

Chapter Six

The Golden Years? They've Gotta Be Kidding!

I was tired of working so hard, doing the same thing for so many years, so I retired a couple of years ago, figuring this was my chance at the golden years," says a seventy-two-year-old, his words etched in bitterness. "It was okay for a while, but all the 'fun' stuff doesn't seem like fun anymore, so now what? There's got to be something more than waking up wondering what the hell you're going to do with your day." He pauses, looks out the window at a view that would make anyone smile, turns pained eyes back to me, and snorts, "The golden years? They've gotta be kidding! If this is gold what's brass?"

In 1979 I published a book that included a chapter titled "What Am I Going to Do with the Rest of My Life?" Then, I was writing about women who, at forty, found themselves facing a frighteningly empty future. "Pretty much the whole of adult life was supposed to be around helping your husband and raising your children," exclaimed a forty-two-year-old woman who epitomized the dilemma of that era. "I mean, I never thought about what happens to the rest of life. Then all of a sudden, he doesn't need your help anymore and the children are raised. Now what?"¹

Much has changed in the intervening decades. Then, most forty-year-old women had devoted themselves to being wife and mother only to awaken to the realization that they no longer knew who they were beyond the confines of those roles. Now, the same women have most likely been in the labor force for years and, as a result, have a broader, less elusive sense of self. Now, instead of bearing her first child at nineteen or twenty, a woman is likely to be twenty-six, and for a significant subsection of the population, much older, maybe even forty.

In the mid-twentieth century, when American life expectancy hovered around sixty-five, forty was on the cusp of middle age; questions about the "rest of life" presumed something like twenty more years, and it was mainly women who asked them. Men knew what the rest of their lives would bring. If they were lucky enough to live to retirement, they'd get a party, a gold watch, and not much time to enjoy it. Now a man who reaches the age of sixty-five can expect to live into his early eighties, a woman even later.²

It's not just the privileged middle class who can count on living so many extra years. For while class, race, and ethnicity play a part in determining life expectancy in our nation, and while those in the white middle- and upper-middle class are indeed the most privileged in this as well as other aspects of their lives, the inequalities in life span are smaller today than at any earlier moment in history.

As we live longer, healthier lives, the question "Now what?" comes later, for some at sixty, for others not until seventy or more. But no matter how delayed, the question will arise with the same inevitability that death itself arrives on our doorstep. It makes no difference what our station is, whether high or low, we will all stand at the abyss as, by the very nature of living so long, we are forced to look into a future we cannot know and confront the combination of hope and fear that accompanies that reality.

"I wouldn't know what else to do," said Mike Wallace, the renowned television journalist, when, at eighty-eight, he was asked when he might leave the show at which he'd worked since 1968. When, a short time later, he suddenly announced his retirement without explanation, his former producer, Don Hewitt, speaking from his own experience, explained, "You get to a certain age . . . and you're not as gung-ho as you thought you were going to be. But you hang onto *who you were* [italics added] because you don't know any better."³ To *who you were*, not *what you do*, because, as is so often the case, what you do becomes who you are.

I can almost hear some voices arguing that this isn't necessarily true among working-class men and women for whom what they do is just a job, not the definition of self. While there may be a kernel of truth in that view, it's also the conceit of the professional class that people who aren't as well educated as they, people who work with their hands instead of their heads, can't possibly find work fulfilling, let alone self-defining.

But talk to working-class people, listen to what they say about themselves, and you hear a more complex story. Not surprisingly, women, even those who work outside the home, have a more fluid and multifaceted sense of their own identity than men—a fact, parenthetically, that's true about women of any class. So while they may value their work life, they still define themselves in various ways: wife, mother, worker, daughter, usually depending upon which claims the center of their attention at the time of the conversation, none necessarily taking precedence over the other.

For the men it's different. While working-class men generally may be less attached than professionals to the actual work they do, the fact that they have a job to which they go every day is the central identity-defining feature of their lives. In hundreds of interviews with working-class men over more than three decades, I never spoke with one, not even a man who found little satis-

faction in the job itself, who didn't start a description of himself by telling me what kind of work he did. Not that he was a husband, son, father, not where he lived, what he cared about, or what hobbies he may have had, but what he did for a living. Work, whatever it was, whether they liked it or not, defined them, established their status as men who deserved attention and respect. I'm a "working man" they declared proudly, words meant to suggest they were *real* men, not like those "pencil pushers" who, according to many of them, "never did an honest day's work in their lives."⁴

This isn't to say working-class people are content with their lot, only that they find ways to compensate, to rework the common assumptions about the value of their place in this status-driven society in ways that enhance their self-regard and allow them some psychological ease.

Whatever the class or gender differences or similarities may be, one fact is indisputable: all of us are now in uncharted territory, a stage of life not seen before in human history. And whether woman or man, whether working-class or professional, we're all wondering how we'll live, what we'll do, who we'll be for the next twenty or thirty years.

For lack of a better alternative, many people remain on the job well beyond what was once the accepted retirement age. Some, generally professional women and men who find satisfaction in their work and whose identity is closely tied to it, do so out of choice.

"I love my job; I love to teach; I can't imagine giving it up," exclaims a seventy-six-year-old college professor. Then, with a rueful smile, "Well, I guess the day will come when it won't be my choice, won't it? I can't imagine life without it."

Many more stay in the work force or return to it after retirement out of need, sometimes economic, sometimes psychological,

often a combination of both. The economic side is straightforward. In a nation driven by consumerism, where our president, seeking to restore public calm after September 11, advised his people to go out and shop, where 62 percent of people over fifty-five have less than \$100,000 in savings⁵ and the median value of retirement accounts for those between fifty-five and sixty-four is \$88,000,⁶ where economists who watch such things tell us that Americans are spending more than they earn, that household debt rose by 132 percent of disposable income in 2005,⁷ and that debt payments consume close to 20 percent of the average family's income and much more for those on the lower rungs of the economic ladder⁸—only the very rich have enough savings and investments to support their lifestyle.

Most pensions, when they exist, aren't adequate to sustain the lifestyle people are accustomed to, many not even enough to meet basic needs, and, in any case, rarely keep pace with inflation. For those with no pension and limited savings, the choice is scrimping or going back to work; those who managed to put aside a nest egg are forced to deplete it.

"I did everything I was supposed to do, even managed to save a fair amount of money for retirement," says an eighty-four-year-old who retired nearly twenty years ago, went back into the work force eight years later, and recently retired again. "But the pension wasn't enough, and it seemed like the savings were gone in a blink. Who knew I'd still be alive so many years after I gave up working?"

Psychologically, it's more complicated. While their middle-aged children dream of a life beyond the rat race, one-third of their "retired" parents are back in the work force, and two-thirds of those say they're there at least as much out of desire as economic need. During their working years, they looked forward to retirement with fantasies about all the things they couldn't do

when they were working, whether going fishing, playing golf, remodeling the kitchen, or spending more time with the grandchildren. Then reality hit.

From the attorney to the truck driver, from the homemaker to the executive, the complaints are the same. Without work, without something to structure their days, something that marks the difference between Sunday and Monday, something that signals that they still have a place in the world, life is stripped of much of its meaning.

"Okay, so I pick my grandchildren up from school two days a week, and I love the time we have together. But what about the rest of the time?" asks a seventy-four-year-old retired social worker. "Sure, I keep busy, but that's just what it is—keeping busy. It doesn't have a lot of meaning, if you know what I mean."

The pleasures they'd looked forward to are indeed pleasurable, but not quite enough to still the restlessness that sets in—the sense that there must be something more—or to quiet the internal voice that asks so insistently: *Now what?*

"I used to think life would be perfect if I could play golf every day," remarks a seventy-six-year-old former salesman. "What can I tell you? Now I know that even if I did, there'd still be too many days in the week. I mean, I love it but . . ." His words trail off, as if searching for a way to avoid the thought he doesn't want to speak.

"But what?" I coach.

A deep sigh. "I don't know what to say; it's just not enough. It's not a life, that's all."

Go to any mall in America that houses stores like Home Depot, Wal-Mart, Target, Costco, and all the other retail outlets that eagerly hire older workers, and you'll see formerly retired women and men on the floor, usually doing jobs well below their capacity. It's a good deal for the companies. Older workers, unlike their baby boomer children, have little sense of entitlement.

They don't complain, don't ask for anything, and are more reliable than younger workers. If that isn't enough to soothe any manager's anxious heart, retirees are happy to work part-time, which means they don't qualify for benefits—a big boost to the company's bottom line.

It sounds like exploitation, and it is. But in this case, what's good for business also works for those in need, who have few or no options. And indeed there are few for the older people who looked forward to retirement, thought it would be a walk on the sunny side, only to find themselves on a cold and lonely path. Even if they wanted to, they can't go back to the job they left, and they're not likely to find another one like it. So they take what they can get.

"I retired a couple of years ago because I thought it was time to stop working and start living," says a seventy-year-old former forklift operator. "But after a couple of years, it got pretty damn old. My wife got tired of me moping around the house with nothing to do. I mean, how often can you tune up the car or fix the damn stopped drain? I just couldn't take it anymore. I woke up one morning and thought, Christ, if this is life, what's being dead like? Don't get me wrong, I don't love this job I've got now, but at least I'm back out in the world, and that's a lot better than sitting around the house drinking beer and wondering what I'm going to do today." Then he added, with a wry smile, "The extra cash doesn't hurt either."

It's a story I heard repeatedly in one version or another, including during a recent appearance on a local radio talk show. We weren't five minutes into a discussion about retirement and what it means today before the phone lines were jammed with women and men wanting to speak their experience about the difficulty of finding meaning in a life so drastically different from what they'd known.

When I left the studio, the security guard who had escorted

me in was waiting to lead me out. She had seemed, when we met an hour earlier, to be a quiet, deferential woman I judged to be in her late sixties. When she met me after the show, I hardly recognized her as the same person. She was ebullient, a huge smile lighting up her face, words pouring out uncontained and unfiltered.

"Go, girl; right on," she exulted, practically dancing with joy. "Everything you said is right. Did you hear all those people talking to you; they know you're right, too. It's why I work here. I worked all my life since I was thirteen years old, cleaning houses, raising my kids, doing all kinds of lousy jobs until I finally worked myself up to a nurse's aide at The General [local slang for San Francisco's County Hospital]. Hard work that is, sad, too, people sick and dying and needing and sometimes nobody there for them.

"I used to think, boy, I'm going to be glad to get out of here. My husband, he left me a little insurance money and a pension when he died last year, and I thought, yeah, it's time to take it easy. So I retired, thinking I was going to have me a good time. But it didn't work out that way."

"Why?" I asked. "Wasn't there enough money?"

She laughed, "Well, you know, a little more money never hurt, but no, that's not the real reason why I'm here. I just couldn't stand being retired. I mean, the days dragged by, and I felt useless. I tell my kids, you better think about what you're going to do when you get finished working, because you can't figure on dying these days. But those young people, they don't believe it; they think it'll all come up roses. Just wait, they'll see."

Then, as she saw me out the door, she leaned toward me and said more quietly, "Girl, you keep on keeping on. You're doing good; people need to know they're not the only ones feeling what they're feeling."

I climbed into my car and drove home, so preoccupied with

the tape in my head that kept rerunning everything I'd heard that morning that I missed my freeway exit.

A colleague, reading these words in a draft version of this chapter, asked: "What about women like my mother, who's in her late eighties and never worked outside the home? Her life doesn't seem all that different than when she was middle-aged, and maybe not even when she was raising us."

I think about her words, think about the women I met in the course of writing this book—those who had worked outside the home and those who had not—who spoke without prompting about the difficulty of living a life without a meaningful social role, one that affirms their presence in the world and validates their importance in it.

"The hardest thing about this time of life is feeling useless," explains a seventy-two-year-old woman who never held a paid job. "I used to feel like there was a purpose to my life, but now with my husband gone and my children . . . What can I say, nobody needs me anymore."

How, I wonder, could it be otherwise, in a society that values usefulness above all else?

Whether in the public world of work or in the private world of family, the loss of the roles that ground us, that define us to ourselves and to the social world in which we live, is rarely if ever met with ease and equanimity. Why, then, would we assume that men suffer when they lose the role that centered their lives, and women don't, that men need to feel useful and productive, but not women?

True, their experience is different, tinged as it is by the gendered roles of the past, by who they were and what they did then, by the fact that it was generally the family roles that defined women, while for men it was largely their place in the world of work. But none of this changes the fact that for those women who never worked outside the home, being mother and house-

wife *was* the job, and they feel the loss as keenly as any man who's paid for his work.

Where, then, did the idea of "the golden years" come from? Is this just media hype that has no relation to the reality of people's experience in old age? Or was it a more or less apt description of some earlier time? Maybe when people lived only a few years after retirement, the relief from a lifetime of work and tight schedules, the freedom to allow themselves to expand fully into the space they inhabit, to take up activities they never had time for before, did indeed make those years golden. Maybe so many of us feel them so differently now because they last so long.

I think about my mother, who retired from her factory job in New York's garment industry when she was sixty-five years old. Those first few years were wonderful. She traveled, saw the world beyond the borders of New York City for the first time in her adult life, visited her children and grandchildren, none of whom lived nearby, and agreed to let me hire a tutor to teach her to read and write so she could be relieved of the stigma of illiteracy that had shamed her throughout her life.

I don't know whether she would have called those years golden, but she certainly seemed more at peace than I'd ever seen her. But the years kept piling on, and pretty soon she was seventy, then eighty and still counting, until finally, all she could say when I came to visit was: "Why doesn't God take me? Who needs to live so long?"

She wasn't ill or infirm; that wouldn't happen until shortly before she died at ninety-four. But after a while, she couldn't, maybe didn't want to, sustain the renewed vigor with which she had approached life immediately after her retirement. If there were opportunities still waiting, she couldn't see them. It was as if she had lived her life and was finished; anything more was burdensome.

Such feelings are not unknown to many of us at this stage of

life. Indeed, for most of us, even those who are healthy and active, our extended old age will most likely feel like some combination of a blessing and a curse. Certainly there are moments when we enjoy what feels like the "warm autumn" celebrated in a *New York Times Magazine* article titled, "The Age Boom."⁹ There's something to be said for being freed of responsibility, for waking up each day to the knowledge that you're not obliged to perform, for having the time to read the novels you've hungered for but couldn't get to before, for feeling you've earned the right to pick and choose what you'll do, when you'll do it, and with whom you'll do it.

"Maybe the one good thing I can say about getting old is that I'm more likely than ever before to do what I want and say what I feel," explains a seventy-five-year-old professional woman who's still working part-time. "Before, I was always worried about what other people would think; now I don't care in the same way. So if someone wants me to do something I really don't want to do, I'll say no. I just don't put up with what I used to accept before.

"I had lunch with a friend recently, someone I've known for many years but don't have that much of a connection with anymore. She complained that she doesn't see enough of me, and I was able to say what I could never have said before: 'I'm sorry, but this is what it is; it's as much as I can give.'"

But these newfound freedoms come with a price. Ask anyone who is living this new life stage and you'll hear also about the times when it feels like a cold winter. For along with the gift of time comes the realization that time itself is now finite, that we hold the end always in our sights. It's a showstopper. A fifty-four-year-old friend tells me he'd like us to join him and his family on a trip next year, and all I can think is: *If we're still here then.*

How do you plan for a future when you don't know when time will stop? That's true for all of us, of course, but for the old it

has an immediacy that can't be denied. It's not just the realization that we're close to the end that makes this time so difficult. For the pleasure in our freedom to "just be" comes with the understanding that it's possible only because we've become superfluous, because we've lost our place in the world, because our presence is no longer needed, and that in addition to being unnecessary—or perhaps because of it—we've also become invisible, just another one of the old people, featureless and indistinguishable from one another, who take up space on the bus.

"No memory of having starred / Atones for later disregard, / Or keeps the end from being hard," writes Robert Frost. I read the words and think: *Disregard, yes, but it's also more than that.* It's being invisible, being seen only as part of the group, not as an individual. "You know what I miss as I get older?" asked Mary Cantwell in a conversation with novelist Jean Rhys. "That look of anticipation in a man's eyes when he first meets you."

"Yes," sighed Ms. Rhys, then well over eighty and not far from death, "I miss it still."¹⁰

It's a painful reality for older women, one that highlights the historic gender differences. Men, even those who age badly, usually have no trouble finding companionship, sexual and otherwise. It's a common tale, so well known and observed it needs no documentation: men who are old, fat, and bald marry attractive, slender women twenty or more years their junior as if it's their birthright.

"Scarcity," says a male friend to whom I make this observation. "It's a market phenomenon, a matter of scarce resources." True, women outlive men by a very large margin,¹¹ but scarcity alone doesn't explain the differences in the social-sexual desirability of women and men. Rather it's a matter of value and social power, and even in old age, men retain both in ways women never had them.

A 2006 film, *The Boynton Beach Club*, about a community

of retirees, gives testimony to the truth of this observation. A woman whose husband dies is befriended by another woman; no man in sight. A man who loses his wife has a freezer full of casseroles delivered by women eager to show off their wares, while all he wants is a quiet space to grieve. Until, that is, a svelte blonde comes along to entice him with something besides food. Scenes that made my feminist soul squirm with discomfort while I also knew they spoke the truth.

Still, outside the social-sexual arena, even men aren't immune to the invisibility of age, which follows all of us into many corners of life where we used to be seen, whether on the job or in the social world. How can it be otherwise in a society that idolizes youth, that has little reverence for its own history, that moves so quickly that yesterday's knowledge is rendered obsolete today? In such a social setting, whatever wisdom about life we who are old have gathered seems like ancient history, not . . . What's that word that has been so prominent in our national discourse for the last several decades? Ah yes, "relevance." We're not relevant.

"I'm a lot smarter today than I was thirty years ago, and I'm better at my job now than I was then," says a sixty-five-year-old executive who lost his job to one of those corporate mergers we know so well these days. "But these yo-yo kids who are in charge don't even see me and what I can do; they only see my age, and that's the end of it."

A plight common enough to warrant a *New Yorker* cartoon featuring a cigar-smoking, bewildered-looking seventy-something man looking out the window of the office he's about to leave for good and saying ruefully, "I think I've acquired some wisdom over the years, but there doesn't seem to be much demand for it."

In a nation that puts such a high premium on work and productivity, where personal identity is defined primarily by what we do for a living, not being "in demand" is a hard place to be. It's almost as if we don't exist. Think about it: How do you place

someone on first meeting? What's the first question asked of you after the introductions are made? What's the first thing you ask?

"What do you do?" Until you have the answer, the person before you is virtually a cipher, a form without much content. When we know what job she holds, we can fill in the shape, place her in the class, status, and social hierarchy that lives in our mind, even when we don't consciously think in those terms. It tells us what the common ground might be, gives us a start, some basis for beginning a conversation with a stranger. Or, as is sometimes the case, it warns us off.

"One of the first questions on meeting you is, 'What do you do?' and I no longer know how to answer that question," writes some unnamed blogger I found on the Web. "It may be vanity or prejudice based on faulty, past perception, but 'I'm retired' is not a phrase that will pass my lips any time soon."¹²

It isn't vanity or misperception. He avoids the word, as so many retirees do, because to use it makes him feel vulnerable, as if he has no place in the world, no self to present to it. Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Butler,¹³ the founding director of the National Institute of Aging, speaks about the cost of being identified as retired and his own resistance to using what he calls "the R word."

When I stepped down as the chair of geriatrics at Mount Sinai to build the Longevity Center, people began to refer to me as "retired." I quickly realized that "retired" was not a good word. If you are applying for grants from the N.I.H., you don't want to be perceived as "retired," which seems to be a synonym for "over the hill."¹⁴

If Robert Butler, a man who almost single-handedly created the field of aging and its serious study, who at eighty still heads up the International Longevity Center, a research and policy orga-

nization affiliated with Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, feels the chill of "the R word," what chance do ordinary men and women have?

"I didn't used to mind it when the first thing people I didn't know asked was, 'What do you do?'" remarks a retired sixty-nine-year-old former executive. "Now I hate it; I hate having nothing to say. If I say I'm retired," he continues, shaking his head as if to wipe out the image of the word, "it's like saying I'm nothing, and it's not just in my head. I see how people react when I say it; it's like they don't know what to say after that. Then, finally, they say something dumb, like 'Hey, that's great,' and go talk to someone else."

Hmmm! That's exactly what women used to complain about when they had to answer "housewife" to the what-do-you-do question, a designation that was upgraded to "homemaker" but that made little difference in how quickly the questioner turned away. "It's payback time," I think with a moment of malicious pleasure as I wonder how many times this man did that to some woman.

The scars I bear from the years when I was made to feel like "nothing" because all I could say was "housewife" have faded, but the memory of being written off with barely another word can still bring a chill and a shot of anger at the way we—women, old people, whoever—feel forced to deny ourselves in order to be seen, feel impelled to make up an answer to the what-do-you-do question to keep people from walking away.

I can't get the word "retired" out of my mouth today any more comfortably than I was able to say "housewife" all those many years ago. Nor can my ninety-year-old husband do anything but shift and dodge when he's asked the question, and finally quip, "A writer never retires." It's not true, of course, but it saves him from the need to confront publicly the truth that he has been retired—meaning, in social terms, "nobody"—for years now.

I'm keenly aware, too, that, for the first time since I laid myself off as a writer a few years ago, it's enormously relieving to be able to claim a recognized public self again, to say once more "I'm a writer"—present tense not past—instead of fumbling around explaining how I'm becoming an artist. Indeed, it's probably one of the reasons why I accepted the invitation to write this book. For the moment, at least, I'm freed from the delicate balancing act of sustaining a sense of self without a valued social identity.

I can almost hear some readers say: Wait a minute; it can't be that grim. My Aunt Sally is retired, and she doesn't seem to be troubled by the word or the idea. My Uncle Joey moved into one of those retirement communities a couple of years ago and loves it.

Yes, there certainly are plenty of Aunt Sallys and Uncle Joeys who find some pleasure and comfort in these years, just as many of the people who complain the loudest will grant that there are times when their lives look pretty good to them. But no matter which side someone falls on, it's almost never cleanly unambivalent, rarely without some deeply felt understanding of the difficulties of these years, whether physically, emotionally, or both, seldom without the knowledge that they don't count in the world in the way they did before they retired.

True, there have been more media stories than I can count about the wonders of the retirement communities—or "active adult communities" as they have recently been renamed—about the endless round of activities they offer, about the classes, and the dances, and the parties, and the shows. I've visited some of these communities, talked to people who live in them, listened to them tell me how much they love living there, how much fun it is, how they're so busy all the time that they have little time for anything else. "We're more social here than we've ever been before," says one woman. "I just turned seventy and do hula dancing," exults another, whose husband is taking tap-dancing les-

sons. "We're so busy all the time; it's like a whirlwind, no time to think about anything," explains a third.

But tell me, am I the only one who looks at this level of frantic activity and wonders what's going on behind it? I don't mean to dismiss the experience of others in favor of psychological interpretations, but I can't help asking: How much of the "fun" is a race against time? How much is a denial of their fear of facing their mortality? How much is pure escape from the realities they'd have to face if they slowed down to contemplate them? Nothing wrong with any of that, but these surely are questions worth asking.

My questions notwithstanding, I also believe that, given the indignities of aging in this society, retirement communities serve an important function for those who choose to live in them. They move from a world where they no longer have a place, a world where age is stigma, to one where they are celebrated. Who wouldn't like that? They go from the world where the cocktail party question du jour is, "What do you do?" to a place where no one is supposed to ask or care, where people make great effort to accept one another for who they are today, not who or what they might have been yesterday. Who wouldn't feel good there?

But here's the caveat. Look around these communities, talk with people in them, and you see a much more complicated picture than the chirpy, good-news-about-aging the media tales present—or even what their relatives want to believe. Uncle Joey might tell his nephew that he's having a great time, and in some ways he is. But when someone who knows what old age is all about comes along and really wants to hear his story, it's toned with shades of gray, not black or white.

Moreover, it's often the new residents and largely those we might call the young old—those between about sixty-two (usually the bottom age at which people can enter) and seventy-four—who are having such a good time. And not even all of these.

As one manager explained, "There's the go-go folks, the go-slow people, and the no-go ones." But even for those who start out as go-go's, by the time they've been there a few years, the activities begin to pale into more of the same, and the sense that there must be more to life than this begins to take hold.

"We moved in here eleven years ago, and I thought it was great," explains a seventy-seven-year-old man. "But now..." He's silent for a moment, his eyes roaming the room, then, "Look, don't misunderstand, I still think it's a great place to live at this age, but..." Another pause, then, "Well, that's the point, isn't it—at *this age* [emphasis his]." He shakes his head sadly as he thinks about what he's just said. "It's like been there, done that, so then you begin to ask, what's left?"

For those who live outside such communities, it's pretty much the same. The early retirement years may be pleasurable, may even be wonderful for some. But as the years pass, many begin to complain that they're living too long, that life no longer has meaning.

"What's the point. I can't do all the things I used to do anymore, and I don't even want to," exclaims an eighty-nine-year-old woman. "What? Another trip to someplace I've already been to too many times? Another club meeting? I know before I get there what everyone in my book club is going to say. I'm tired; it's time to lay my head down and go. What are those scientists doing, using all that brain power to get us to live longer? I want to know, what's the point?"

What's the point? It's not a frivolous question. I ask a mid-sixties friend if she'd like to live to one hundred, and she replies with a grimace, a shudder, and an unequivocal "No."

"Why?" I want to know.

"What would I do for all those years?" she asks.

A reply I got from many of the people I met of whom I asked the same question. There's some ambivalence, of course. How

could there not be? We're talking about *death*—the ultimate finality. But bottom line, most people offer a resounding no to the question, as does Frank Bruni, the food critic at the *New York Times*, in his droll and poignant column on the subject.

If living to 99 means forever cutting the porterhouse into eighths, swearing off the baked potato and putting the martini shaker in storage, then 85 sounds a whole lot better, and I'd ratchet that down to 79 to hold onto the Haagen-Dazs, along with a few shreds of spontaneity. It's a matter of priorities.

Do we really want as many years as we can get, no matter how we get them? At what point does the pursuit of an extended life . . . become the entire business of life? Is longevity all it's cracked up to be? . . . Each of us can individually hunker down for the long haul . . . exercising faithfully so that our limbs stay as limber as our nipped-and-tucked faces are taut. But doesn't the quality of our days matter as much as the quantity of them?¹⁵

To which I and many others say, "Amen!"