

What Is Old Age For?

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When we are young, we look forward to leaving adolescence and entering adulthood. The tempting fruit of adult freedom has led many teenagers to wish away the years until they can be independent. But there is no similar rush to enter old age, as it is punctuated by death, not the signing of a lease for a person's first apartment. Put old age and youth on a ballot and the former will lose in a landslide of historic proportions. The bottom line? People want to be young.

The vigorous pursuit of youthfulness includes a healthful diet, physical exercise, and an optimistic attitude. People who are attentive to such things age more gracefully than those who pay little heed to the legitimate needs of body and mind. The development of age-related diseases and disabilities can and should be delayed, but aging itself will not be denied. It may come sooner or it may come later—but it will come.

Human strength, vitality, and reproductive vigor peak before an individual's 30th birthday. Even the conservative historic standard of a life expectancy of three score and 10 leaves 40 or more years of decline to follow the tender blossom of youth. It hardly seems right that the majority of a normal human life should be lived in a state of decline. The data that quantify our declining bodily functions are not all we have to contend with, as society's celebration of youth gleefully rubs salt into the wounds of old age.

When I wrote the book *What Are Old People For? How Elders Will Save the World*, my publisher was wary of putting the words "elderhood" and "old age" into the title. There was a legitimate fear that seeing those words on the cover would discourage people from buying the book or even taking it off the shelf for further examination. Reminding people of old age (and their eventual death) always makes a product less attractive to consumers. More comforting is the multitude of books that actively and energetically deny the inevitability of old age. They preach a new gospel of immortality joined with eternal youth.

Talking about, reading about, or just thinking about the changes that accompany late life is difficult for most people. This reluctance is the product of the declinism that dominates our culture. Although the contemporary aversion to old age pervades every aspect of our society, it should not be mistaken for a universal human phenomenon. The development of a new perspective on age and aging is both necessary and possible. Given the importance of aging in our lives and the impact of aging on our families and society, a new openness and even curiosity about human aging would seem more than warranted. The time has come for our wondrous longevity to emerge from the long shadow cast by the vigor and virtues of youth.

Imagine gathering a group of your friends for a fine meal and good conversation. After dessert is served, you linger over tea or coffee. A break in the conversation allows you to make an announcement: "I have discovered an ancient path to human development that is all natural, subtle but transformative, and requires decades to experience fully. Only mature adults may sign on; the young are unprepared to accept what it has to offer." A murmur of general approval is likely to follow. "Tell us more!" And so you tell them about aging:

• **Aging requires life.** When we speak of the aging of machines, buildings, or cities, we are employing a metaphor. Inanimate objects can and will decay, but they cannot age. Aging is an active process that requires the force of life. A building does not live and thus cannot age, though its human occupants must. Being alive is a continuing prerequisite for growing old. The

challenges of longevity are insistent; they cannot be set aside by those who find them unpleasant. Given a choice between growing old or remaining young, there is hardly a soul alive who wouldn't choose youth. Life, however, offers us a different set of options. Given a choice between aging and death, we choose to grow old.

- **Aging is natural.** Aging is within us, not imposed on us. While environmental conditions can accelerate or retard aging, the process itself is part of the human being. How a species ages is one of its defining characteristics. A mouse lives two years, not 200. An oak tree grows to maturity in 50 years, not five. So it is with *Homo sapiens*—; when and how we age is written into our very being.

- **Aging is gradual.** We don't have to think about breathing in order to breathe, and we age whether or not we wish to do so. Aging is a gradual, rhythmic, highly choreographed process. It holds no surprises, as its course and consequences are well known to all of us. No one goes to bed at the height of vitality and wakes up old. Like water on stone, this is the source of aging's power.

Remember Tithonus? In the palace of his lover, Eos, he enjoyed perfect health, was protected from all harm, and feasted on the nectar of the gods. Still, he aged. It is because illness and injury so often occur with the process of aging that we confuse them as being part of aging. While illness and injury can and do complicate the aging process, they are distinct from it. When a young man breaks his neck in a fall, he is not aged; he is injured. When an old woman falls and breaks her hip, the fracture is unfortunate and fraught with danger but is not itself a manifestation of aging. Orthopedic wards host young and old alike.

- **Aging requires maturity.** Some movies, CDs, DVDs, and even books are available only to "mature audiences." We label these products out of concern that the ideas and images they contain may overwhelm younger, less-mature people. We restrict access to tobacco and alcohol for similar reasons. There are many things best reserved for people with the good judgment that comes with age. Old age gives us access to a collection of experiences and insights that are beyond the capacity of the young to understand or fully appreciate.

Scientific theories about how we age nearly all accept without question the doctrine of youth's perfection. They focus on decline and pay little heed to the steady emergence of new gifts and capacities. This tunnel vision is the root cause of their failure to fully explain aging. They fail because they are the products of a culture mired in a misunderstanding of age and aging.

If aging is truly a catastrophic prelude to death, an alien rot imposed on an unwilling adult, it deserves the dread it currently engenders. But what if aging is better understood as a normal, natural ripening? If aging and old age do include important affirmative elements needed for a normal, healthy human life, then we have to ask: What is old age for? Does it serve a distinctive purpose or is it a leftover from youth's vitality, unconnected to the central purposes of life? Even a brief examination of the world around us would offer support for an optimistic outlook. Aging is everywhere. Far from being some dreadful anomaly, it works its way into the lives of millions of species and hundreds of billions of creatures each and every day. This ubiquity suggests that nature finds aging to be very useful, even essential.

If we are ever to understand the purpose of aging, we must explore the origins of the human being's unprecedented longevity.

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