

chapter twelve

Reflections on Aging



In 2005 the editors of the German feminist journal L'Homme queried me by email: would I be willing to be interviewed on the subject of aging for a special issue of their journal? I was unenthusiastic about the idea, since the subject was not within the areas of my competence, but I was intrigued enough by it to ask them to send me a list of the questions they wanted to ask me. The questions arrived and were both interesting and challenging. Suddenly, it occurred to me that I needed no academic competence to write about aging: like all old people, I was an expert, thinking and writing about my own experience. I agreed to do the interview.

This happened at a time when I was struggling with serious health problems, considerable pain and some disabilities. I was considering whether to enter a retirement community that would guarantee me access to assisted living, when I needed it. I now live in such a community and am convinced I made a good choice. But at the time the decision was difficult for me. Agreeing to that interview was part of a slow process with which I needed to engage.

The interview was conducted by email and in German. I had not written anything in German in nearly fifty years and had only recently regained my ability to speak and read in German with the competence of a native speaker. There were a few editorial changes to make, then the interview was printed in the journal. After reading the printed text, I spontaneously decided to translate it into English. I had no particular purpose in mind for doing the translation, but as soon as I had done it, I decided to include it in this book. This is one of the few instances in my writer's existence in which the text led me to make decisions in life. Writing and life interacted almost outside of my volition.

I'm quite well in myself. Nothing wrong with me. I can't see very well,
I can't hear very well, and I can't walk very well, but I'm perfectly well.

— VALENTINE VESTER, the "Grand Dame of Jerusalem"

Aging as a Natural Process

It is part of life, and yet it is more difficult than anything that came before it. It presents us daily with new challenges and demands. When one

is younger, one goes through various life stages, all of which are culturally recognized and supported. Childhood, adolescence, adulthood, the stage of nurturing one's own family and children, maturity in work and social relations—these stages follow in predictable succession. Each stage presents us with new challenges and changing conditions; we adapt to them, always hoping for a good outcome, a stroke of luck, and better circumstances. If we fail to make good choices in one stage, there is always the next stage in which we can do better. But in old age there is only one next stage and that is death. Aging is the way to it, and it poses its own inexorable demands.

In old age we cannot take for granted that we will be able to enjoy the luxury of making good choices; we often have to choose the lesser of two evils. Our body, which we have always trusted as a reliable, familiar friend, now confronts us with its weaknesses and limitations. We have to develop a new relationship with it, adapting to its slow decline in capacity and strength. Pain and physical impairments become our steady companions. We have to get used to them, respect them and adjust to them, as best we can. Without pain and impairments nobody would ever be ready to die.

On the positive side, we can develop a new understanding of our body. We can listen to its needs, keep it as balanced and flexible as possible and refuse to coerce it with competitive and excessive demands. We can nurture it, look after its health with more care than we did when we were younger. We can exercise without stress, substitute for failing energy by steady effort, adopting relaxation techniques as our friendly helpers.

Aging forces us to give up activities, skills, and enjoyments we have long practiced. We have to learn to give up more and more of what we have accomplished, what we have gathered in and what we cherish. Getting old means giving up something forever at every stage of the process. The trick is to learn how to give up things gracefully and without despair.

Giving up more and more of what we have accomplished means learning to detach from whatever it was that made us successful and letting the work go to stand on its own merits. We can no longer demand of ourselves that we continue at our usual pace, nor can we, at this stage of life, make up for lost time. We must accept what is and prepare to let go of it.

Giving up more and more of what we have gathered in and what we cherish means simplifying our lives and letting go of clutter. It means choosing what is truly essential to our well-being and holding on to that, while giving up what is negative, destructive, and hurtful. It may mean

giving up old feuds and festering grievances; it may mean giving up things we cherish, because we no longer have the energy or physical capacity for pursuing them. Often, that is the most painful aspect of aging: the fine musician whose hearing deteriorates so that she can no longer enjoy music; the passionate hiker who can no longer walk long distances or even short ones; the passionate reader whose eyesight is failing. The losses of aging are multiple and often cruel; they are more easily accepted if one accepts aging as a natural process, an inevitable aspect of living and evolving. As long as we are alive, we have the capacity to develop compensatory skills and seek new insights. We must develop whatever we still can develop and learn new ways of seeing, perceiving, and functioning. Learning to continue living with diminished means has its own rewards.

One of these rewards is observing and treasuring the particular over the general. Watching birds at the feeder and ducks in a pond can evoke earlier sights of vast panoramas, eagles in flight, the search for daily sustenance and shelter of creatures in the wilderness. Leaves of grass can stand for earth forces and for the persistent power of humble plants to renew the earth. Mosses and lichen prepare the soil for mighty trees. We can learn to observe more keenly and to think in metaphors, which is the great contribution of human beings to the evolution of life on earth. Even though we are diminished in our physical capacities, we are still part of the greater life cycle.

Aging is a process of purging, of purification: one lets go of unnecessary expectations; one no longer agonizes over old quarrels and accusations; one makes peace with one's life and one's way of living; and one learns to treasure the gifts of each day. One enjoys old friendships and well-known, comforting places, and yet one strives to make new relationships in order to stay rooted in life. Living consciously through this process, one finds a new kind of happiness, more serene, more peaceful than anything that went before.

We can use the time of aging as an opportunity for developing a philosophy about living and dying. Our spiritual growth can continue, even when our bodies fail us. Aging is a process preparing us for death. There is strength and succor in acknowledging that fact, while continuing to take part in life to the best of our abilities.

Aging as a Social Construction

While the natural process of aging presents each person with challenges and difficult adjustments, the social construction of aging often defines and complicates the problems of the individual. Cultures differ in how they construct and view old age; these cultural differences are expressed in attitudes, mores, laws, and political and economic policies.

During the twentieth century world populations underwent major demographic shifts at a historically unprecedented rate. Human longevity increased dramatically, and life expectancy rates went up worldwide, but especially in the industrially developed nations. My generation experienced a revolutionary change in regard to aging. In my childhood in Vienna, Austria, when an old lady friend of my grandmother died at the age of seventy-three, everyone could agree that she had experienced a ripe old age. One had a reasonable expectancy that one would die in the seventh decade of one's life. Demographics have changed in such a way that a woman in the United States has a life expectancy of eighty-six years. Since that is an average figure, this means that for many women old age has been prolonged by fifteen to twenty years. For men, the average life expectancy figure is eighty years. Thus, married women can expect to be widows for at least six years. Another change is that older people, due to advances in medical care, cannot only live twenty years longer, but they can expect to live those years in better health than did their forebears.

Society has not reacted to these new realities in a positive way. There is no model for "aging well" that is appropriate to the new reality. The media and advertisements show us white-haired people in vigorous health, usually in couples, enchanted over some new drug or medication. They never look older than seventy. At times we see them in ads embarking on a cruise or playing golf or potting plants in impeccable gardens. Nobody has knees that do not bend, joints that cannot flex, or insufficient strength to hold a trowel. The media's old women are slender, exquisite beauties in Chanel suits. Their inevitable aches and pains are immediately relieved by the advertised drug, which causes them to wear a perpetual smile.

Reality is considerably different. Although they are expected to retire at age sixty-five, tens of thousands of older people must continue to work out of economic necessity. The ranks of workers in their seventies and eighties are increasing, as promised pensions vanish or are severely cut.

Older employees usually cannot stay in the jobs they have had in their middle years and must compete for low-paying, low-status jobs.

For those with a secure pension and Social Security income, who still enjoy good health and would like to continue working, retirement can sometimes be postponed for five or ten years. Part-time jobs, although hard to find, offer a good solution. For professionals, such part-time retirement schemes have proven very beneficial. Unfortunately, flex-time and shared jobs are not widely available. If society recognized the changed demographic of aging, institutional adaptations could help to afford older people many more choices in regard to continuing employment. The benefit to employers in having experienced workers who enjoy the work they are doing and are reliable in their performance would be considerable.

In early centuries and even still before World War II older people could expect to find fulfilling roles as family helpers and members of extended families. But today American families live geographically far apart and the traditional role of family helper is not practical for families living in apartments and small houses. Families expect to see their grandparents on holidays and for special occasions, but for everyday life they expect the older generation to live independent lives. When bad health makes that impossible, the individual and his or her family are faced with a profound crisis.

For the individual, American cultural attitudes that favor youth, independence, and individual resourcefulness over communal solutions make it difficult for many older people to accept their need for dependence. They resist moving out of oversized homes and accepting community services, such as meals-on-wheels or the part-time assistance of social workers. They do not wish to be a burden on their children or their friends. Many withdraw into their homes or their apartments, hide their difficult condition from friends and neighbors, and wait until an accident forces them to seek outside help.

The choices open to sick and frail elderly persons vary with their economic resources. For the wealthy and those with adequate savings and financial resources, the preferred solution is to enter a retirement community. The quality of such communities varies greatly, ranging from excellent to substandard. Their availability depends on location; they are more readily available in urban centers than in rural areas. For many people, moving into such a community also means a major geographical reloca-

tion, since they often move away from the community in which they spent most of their lives to one that is closer to the location of one of their children. Still, society in general and the health profession favor that solution. Underlying it is the assumption that age segregation is beneficial and that it is normal that old people should live with other old people. Such an assumption is very much open to question. Many studies have shown that social integration is one of the most important factors in the well-being of old people. Yet at the very time when older people need the help of the younger generation the most, when interaction with younger adults and with children gives them new strength for living, American culture prefers that they be socially segregated.

In recent decades some affluent elders have tried to build alternatives to retirement homes by creating cooperative housing communities. These have sprung up in urban as well as rural communities, and quite a few of them seem to be successful. They can serve as models for offering more choices for the care of older people. These communities are often age-integrated, offering inducements to younger families to join them. They feature private living spaces, but one communal center for cooking and eating. Meals are shared, and people cooperate in shopping, repairs, and social activities. The downside is that it takes years and a sizeable investment of funds, energy, and know-how before such communities can be formed.

Retirement communities offer solutions to the problems of caring for old people only for the affluent. People with fewer resources try to service their needs with part- or full-time paid help. The problem with that is that even if the potential employer is able to afford such help, caregivers are hard to find. The fact that Medicare and other health plans do not offer adequate coverage and compensation for such care inevitably lessens the supply of available workers. In the United States, the lowest-paid, least-skilled jobs are reserved for those who care for children and care for the old. By definition, these are women's jobs, and expressive of the deformation of society through racism, they are jobs for minority women, often recent immigrants. Workers in inadequately paid positions that offer no job security or chances for advancement often cannot give the kind of reliable, supportive care that the frail elderly require. Thus, the absence of a well-functioning social network for supporting the needs of old people affects the care that even the most privileged retirees can receive.

Many people, regardless of income, prefer for cultural and religious

reasons to share their homes with elderly parents or relatives. Again, depending on income, this can be a good or a very difficult solution for both generations. Small apartments and compact houses often offer no adequate living space for the elderly. Those who can afford it, build additions to their homes, but most people have to compromise with inadequate space that offers insufficient privacy. In the many families in which both spouses work, the live-in parent faces long days in isolation. For middle-class people, as well for the poor, such arrangements, even among loving family members, lead to considerable stress on both generations. Still, strong cultural, ethnic, and racial traditions and economic necessity make such arrangements the preferred form of elder care for millions of people.

Families caring for dependent family members have become endlessly inventive in creating voluntary networks for caring. Middle-aged siblings take turns living-in with a sick parent; neighbors and friends commit themselves to regular weekly visits, to donations of food, or to other caregiving chores. Social agencies and religious institutions send volunteers to share in the caring network. In the final stages, hospice and its pool of volunteers help families and the dying to cope.

The social construction of aging also varies from country to country. I noticed during my travels in Europe that older people have a far easier life there than they do in the United States. The welfare state and larger pensions make life more secure for the elderly, and many more families than in this country share their homes with their old folks. There are day care centers for seniors, and a variety of social services are available to help working families care for aging relatives. The fact that in most major European cities there is an adequate and affordable public transportation system of buses, streetcars, and underground trains makes it possible for older people to take part in public events and attend movies and theaters with ease. Old folks are everywhere visible in the street scene and in coffeehouses. That is not possible in the United States. Here, as long as one can drive a car, one has access to many public events; but when one no longer can drive, then one becomes truly isolated.

More than physical obstacles keep older people in enforced isolation. "Old age" has become a marker of social difference. Old people are depicted as having negative characteristics; collectively they are sorted into an inferior group. Aging is viewed as though it were a contagious illness. As a member of a group characterized negatively, the individual is lost to sight. In this regard there are sharp gender distinctions: old men are

socially acceptable; they are welcome at social gatherings and defined as being “interesting.” Old women are often regarded as socially unacceptable; they are considered “boring, needy, and depressing.” It is easier for old men to make new social contacts than it is for old women. Widowers frequently find new marriage partners, often women much younger than themselves. For widows the chances of remarriage are statistically very poor. Men their own age are interested in younger women, and younger men shy away from older women. Of course there are exceptions, but the rule still stands. A number of widows have turned to other women and made successful lesbian relationships.

Marking old people as dependent and essentially useless is not an affirmation of life; it is an excess of hierarchical society, alienating people from nature and natural processes like aging and dying.

Personal and Societal Solutions for the Problems of Aging

How to personally survive in old age is a challenge. Dedicated activity for others or for the social good can help in making aging more tolerable, but this is not the only solution for aging. I see aging as a natural part of living, not as a catastrophe. There are as many ways of aging as there are people. In old age people become what they have always been, only more so. For some it means an intensive commitment to worthy causes and a purposeful engagement with other people. For others it means turning toward intellectual or creative pursuits. Some find contentment through new interests—gardening, handicrafts, whittling, spectator sports.

For those whose old age is marked by physical pain and increasing disabilities, the constant battle for competence and independence is an all-encompassing task. They have to strive for patience and inner peace in order to keep up their interest in life and to enjoy good days and good hours.

There are also many people who use their old age to turn more and more inward, to evaluate their own life and the lives of their family and to seek better understanding. Such people do not just want to be occupied; they also want to seek understanding and wisdom. They want to know what meaning this last phase of their life holds; they see aging as a challenge they must meet.

There is no single solution—aging is a dance on uneven ground, under-

taken with weakened limbs. One tries out this or that step, and once in a while one gets back into the swing of it, finally experiencing dancing as it used to be and as it now is. Aging is soothed by learning to fully experience the present. We have come this far and what there is now is all there ever will be. And so we keep dancing, as best we can.

For myself, I now allow myself more time for quiet contemplation, for simple domestic pursuits, and for thinking. I have learned to live alone with great contentment, and I continue to enjoy a rich intellectual and social life. Although I was always physically strong, athletic and quick in mind and body, I am now excruciatingly slow, awkward, and more sedentary than I like to be. But I no longer make the kind of demands on myself I used to, and therefore I can appreciate doing what I still can do.

I am very fortunate to be a historian, able to continue my intellectual engagement with the past, which makes the present more tolerable. I'm also very fortunate in being a creative writer. Creativity and form-giving are the greatest gifts one can enjoy in old age.

The fact that I had an unconventional life with many disruptions and many enforced new beginnings was probably a good preparation for the necessary flexibility needed to adapt to old age. In old age one has constantly to adapt to major changes: when the body does not function as it used to function, when old friends die or move away, when one is forced to relocate to smaller quarters, when one has to give up forever occupations or pursuits one used to love. Much more than at any previous stage of life, the old person has to be flexible.

My lifelong commitment to social action as a political radical has greatly enriched my life and has helped me to be connected with many networks of colleagues and like-minded people. I look back on my years of political activism with satisfaction, even though there were many disappointments and defeats next to the successes. It was also a great advantage for me to have been active on two continents.

TO MAKE AGING EASIER and more constructive societies should invest more in aging: a good and cheap system of public transportation, so that old people have more access to the community; larger apartments or houses for young families, to enable them to shelter old family members; adequate pensions and health insurance, so that all old people can be assured of a minimum level of subsistence; no retirement centers or old

people's homes without having a certain percentage of the units reserved for young families with children.

There are very few models of communal solutions for the needs of aging populations. Senior centers in many towns provide a good beginning, but their emphasis is on recreational occupations. At a time when many families need two wage earners to pay their way, it is difficult and expensive for such families to meet the needs of young children. Community cooperatives, in which older people could serve as volunteer "grandparents" for children after school hours, would help both the old and the young. Such arrangements could be made in stable neighborhoods that are not age-segregated. In my hometown there already exist groups that try to pair young people with small incomes and older folks who live in large, empty houses. The young people get cheap rentals and, in exchange, help the older folks continue to live in their house and garden by relieving them of the heavy physical labor. This kind of arrangement works quite well for both sides. It could be extended to meet the needs of children whose parents work long hours. In order to turn such model experiments into large-scale plans society and politicians would have to take the problems of aging populations seriously and understand that there is a new reality out there to which they have to adapt.

Above all, cultural attitudes toward aging need to be changed. Old age is not a catastrophe; old people are not problems and useless dependents. Old people can contribute much to society: through their knowledge and life experience, through volunteer work, through their patience and peacefulness. With some societal adjustments, some innovative programs, some respectful help, old people can continue to work part-time into very old age. Like all living persons, even the very old feel the need to be incorporated into community and social networks. Age segregation and isolation are much more frightening to old people than are pain and physical handicaps. Old people still are society's best link with the past, and their knowledge and experiences are desperately needed in a mechanized society that is more and more alienated from nature and natural processes. Even the very old and the handicapped can help younger people by modeling how to accept help. In our competitive society people are trained to be self-made and independent. But they also have to learn how to help others and how to accept help without feeling demeaned and diminished. Because modern society excludes or marginalizes old people and avoids

dealing with death, the healthy and the living are full of fears and have no preparation for their own process of aging. The steady courage of older people, their patience, their optimism, and their childlike willingness to experience spontaneous joy could serve as models for the aging generation of their children.

Old age is not a contagious disease. It is the ripening of the fruit, the preparation for the harshness of winter, when the roots grow and strengthen, a time when leaf mold decays, making a seedbed for the new growth of mushrooms. It is the closing of the circle; the fulfillment of the contract of the generations. It needs to be treated with respect and honor.