Aging Wisely. . .

Wisdom of our Elders

Summary Overview

PART I

Life Stories

Our lives are composed of stories; we sort the events of our lives into stories to make sense of who we are, who surrounds us, and the world we live in. If we are wise, we share our stories with others, first, so they can know us, and second, so they can benefit from what we have already learned.

This first section opens with a chapter on sharing our stories, laying out how we can learn from understanding them and how, as we age and draw closer to our own endings, our stories can bring comfort to our loved ones. We then follow life stories from six inspiring elders: a 103 year old man who went back to school at 75 and published two volumes of poetry, one at 99 and the other at 102; an 82 year old woman who capitalized on the unusual opportunities that came her way; another 82 year old woman whose early curiosity and sense of wonder in the world led her to a wider life than her parents might have planned for her; a 99 year old man who found a way to celebrate the positives in everything; a poet reflecting on the ups and downs of her life at 95; and a couple, both 80, remaining active and optimistic—and together—through all their long years.

What do these stories teach us? First, that we all have stories to tell. Second, that seniors are powerful teachers. Third, that our stories continue through all our years. And, fourth, that in telling our own stories, we may learn something of value—not just to our loved ones or to the wider world, but also to ourselves.

PART II

The Biology of Aging

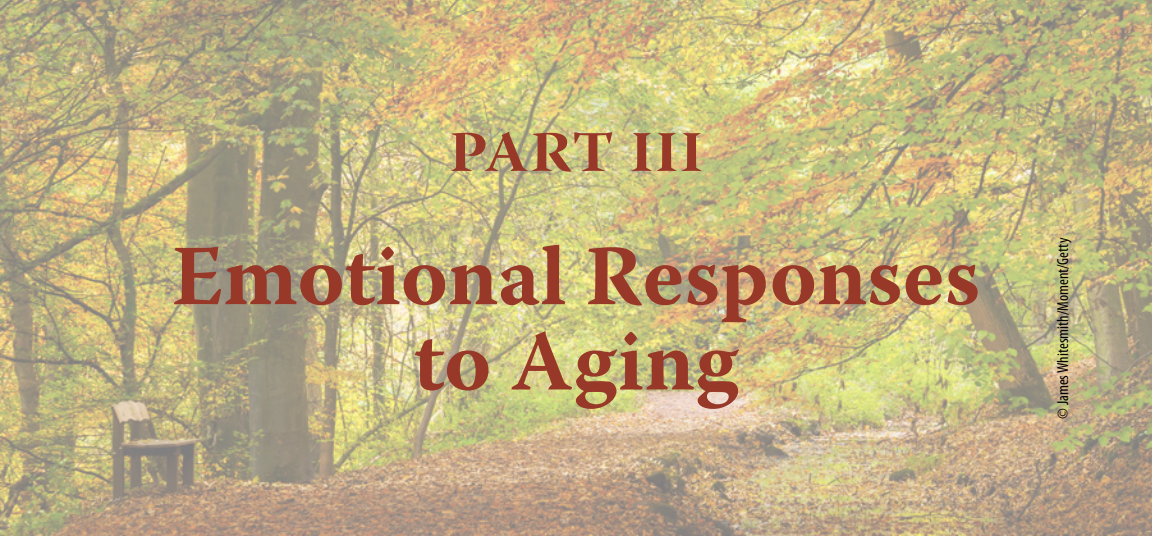
Conventional wisdom says "aging is bad." We don't want to look old; we don't want to feel old. And yet, as a society, we are getting older, especially as the Baby Boomer generation moves into their senior years. For many, age comes gradually and gracefully, with increasing wisdom and few difficulties. For others, the process has more pain.

What actually happens to our bodies as we age, and how can we make our longer years, years worth living? Those are the questions the chapters in this section explore.

The section opens with a chapter describing the concept of Successful or Positive Aging and how creativity keeps both mind and body active and vital well into one's senior years. It then turns to an analysis of normal health changes in aging and ways we can keep ourselves healthy. There follows a chapter on the close links between body and brain that explains how keeping our bodies healthy also contributes to brain health. Next, a doctor looks at memory, attention, language, and other cognitive skills and provides suggestions to maintain cognitive health as we age. A woman in her 80s discusses important psychological and interpersonal facets of aging well, to add to medical suggestions like eating and sleeping well. Vision and hearing losses, so common in the senior population, are discussed by another doctor, along with appropriate treatment options; and a pair of pharmacists lay out medication considerations especially applicable to seniors.

As indicated above, sometimes aging involves pain and physical losses. A poem in this section describes the sequelae of a stroke, one of many possible causes of such pain and loss. For anyone who suffers a stroke, a heart attack, cancer, or other serious illness—all, more frequent among elders—aging is neither smooth nor graceful . . . yet it need not be experienced as catastrophic. Having help, helps. And: continuing to be alive means that possibilities and opportunities continue too.

The ultimate message of this section is that although aging has its perhaps inevitable losses, by paying attention to our bodies and brains, and taking care of them to the best of our capacities, we *can* age successfully and really live to the end of our days.



PART III
Emotional Responses to Aging

How do people *feel* about getting old? While many elders have positive attitudes about most things, few find anything good to say about the process of getting older, beyond Maurice Chevalier's oft-quoted remark, "Old age isn't so bad when you consider the alternative." Indeed, what is notable about most people as they age is that they want to postpone "the alternative"; they want to continue living.

The chapters in this section start by comparing aging to adolescence—both times filled with physical change—noting that the changes of aging make us "feel like survivors in a losing battle against inevitable weakness and decline." This sentiment is echoed in three poems that follow, addressing aging and time itself in metaphorical ways, and then in a prose chapter whose author comments on her mother's aging, and her own. Finally, the section concludes with another approach to aging, that of humor. The aging process may not be pretty, but at least we can laugh—and this seems to be a strategy that many seniors use to help them through the rough spots of aging.

PART IV

Coming to Terms with the Changes Caused by Aging

Age brings many physical changes; they are expectable, if not always pleasant. Part of "aging wisely" is coming to terms with these changes. The key word is acceptance. Sometimes, as the first chapter in this section makes clear, what is needed is a widespread acceptance of self and others and establishment of a positive orientation. The next chapter in this section looks at finding the right kind of help (or, for those assisting others, figuring out what kinds of help are needed and available), as a way of making peace with the needs of aging. The next two chapters present ways to cope with changes in bodily functions (such as vision, hearing, and mobility) and suggestions about ways of accepting appropriate technological assists.

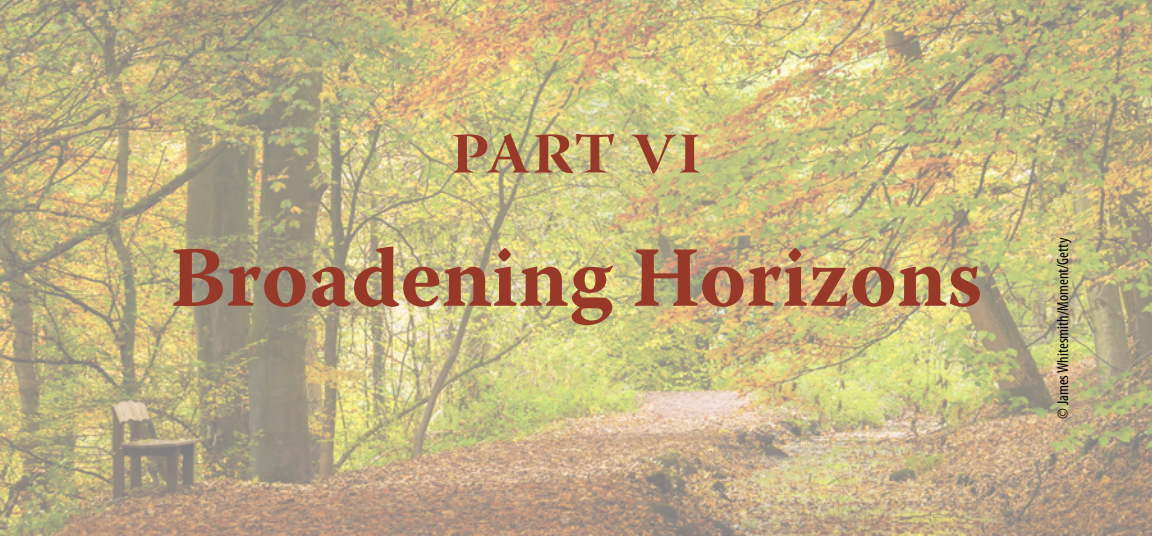
Sometimes coming to terms with the consequences of aging means facing up to the fact that in older age, certain options we had when we were younger are no longer available to us. The final chapter in this section, laying out the wish to once again be pregnant, expresses something important through that metaphor, about a capacity no longer feasible in older years but perhaps still wished for . . . a change maybe to be mourned, but also with positive underpinnings, maybe to be welcomed.

PART V

Using Internal Strengths

None of us gets to older age without living a lot of years, gaining a lot of experience. The chapters in this section talk about some of the inner strengths we develop over the years, the resources we can harness to make aging comfortable, rewarding, and fulfilling. These include learning how to really listen to others; developing the skill of maintaining a hopeful—optimistic—focus in facing our lives; cherishing the lives we have, each and every day, and living each to the full (whatever that means on an individual basis); and bouncing back from the inevitable hard knocks and rejections life too often throws at us.

These internal skills or strengths may require cognitive restructuring to move us from negative perspectives to more positive ones and from an external locus of control to a more internal one. Essentially, they are the building blocks of a wisdom that allows us to take things in stride, to become more tolerant of who and what we encounter, and to value others as we value ourselves.



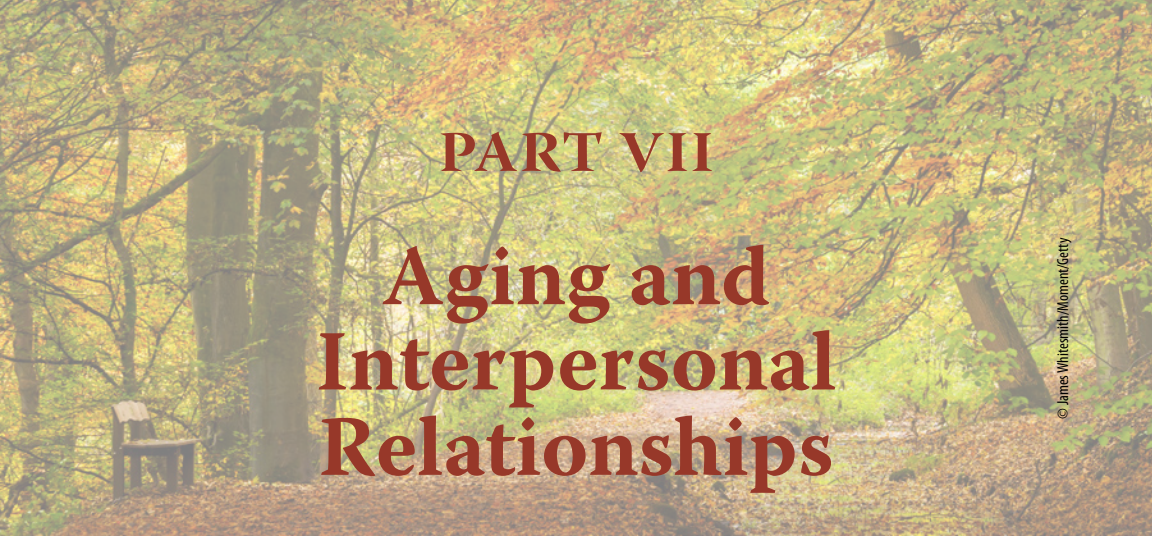
PART VI

Broadening Horizons

Particularly as we age, we need to recognize our limitations and find ways outside ourselves to work around them. One such area is in finding new activities, such as volunteering, to make our later years more meaningful. Another area is in keeping our bodies functional and strong, by embarking on a systematic program of exercise.

Aging involves broadening our horizons in psychological ways too. We need to use what the world makes available to us to broaden our minds. One obvious way to do this is through travel, which exposes us to a broader swath of humanity; however, by paying attention to others and welcoming the differences we see in them, we can broaden our perspectives even without leaving home.

The chapters in this section describe all these possible broadenings, from volunteer work to exercise to travel to accepting those who are different from ourselves, letting them stand out for their own merits rather than for their differences.



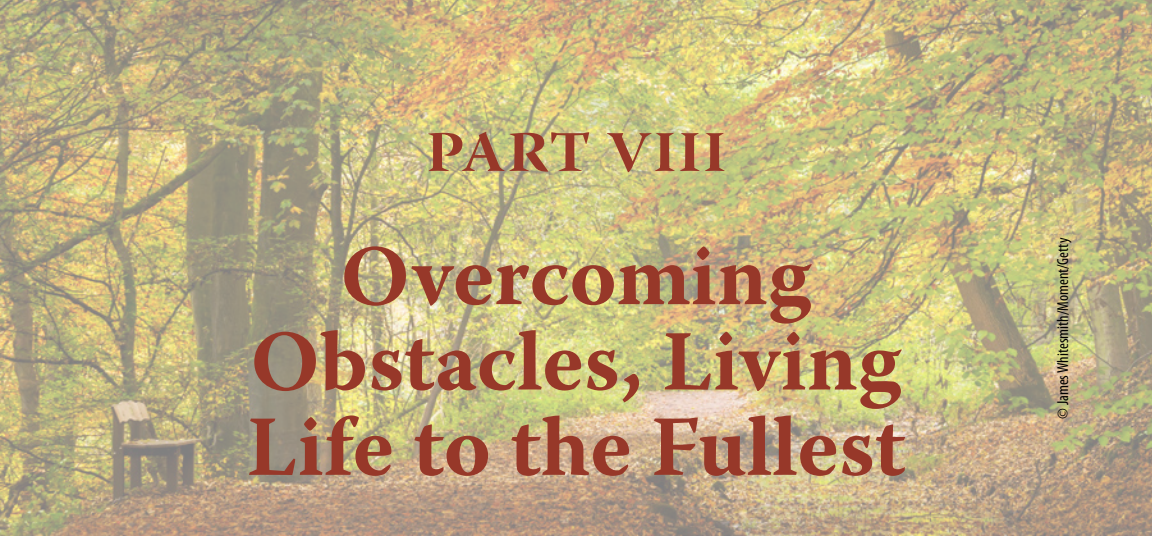
PART VII

Aging and Interpersonal Relationships

For many as we age, family takes on more importance. There is not only an increased longing for closeness and a desire to interact with the people we care about, but also more need for tangible assistance. Some elders may choose to move closer to family, or even to move into the home of another family member—a disruption of familiar ties, for the sake of that sense of closeness. But: reliance on our children does not always bring new closeness; it can also reveal problems, as children live their own lives and may not be there enough in the lives of their aging parents; and sometimes relationships between parents and children come with a history of poor communication or other difficulties.

The chapters in this section deal with a wide variety of relationships. The section opens with a chapter describing a close relationship between a young person and an unrelated but loving elder, which perhaps can model what is hoped for—from both sides—in relationships between elders and grandchildren. The next chapter describes the awareness on the part of an elder that his children have wisdom too, and are (at least sometimes!) worth listening to. The following chapters deal with partner relationships: what is so valuable there, the struggle of loss, and the possibilities of finding new relationships later in life. Finally, the last two chapters describe the joy in grandparenting from the grandparent's perspective, the chance to nurture yet another generation.

These chapters reveal several recurring threads, including the common desire of elders for others to share the ups and downs of their lives, and the sustaining importance of communication with loved ones. These themes become particularly poignant as death steals partners (and sometimes other family members) away. Loneliness and longing are frequent accompaniments to widowhood and other losses; and people, elders included, make different decisions about seeking out new relationships after losing someone dear.



PART VIII

Overcoming Obstacles, Living Life to the Fullest

Some of us struggle with obstacles—disabilities, handicaps, etc.—all our lives. For others, these issues accumulate with age. Having obstacles to face, however, does not mean we are doomed to lives with few rewards. As the chapters in this section illustrate, we have the power to make our lives better—and sometimes, to do the same for others too.

The first chapter in this section pays tribute to one remarkable elder who, despite her weaknesses, demonstrated the value of being present and helpful to others. The next chapter explores the question of living in the real world versus taking refuge in imagination, and when it is appropriate to do either. The succeeding four chapters in the section look at how accepting help can overcome physical and emotional obstacles, describing (in turn) a psychotherapy's help in attitude change; one man's lifetime experience of needing and accepting help; the value of such help as occupational therapy; and techniques that help in dealing with depression. Finally, the section concludes with thoughts on how we can help ourselves, with techniques we can use to avoid making mistakes.

The situations covered in this section are varied, but all of them relate to finding ways around obstacles, to live the best lives we can. And the central message is that in many or most situations, it is possible to overcome the obstacles if we set our minds to it and use the helps we find available.

PART IX
Work and Retirement

The kind of work we do is a major factor shaping our lives. Typically, as we grow older we look back on the arc of our professional lives, thinking about what was satisfying to us—and why—and what was not. The chapters in this section follow the career paths of a few seniors as they review their professional choices, including whether to remain active professionally or to retire and move on to other kinds of endeavors.

In the first chapter in this section, the author, a lawyer, considered the options of continuing to work full-time, reducing to a part-time schedule, or retiring, ultimately deciding that, for him, part-time work was not feasible and the best choice was to retire. The second chapter, also written by a lawyer, represents a different (and in some ways more serendipitous) solution as the author has happily continued working into his 80s on a reduced schedule.

The third chapter focuses on planning during one's working years for what to do in retirement, including considerations of money and where to live. The fourth chapter similarly advocates for advance planning to insure that the retirement years are full and fulfilling.

In the fifth chapter in the section, a successful novelist describes the process of beginning to write her first novel (at age 50) and publishing it in the then-conventional way; and how, now, at age 85, she continues to write—and to explore new publishing options. For her, retirement would be a non sequitur, as writing is both her vocation and her avocation.

Finally, the section concludes with an account from a scientist who, after a long career in important biomedical research, left her work behind at age 71 and has devoted herself since then to entirely different pursuits.

What is clear from these chapters is that decisions about work and retirement are very individual; there is certainly no one-size-fits-all solution. Some people love their work too much to ever want to give it up while others are ready to make

hobbies or other interests their "center" when they reach their later years. Some find a compromise in a part-time work schedule. All need to consider health and financial issues in making their choices—and all need to find (or continue) something that will keep them vital as they age.

The chapters in this section presuppose that individuals are financially able to retire if they want to do so. This is obviously not true for everyone. Situations where retirement is financially challenging or outright infeasible are considered in the section entitled "Money Matters."

PART X

Housing Options and Solutions

Seniors today have many choices in housing. For some, the obvious choice is to stay in their established homes. For others, moving into a senior community, such as the continuing care retirement center model with independent living, assisted living, memory care and long-term healthcare options, is more desirable. Downsizing and moving closer to family—or with family—are other options.

This section opens with a chapter from the CEO of Hebrew SeniorLife explaining the advantages seniors can find in a continuing care retirement community; Hebrew SeniorLife operates NewBridge on the Charles, the community where many of the authors in this volume live. The next two chapters, written by NewBridge residents of disparate ages, explain the reasons why moving to a retirement community made sense for each of them

Retirement community living is not a unanimous choice by seniors. The final two chapters in the section describe the situations of two seniors who chose to stay in their own homes—in one case, deriving great benefit from that choice and in the other, becoming isolated and bitter.

The chapters in this section all assume seniors have enough money to choose the style of retirement living they prefer. For seniors with more limited resources, choices may be more restricted. Those situations are discussed in greater depth in the section entitled "Money Matters."

PART XI

To Drive or Not to Drive

As we reach older age, we have to make many hard choices. For many, one of the hardest of all is deciding whether to give up driving. The two chapters in this section deal with that decision.

In one of the chapters, a 92 year old woman shares that continuing to drive allows her to remain independent, noting she is careful about her driving and would stop if she felt her driving were unsafe. The other chapter, written by a social worker specializing in eldercare, talks about assessments for driving safety and how family members and elders can deal with the emotional upheavals surrounding "to drive or not to drive" decisions.

The central issue here is that, as we age, we lose capacities we enjoyed when we were younger. Those capacities assisted us in feeling able, strong, and independent.

Driving, of course, is not the only place where our sense of strength and independence gets challenged as we age, but it can represent those other areas metaphorically.

PART XII

Money Matters

Seniors with limited financial resources face even greater challenges than the economically disadvantaged young, because they may no longer be able to work and are likely to have greater needs (and expenses) for healthcare. The four chapters in this section present different aspects of their struggle.

The section opens with a case study of a senior with both economic and immigration-related issues, which together have driven him into a clinical depression; depression is a serious problem for many elders. The second chapter provides useful advice on living on a fixed income. The next chapter focuses on the lack of suitable and affordable housing for the elderly, and describes the kinds of housing that should be more widely available. Finally, an "untypical woman" on a limited income lays out some of the financial choices she has been forced to make and how she tries to live in the present to minimize worrying about the future.

All of these chapters present questions about the kinds of help, tangible and psychological, that are needed by seniors with limited financial resources. This is a major issue for society and will only become more so as the number of seniors continues to grow.

PART XIII

The Meanings of Success

"Success" can mean many different things. In this section, five seniors reflect on their personal definitions of success and how their own lives exemplify success or fall short.

The opening chapter lays out the possibility that success can be measured in terms of family and other personal considerations; success is not limited to those making great contributions to the world or amassing great wealth. This author's practice of maintaining strong connections with family and friends is what makes her feel successful.

The author of the second chapter describes a life that, as she acknowledges, others would hail as successful, yet one shortfall leaves her feeling *not* successful. This chapter raises important questions about internal and external measures of success and the importance to be attributed to any one given area.

The author of the third chapter describes how, as she developed and aged, her concepts of success moved away from performance or achievement and toward the internal gratifications that come from personal relationships.

The fourth chapter defines success in terms of having a positive impact somewhere—anywhere—in one's world.

The final chapter in this section lays out a life that is successful in multiple dimensions. Written by a self-described "mother and grandmother," the chapter describes the author's rise from humble beginnings to former First Lady of New Mexico, New Mexico Secretary of Cultural Affairs, and national activist for Hispanic advancement.

What comes through in these chapters is, first, how age brings with it a greater personal understanding of who one is and what one sees as important, and second, the great and individual variety of those things.

PART XIV

Finding Fulfillment in Older Age

Where do people find pleasure or fulfillment, and how do those things change with age? Of course, many of the things we like or love, are things we cherish throughout our lives—art, music, writing, and so forth, either as practitioners or as appreciators. As humans, we find things to be passionate about, that we want to incorporate into our worlds. These range from treasured objects to loving relationships to just being in love with life.

Some things become more fulfilling as we age. Many elders are surprised to find themselves thinking about, and valuing, things that barely entered their minds in their youth. As Erik Erikson noted, one such thing is the idea of legacy, of leaving something behind for future generations.

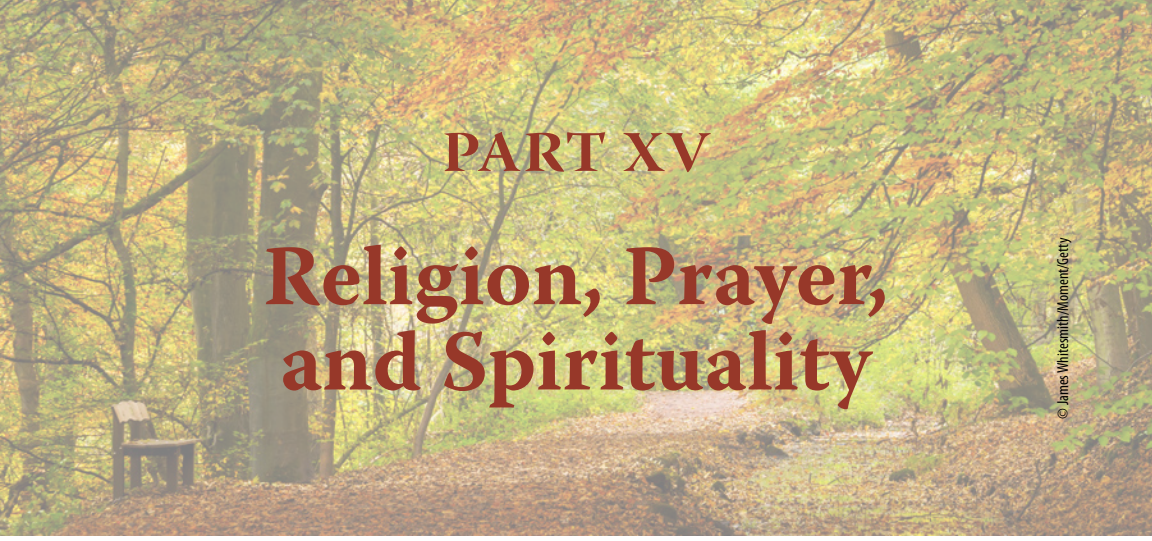
The chapters in this section discuss many different ways of finding fulfillment in older age, starting in the first chapter with the idea of building a legacy. The second (and related) chapter talks about finding pleasure in communicating one's passions to younger generations; and the third chapter identifies how individual one's passions might be.

The fourth chapter in this section moves in a slightly different direction, to address how, with age, something that once was important (in this author's case, making violins) takes on new attributes as it gets combined with patience, a trait perhaps more natural to seniors than to our younger selves.

The next three chapters address areas that are fulfilling for many: music; art; the movies; and open questions, even more fully developed in the succeeding chapter, of how to combine those fulfilling interests with one's work.

The final chapter in the section goes to the heart of living, explaining how *being alive* offers pleasure and fulfillment—and the desire to keep on living.

What comes through, in all these chapters, is that life can be rich and full, no matter what our age.



PART XV

Religion, Prayer, and Spirituality

As meaning-making creatures, we humans, unlike other animals, ponder what force or forces created us and brought us to this planet, and what is the nature of our finite lives. We look in many different places for answers, and we do so with increasing energy and fervor as we approach the end of our days.

What can we expect as we cross from living into death? Spirituality and religion, the latter often implemented through the tool of prayer, are frequently the guides we call upon.

The first chapter in this section looks at spirituality (defined more broadly than religion) as a way of creating peace within our selves, especially as we age. Spirituality is more than particular practices or rituals; it encompasses the relationship between self and life itself, and can bring a sense of oneness with divinity and with achieving justice and fellowship in one's world. The chapter describes health benefits related to having an active spiritual life and compares various cultures and religions in their approaches to life, death, and spirituality.

The next three chapters look at specific religions and their practices, particularly in terms of how they provide support around the end of life. The first of these chapters looks at Jewish observances while the other two—one from a priest and one from a lay person—address rites and rituals from a Catholic perspective.

There follow two chapters, one from a lay person and one from a minister, on the value of prayer. These are followed, finally, by two chapters speculating about the existence of an afterlife and what heaven will be like.

What makes all these things important? They are supports we can call upon all through our lives; but perhaps most especially, they are helps we look to as we age.

PART XVI

End-of-Life Issues and Care

Death comes in many forms. For those of us with a terminal illness, there is the opportunity to use the time preceding death to come to terms with our lives. Though as a society we often say people with sudden deaths are "lucky," they may not have that same opportunity. The fact is that death will come for all of us, and each of us can plan ahead, in our healthier days, for what would be a "good death" for *us.*

The first chapter in this section offers a case history of a woman whose primary concern as she neared the end of her life was taking care of her children. Facing a terminal cancer diagnosis, and having already encountered much in the way of pain and grief, she dedicated her last months to the welfare of those she loved. The next chapter tells the story of a man approaching death but determined to stay positive, not facing his illness and not interacting over-much with family; he was busy in the present rather than focusing on his declining health. These two chapters, taken together, demonstrate how one person's idea of a "good death" can be very different from another's.

Next, a noted authority in the field of death, dying and grief talks about how families should discuss end-of-life issues, and why these discussions are so important; and the succeeding chapter suggests a possible way to structure such conversations.

In the fifth chapter, an emergency room doctor discusses the gap between the end-of-life care most people want—a non-invasive and peaceful death at home—and the deaths most people get, in hospitals or long-term care facilities with multiple active interventions. He urges us all to implement and record end-of-life decisions while we are able to do so, which not only will allow us to have the care (and *only* the care) we want, but also will put our loved ones at ease, knowing what we want and knowing, further, that we will not be subjected to unwanted procedures.

The next chapter describes what patients and families can gain by making an election of hospice care, explaining who is eligible for hospice, when hospice should be called, and what to look for in selecting a hospice.

There follows a chapter on the "happy and sad" of living in a retirement community where aging and dying are both common experiences; and the section concludes with a chapter on "death with dignity," the movement that advocates allowing the terminally ill to act to end their lives.

As is clear from the chapters in this section, different people will have different thoughts about how they want to end their days. The goal of this section is to lay out the choices.

PART XVII

Coping with Losses

Who ever wants to talk about loss? And yet, it is inevitably a part of life, and one that we would be wise to anticipate and prepare for as best we can. The four chapters in this section deal with some of the losses we encounter in life and especially in our later years. There is no way to minimize the pain of these losses, and no point in doing so, though research shows that seniors do better at coping with loss than their younger counterparts. Perhaps this is because seniors are more practiced in facing losses, or perhaps it occurs as part of a creative process of adapting to a "new normal."

Certain losses are expectable, especially as we age. For those who are married, almost inevitably one spouse will die, leaving the other behind. The first two chapters in this section deal with that situation: in one case, a spouse undergoes a long and difficult decline, and in the other, the death is sudden and unexpected. In both instances, the pain felt by the surviving spouse is palpable.

As we as a society age, it becomes more common for the survivors of an elderly parent to themselves be elders. The third chapter in the section talks about the special issues of adult children grieving an elderly parent.

Finally, the last chapter of the section turns to something different entirely, the multitude of losses we experience within ourselves as we age—cumulatively, the loss of who we used to be: the loss of our familiar place when we leave our homes or our home communities leave us; the loss of family members and close friends; the loss of our romantic partners or interests; the loss of our accustomed work; and perhaps most significant of all, the loss of our former capacities. All of these losses accumulate into a loss of freedom and a sense of loneliness; and while there are strategies we can employ to mitigate the impact, we are likely to be hard-pressed to "rage, rage against the dying of the light."

PART XVIII

How Do We Want to Be Remembered?

Although it is hard to consider our endings, most of us have clear thoughts about how we want to be remembered. The chapters in this section explore some ways of being remembered and who will remember us.

The section opens with advice about writing our own memoirs, to give others as much information as possible for remembering us. The next chapter turns to practical ways all of us can remember and memorialize those who are dear to us. In a chapter poignantly entitled "How Will I Be Remembered?" one senior lays out what is most important to her and establishes the legacy she wants to leave her loved ones.

In the fourth chapter in the section, an author describes a powerful moment to be remembered, when three generations of women in her family were present together; and finally, a chapter dealing with old age, friendships and loss explores how one woman remembers some important friends.

What do these chapters have in common? In each case, they focus on the importance to the writer of being remembered, of leaving a positive legacy to those who matter.

PART XIX

Wisdom

And so, we finally turn to wisdom itself, one of the hallmark achievements of older age. The chapters in this section set forth some of the wisdom acquired over the long lifetimes of several seniors.

In the first chapter, a Protestant minister describes two things he learned and wants to pass along to others, the value of offering others a regular "something to look forward to" and the importance of listening above the importance of hearing oneself speak.

The second chapter also deals with something related to talking and listening; its author emphasizes the importance of using talk to share with others.

The third chapter lays out why maintaining a positive outlook is so important especially as we age; and the final chapter of the section provides one senior's statement of legacy: who he is, what he believes in, what he has accomplished and what he still wants to accomplish, and his vision of the world . . . a statement that emphasizes that life itself is what leads to feeling fulfilled.

Fitting words to conclude this volume!