Chapter Thirteen

One Last Word

To know how to grow old is the master-work of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living."[1]

This whole book has been about the difficulties of finding the way to that masterwork of wisdom. Until now we who are old were tethered to society through a series of institutions—school, work, family, church, community—that structured our lives, defined our place in the world, and gave shape to our identity. We had goals then, destinations to which we looked forward, things to accomplish that gave life its meaning. But as Freud noted a long time ago, a strange thing happens when we meet success. Instead of entering into that subjective state of grace we expect it to bring, we often become unsettled, feeling adrift, as if something has gone out of life.

Freud thought such feelings were a response to the guilt we experience over our good fortune. Perhaps so, but it surely isn't that simple. For this is one of those times when winning and losing are opposite sides of the same coin. We finally achieve a long-sought goal—raising the children, getting a promotion, paying off the mortgage, winning the gold (actually or metaphorically) —and instead of the unambiguous joy of accomplishment, we feel something else, an emptiness where the goal lived, a sadness

that suggests loss. And with it the emerging understanding that it's not the destination that has given life its meaning and continuity but the journey itself.

This is the dilemma of the new old age. The journey continues, but to what end? Perhaps it was easier when "old" meant sixty-five and few who reached that age lived much beyond it. But when half the sixty-five-year-olds today can expect to see eighty-five, "old" becomes far more complicated both socially and personally.

The years have left us wise in many ways, but growing old gracefully when we live so long generally is not one of them. How, then, do we go about creating this masterwork in a society that has so little use for us? Stay physically healthy, keep mentally alert, and engage with life, the gurus of aging exhort.[2] Good advice, but the implications trouble me, since they suggest that staying healthy is largely in our hands and that falling victim to one of the many diseases of aging is a sign of personal irresponsibility, if not an actual moral lapse.

In *Illness as Metaphor,* Susan Sontag long ago noted that in our zeal to empower patients and enlist their will in fighting cancer, we developed myths and metaphors about the disease and those who suffered it that ultimately left patients feeling anxious about what they did to "cause" the cancer, and guilty about not being able to fight it successfully.[3] So it is now with aging, which, unlike cancer, is inevitable, but like it is unpredictable. Even when we follow all the advice—even when we never put another pat of butter on our bread, eat another morsel of red meat, or another bite of a trans-fat-filled cookie; even when we spend an hour at the gym and run five miles a day, do brain calisthenics in the morning and math equations in the evening—our bodies and brains seem to have a mind and a timetable of their own that remain outside our control. Yet the growing belief (myth?) that aging is a disease rather than a natural consequence of living has

generated a steady stream of "good advice" about how we can beat back the clock, leaving us confused about what's possible and anxious about what we're doing "wrong" when we see evidence that we haven't succeeded.

But what about staying engaged? Surely that's something that *is* in our control—at least as long as we're healthy enough. Yes, but it's not so simple. People hardly need reminders to stay engaged with family, friends, even community. But what do you do when friends die and children live in distant places? And how do you stay involved in the community when you've outlived your welcome and no one is looking for your services—at least not those you want to offer?

Community organizations generally are happy to have older people volunteer to do routine work; it saves money and lightens the load of paid workers. But ask professional people who have tried to volunteer, and they'll tell you about the bureaucratic stumbling blocks that can make it difficult for them to give their services away.

In a public school system desperately in need of qualified teachers, the services of a retired college history professor I met were turned away because he wasn't properly credentialed by the state to teach high school. College, yes, but not high school.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to give the keynote lecture at the annual dinner of an organization that serves inner-city young people. In the course of my contacts with the group, several staff members told me that their training hadn't adequately prepared them to deal with some of the emotional problems they were seeing. *Good,* I thought; *here's something useful I can do.* I met with the director of the program and offered to develop and direct an in-service training program that would fill some of the gaps. He was delighted until he found out that his malpractice insurance wouldn't cover me as a volunteer, and without coverage, the organization couldn't take the risk. I would have been wel-

comed to answer the phones, clean up the place, organize the supplies, but they couldn't allow me to do what I do best and what they needed most.

But whatever difficulties the external roadblocks to engagement may present, the internal ones are at least as broad and deep. For one of the riddles of old age is how to manage the conflicting forces that emerge inside us: the pull toward disengagement that lies alongside the push toward engagement. The truth is: we want both. Not something that's easy to get in a society that thinks in opposites, that can't easily hold two thoughts in its head at the same time without assuming they contradict each other and that one has to go.

Not surprisingly, then, some older people, tired of listening to the exhortations to stay engaged from those who have little or no understanding of the complexity of our feelings at this time of life, are beginning to ask: What if we're tired of staying involved; what if, in the words of a retired newspaper columnist, "we want to be able to dodder"?[4] Well, maybe not dodder, but take our foot off the accelerator and proceed more slowly. "Does it occur to those prodding us toward the finish line that there's a subtle cruelty in asking us to 'stay in the fast lane' and 'go for it' at 70-something as we did at 30-something?" asks another seventy-something-year-old retiree.[5]

Not that anyone wants to argue for being inactive, maybe just to spend less time in pursuit of yet another goal, maybe just to have more time for *being* instead of *doing*.

Being! It's practically an un-American thought, especially in an era when we wear *doing* on our sleeve, when we tell each other about how busy we are in words that say complaint but in attitude that shouts pride. It's the latest status symbol, the public statement of our worth and importance. "Oh, I've been so busy, I just haven't had a chance to give you a call." "I wish we could do lunch, but I'm just too busy."

Leisure time? If by that we mean *being* leisurely, as in relaxed and unhurried, forget it. We're too busy *doing* leisure, too busy watching the clock and worrying about what's waiting for us when we're finished having "fun." Not a surprise, since nobody in this society gets points for taking it easy, for working less, for smelling the roses or enjoying the sun.

Americans today work 50 percent more than their West European counterparts, a shift from thirty years ago when people in those countries worked more.[6] French national law guarantees a 35-hour workweek, a minimum of five weeks paid vacation, plus eleven public holidays.[7] We average 42.7 hours a week,[8] generally have to be on the job three years or more before we can claim a two-week vacation, and have ten paid holidays annually—that is, if the company we work for honors all the national holidays, which isn't always the case. This, before we even begin to count up the after-hours work when we're "catching up" on e-mail, phone calls, paperwork, and all the other tasks we didn't get to during the day.

When, a few years ago, I decided to say goodbye to my last patient, my last student, my last lecture, I had no idea that the hardest part of the years ahead would be *not* being "too busy." After a lifetime of busy-ness and the rewards that came with it, I found myself bereft, lost in a sea of time with no idea how to live the days that stretched before me. Not that they didn't pass quickly. Ask anyone who's retired, and you'll hear about days that slide by, unheeded, unmarked, in some sense unlived. Perhaps even more than the money they need, it's this sense of uselessness, of time slipping by as if they're sleepwalking through it, that sends people back to work at jobs that are well below their skills and talents.

When I started this work, I thought I was writing a book about old age for those who are now living it, a book that would bring some corrective to the hyped-up media images about the

glories of the "new old age," one that would validate their experience and affirm that their confused and contradictory feelings about this new stage of life are widely shared.

Now that I've finished, it seems also to be a cautionary tale for the children of the old, the baby boomers who will soon join the ranks of the over-sixty-fives and will confront the awesome and frightening reality that they still have another twenty or thirty years to live in a society that sees old age as repugnant at the same time that it expends precious resources on the dream of extending life still further. Paradoxical? Yes, but understandable if we see it in the context of the denial of death that pervades our culture. It's this deep-seated fear that underlies the end-of-life care that so often keeps people breathing even when they're not really living, and this that animates our quest to extend life still further while doing virtually nothing to ensure the quality of those added years.

For those boomers who may be reading these words, then, I have a message. Old age lasts a long time, and it will last even longer by the time you get here. But unlike your parents who stumbled into these years without a clue, you have a choice about how you'll live them. You can go on believing all the cheery good news about the new old age, that sixty is the new forty and eighty the new sixty, that if you eat right, sleep right, exercise your body and your brain right, you'll never get *really* old. Or you can take a long, hard look at the realities of the social and personal world of aging I've described here.

Right now, you're living in a country that's as unprepared for your old age as you are, a country where economists and policy analysts worry that you're "the monster at our door," the "elephant in the room"[9] that threatens to bring the nation to its economic knees, the one that will break the Social Security bank and drain Medicare with your health needs, which grow exponentially with each decade of life.

Whatever the merit of these worst-fear scenarios, one thing is certain: in the next two decades 78 million of you will enter the ranks of the aged. *That's 26 percent of the current population.* Without major changes in social priorities, public policy, and a culture with a long history of deeply ingrained prejudice against the old, you'll find yourself coping with the social and personal vicissitudes of getting old in America without much help from any quarter.

You can choose to walk blithely into that future believing that none of this means you, or you can say, as you did once before about a war you refused to fight: "Hell no!" Only this time, you have no choice but to go. For while you may be able to stave off some of the worst effects of aging for a while, I promise that all of you—sooner perhaps for some, later for others—*will* grow old in a society that abhors old age and whose social institutions reflect its cultural attitudes.

Once, long ago, you coined the slogan "The personal is political." It was the banner under which you transformed the cultural face of America, the flag you carried as you stopped a war, changed the sexual norms of the nation, ignited a feminist revolution that transformed both public and private life, and converted the perception of homosexuality from perversion to just another sexual orientation. Your voices have been subdued in the last couple of decades, quieted by the pressures of your daily lives —working, raising the children, staying ahead of the bills. It would be nice to take a rest as you move into the next stage of your life; you've earned it. But not yet.

Robert Butler, the former director of the National Institute of Aging and arguably the foremost scholar and advocate for the aged in America, spoke recently about the prospects for your future: "I think they're in for a hell of a time, because society is not prepared for them. And I don't think they're a bit prepared for old age.... If they're able to [make any changes] it will

mostly benefit Generations X and Y. The baby boomers are, quite frankly, a generation at risk."[10]

As he speaks today, he's right. But it doesn't have to be that way. Your numbers alone, if you can organize them to collective action, give you the power to seriously dent, if not fully change, the cultural assumptions and social policy that now dominate aging in twenty-first-century America.