

introduction

I have always longed to be old, and that is because all my life I have had such great exemplars of old age, such marvelous models to contemplate.

—MAY SARTON

I remember my Swedish grandmother's strength and steadfastness. A pioneer in a new world, she had to be tough. As a nineteen-year-old immigrant, she came to the United States in the early 1900s on her own. She married and later became a widow with a five-year-old daughter to care for. As I faced some of my own life challenges (two divorces, a husband who died, raising children on my own), I drew strength from her story. As she aged, I watched her seek ways to grow intellectually (she loved US history, listening to books on tape when she could no longer see well enough to read) and socially (in her seventies, she had a boyfriend who was in his sixties!). She walked everywhere and dressed with class. She enjoyed politics, creative pursuits, saving money to buy quality items, teaching, and playing with her grandchildren. She died at 102. I'm grateful to her for giving me a solid, healthy view of aging.

My sister Marilyn has also given me glimpses into what I might expect as I age. As mentor and pathfinder for me, she's been like an efficient snowplow, clearing and sanding the road ahead of me for safe

travel. As grateful as I am to her, the five-year glimpse ahead that she offered hasn't felt like quite enough. I've wanted to know more. I've wanted to know more about what was waiting for me in the years ahead so I could plan, aspire to greater things, feel some measure of control, and be part of an evolving community of women. May Sarton called them "great exemplars of old age" and had them all her life. I realized after entering the second half of my life that other than Grandma and Marilyn, I lacked "marvelous models to contemplate."

This book was born out of a search for more role models. I wondered, *What will old age and its unknown future with its specter of diminishments of all kinds demand of me? Where is the dignity to be found in it? What can I expect at various stages? How will I approach death—my own and that of those I love? What passions do I have time to pursue?*

Women over fifty are the new pioneers. Author Colette Dowling says, "Because no previous generation of midlife women had the luxury of seeing decades of productive time roll out before them, we who came of age with the women's movement are in the position, once again, of having to do it for the first time." We are living longer and better lives than ever before. As there is no turning back the clock, the goal is to live these golden years the best we can, maintaining our quality of life and independence for as long as possible.

Medical advances coupled with technological research are going to extend our life expectancies so much that some of us could easily reach 120. We might become the first generation of women to live sixty or so years beyond menopause! The length of time that humans spend in adulthood has more than doubled since the early part of the 20th century, making it possible for today's midlife women to have fifty more years with their mates (or without them), of watching their children grow old, and of facing career choices, leisure time, physical challenges, and learning opportunities—and fifty more years of trying to fund it all.

In the next fifty years, as science, medicine, and bioengineering extend the span of human life, one-hundredth birthdays will lose their mystique. In 1950, there were only 2,300 people older than one

hundred. By 2050, there could be somewhere in the neighborhood of 600,000 centenarians in the United States. By mid-century, old people will outnumber young people for the first time in history. The 20th century has given us the gift of longevity. In the past hundred years, life expectancy has increased by three decades, a phenomenon that is reshaping our families, attitudes, work lives, and institutions.

We live in a paradoxical time. In the past, respect for the wisdom of the elders was central to human societies. The elders served as keepers of cultural knowledge. But today, in technological countries such as ours, respect has faded into bare tolerance as we expect older people to act, look, and talk young. This view is changing slowly, and aging, as we have known it, will no longer only be seen as a time of disability, mental decline, and diminished energy.

We will be living longer—much, much longer—than we ever dreamed possible. This new era of aging will create an altogether new set of challenges. Our families and social institutions will be boggled by a social revolution. About every seven seconds, a baby boomer turns sixty. Retirement is becoming passé, just another word for “career change,” eighty-year-olds are dating and marrying, and ninety-year-olds are getting college degrees. Thanks to the miracles of medical science, we are experiencing an extension of the human life span, and people age one hundred or older are surprisingly healthy. We are beginning to see more and more educated and healthy older people in our society.

Before the 19th century, most people didn’t age much—they died. Just a hundred years ago, few reached age sixty-five. Now there are about 35 million Americans who are sixty-five and older. By 2030, more than 70 million Americans will be over the age of sixty-five. The number of people over sixty-five has grown tenfold since 1900. And the fastest growing segment of our population is the eighty-five-and-over age group.

Aging continues to be redefined, and we need new words to describe it. In writing this book, I’ve struggled to find a single word for age fifty-plus women that isn’t negative. Authorities on aging describe

us as being young until we're forty, middle-aged between forty and sixty, and old from sixty to eighty. But those terms are simultaneously broad and limiting. We need better words that embody the spirit of the woman over fifty. Some suggest using the word *crone*, but many women bristle at that.

I find the term *wise woman* appealing. Helen Hayes, first lady of the American theater, who died in 1993 at the age of ninety-three, thought we should be called maturians. For her, the word implied there was "still a bit of fight in us." Marilyn, my sister, doesn't like the words *old* or *older*; I like the word *elder*. Some Native Americans use the term *Grandmother Moon*, the elderwoman of the tribe. Perhaps we could settle on the term *elderwoman*. Instead of the clinical designation of *postmenopausal*, we might use the term *opal* (Older People with an Active Lifestyle), coined by Frances Lear, publisher of *Lear's Magazine*. I like the idea of being opalescent—a gem emitting fire! I also like the idea of changing the word *aging* to *evolving*, or as my eighty-year-old friend Alma says, "ripening."

If the world turns in your favor, you could potentially live out all the hidden aspects of your personality, explore your passions, pursue your yearnings to see the planet or change the world, express your unused talents, serve others, continue your search for love and knowledge—lots of possibilities lie in wait.

In preparing this book, I spoke with older women from all walks of life: professionals, homemakers, retirees, grandmothers, widows, single women. The issues I've written about are common to many of us. The women I interviewed said a book like this is needed. I am thankful to those women. I've come to realize that my aging experiences are not as unique as I had imagined and that I am not alone in my journey.

I had my grandmother and Marilyn to look to, yet I wanted more. I searched for other stories, experiences, and advice written by older women that could inform and inspire me. The majority of books written for women on aging have contained quotes and literary images from the writings of men. But a woman's experience of aging is differ-

ent from a man's, so in the pages that follow, you will find heartfelt excerpts, quotes, stories, fun ideas, and serious philosophies written only by women—women authors and poets and wonderful folks of all kinds who will enrich and inform your aging experience. I hope the results of my personal search will enhance your life and that you will be inspired in your eldering and your evolving.

We are pioneers of a new age, and we are the foremothers of millions of women. For the sake of our daughters and generations of women still unborn, we have an assignment to make clear our role in society: to inscribe the possibilities of age on the guideposts to the future. What we create in our mature lives will be our gift to them. Join me in blazing a trail, in creating a legacy of wisdom and strength that can be passed on to the next generation of pioneer women in a new world.

how to use this book

Getting Older Better contains short essays on a broad range of topics that relate specifically to women and aging. Some deal with serious issues; others are meant to be entertaining and lighthearted. You may laugh, you may cry, but most importantly you will realize that you are not alone.

Depending on where you are in your personal journey, some topics may not be relevant to you. Some may be difficult to approach, as you are encouraged to look at issues often ignored. Read the ones that relate to you at this time in your life, and skip the ones that do not apply to you now. For instance, you may not be a grandmother (or a mother), so you might want to skip the essays on those topics.

Each essay is followed by questions that encourage you to journal your reactions, feelings, or what actions you might need to take. You are encouraged to respond to the questions honestly. Allow time for reflection on each topic and time to thoughtfully contemplate your responses. Studies suggest that journal writing, which focuses on deep thoughts and feelings about life events, can even reduce arthritic symptoms and increase immune function, and writing out thoughts and feelings can significantly improve the health of those with chronic illness.

This book is designed to take you through a process of understanding yourself in relation to aging. I present the more hopeful, exciting,

and interesting aspects of aging alongside the more difficult ones. *Getting Older Better* is intended to be used along with a personal journal. However, you might think of your journal as a written legacy that, when completed, can be handed down to your daughters or to any younger woman with whom you have a relationship. As you write out your thoughts and answers, you will gain creative, practical ideas for your future. You will gain deeper insight into how you might, with personal integrity, structure the next years of your life.

part I

1

thoughts, cultural attitudes, and myths about women aging

One can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways.

—EDITH WHARTON

Many people who embrace living still hold on to negative impressions or myths about aging. Living passionately and well doesn't stop at a certain point in one's life, to be followed only by the destructive forces of aging. The sooner we change our attitude about this, the sooner we can honestly explore our longevity.

The attitude that surrounds us is that old age in its most problematic sense starts somewhere between fifty and sixty. Why is this? Perhaps we still buy into the outdated rule that midlife is the beginning of our decline. This fallacy is based on the equally outdated life expectancy of forty-seven years or so, which was an average life span at the beginning of the 20th century. Although average life expectancy has increased drastically since then, our cultural attitudes have not.

People who think positively about aging tend to live almost eight years longer than those who think negatively. In fact, thinking positively is a more significant life extender than low blood pressure, low cholesterol, exercising regularly, or not smoking. Feistiness also makes

aging easier, and personal determination to stay independent can help overcome physical frailty. A study I read found that an optimistic attitude has a measurable effect on preventing heart disease, for instance.

We may not have control over a lot of things as we age, but what we do have control over is our *attitude* toward aging. The degenerative aspects of the aging process can be substantially retarded by a combination of factors that include improving attitude, taking opportunities for service, continuing intellectual stimulation, and adopting good health habits. Let's get started.

WHEN THEY WERE OUR AGE

We're suffering from an image of aging that comes from a different time. An image that was never anything but propaganda.

—BARBARA SHER

We won't be experiencing aging the way our mothers and grandmothers did. Once again, we are defining our times. With some effort, we can be fit, fabulous, and over fifty. Our perception (and experience) of aging has changed because just about nothing in our lives is what it would have been in the lives of women our age even twenty years ago. For the most part, women now are healthier as they expect to live longer, reevaluate their priorities, and once again explore their passions.

Actress Susan Sarandon once said: "It's thrilling to know that around the world, women everywhere are working, thinking, daring, creating, making change. I don't know if our mothers ever felt this way about their counterparts—but I have the feeling our daughters will." We live in a wondrous age. Most women who reach age one hundred do so in surprisingly robust health. Genes may be responsible for about 30 percent of the physiological changes that occur in advanced age, but the majority of changes are the result of environment, diet, exercise, utilization of available medical care, and mental outlook.

My grandmother and my mother were my models of aging women. It was inconceivable to me that I would ever be as old as they seemed to be. I realize that I'm now the same age as my grandmother was back then, but it feels very different for me than I think it was for her. As I age, I intend to be more aware of my mental, emotional, and physical needs than my mother was of hers. I won't ignore my health as she did; I'll eat better, exercise to keep up my strength and balance, and not allow anyone to take advantage of me. She smoked heavily, was constantly stressed, and died at seventy-eight. I hope to live many years longer than she did.

How is your experience of aging different than your mother's or grandmother's?

MYTHS TO NOT LIVE BY

The media reflects our collective anxiety about growing older. I like to call this the "misery myth."

—LAURA L. CARSTENSEN, PHD

To age successfully, we need to be aware of the newer and older myths about aging that our current culture holds true. Here are some examples of the myths I've heard and what I know to be true:

Myth: Old women are depressed and lonely.

Truth: Depending on circumstances, we may get sad and lonely from time to time, but the research shows that the least lonely and depressed women are over seventy-five.

Myth: Older women are less successful in new pursuits.

Truth: Some of the best and brightest women, though past the half-century mark in years, are still climbing the ladder of success in the world.

Myth: Old women have more stress in their lives.

Truth: According to psychologists, older women have more stress-free days than younger women do.

Myth: Growing older is synonymous with the loss of meaning and purpose.

Truth: Research and the elderly themselves are demonstrating that a person's later years can be the richest ever in wisdom and spirituality.

Myth: If you are older and are reminiscing or becoming garrulous about the past, you are exhibiting signs of senility.

Truth: These recollections are natural and appropriate. Their purpose is to resolve life conflicts and to do a life review.

Myth: The older you get, the faster time passes.

Truth: Mathematically, those proverbial endless summers of your childhood were not even one minute longer than last summer. You have more routines now, and routines lend uniformity, which makes it very easy to be oblivious to time.

Myth: Everyone wants to, and should be willing to, hear our wisdom and opinions just because we are older.

Truth: Even though we're older and wiser, we don't necessarily know everything.

Myth: Older women are weak and have to be protected.

Truth: Once the protector myth is conquered, women become whole and authentic. We know that if we accept a limiting role, we violate ourselves.

Myth: Creativity is only for the gifted few, and our talents dim with age.

Truth: Creativity is not just for geniuses and the gifted. It is the energy that allows us to express ourselves in unique ways; it enables us to view life as an opportunity for exploration, and it knows no age.

Myth: All old women are physically passionless and have no interest in being sexual.

Truth: Many older women continue to be passionate about life and maintain an interest in sex.

Think about another myth you have heard about women and aging. Then write about what you've learned is true.

LIVING IN THE PRESENT

You can't know who you are if you don't spend time honoring yourself, and living in the present.

—NAOMI JUDD

Do you think about some event that might happen in the future that causes you to feel anxious and uncomfortable? Doesn't that kind of fretting keep you from enjoying what's available in the present? Sure, we have to make plans for our financial and health care needs and things of that nature. But once the plans are in place, it's important to be mindful of how you torture yourself out of the present and the beauty it brings.

I wonder how I will be as a very old woman, and some of what I envision worries me. I wonder how I'll manage if I'm infirm or unable to walk or see well. In those moments, I work at bringing myself back to the present, which is all we are assured of anyway. I keep reminding myself that every moment stands alone, a presence in its own right, a singular visitation that doesn't include the future.

We're getting older every day, but we need something else to think about besides long-term-care insurance and wondering what our adult

kids are doing when we're home alone. Sue Bender wrote in *Everyday Sacred: A Woman's Journey Home*, "The challenge is to find even ten minutes when the world stops, and for that moment, there is nothing else. How can we bring that quality to what time we have—making that limited time sacred?"

Take a moment—right now. Perhaps you're reading this book in a chair, on a train, or in a plane. Are you comfortable? Does the chair feel soft or hard? What do you see around you? Are you in a beautiful location? On a beach or a porch? Pay close attention to the small, the beautiful, the meaningful. Live in the present—for today, for ten minutes, for an hour.

What have you been overlooking in the present because you've been too worried about the future?

CHANGING TEMPO

I used to be able, as most women are, to do four or five things at once. Do the juggling act. Now, if I can keep one plate in the air, that's good.

—URSULA K. LE GUIN

A respected colleague, seventy-nine-year-old Anne, told me she wonders why she's tired. As an alcohol abuse counselor, she sees four or five clients a day, attends training lectures or presents at them, keeps her own home, and volunteers at a women's shelter. She's tired and hasn't learned the fine art of pacing herself, of dancing to a slower (no-less productive) tempo.

Each week we have 168 hours—10,080 minutes—to work and play, and you spend the better part of your time trying to get too much done—rushing, dashing, scurrying. In the mid-20th century, futurists predicted that computers and other labor-saving devices would free up time and transform America into the most leisurely society in history. Exactly the opposite happened.

In this age of rapidly expanding technology and continued consumerism, how can you fashion a simpler, slower-paced life? If you buzz from this chore to that with cell phone in hand, racing from one activity to the next, how can you enjoy your world?

I look for opportunities each day to see the world a little more clearly. This is my private time to enjoy the quietness of just being, of stopping to look and to feel and to think—and to indulge myself in a changing tempo.

The societal expectation that we must be accomplishing something all the time is broadcast so efficiently and from such an early age that we internalize it. We struggle with a seditious inner voice that says, “You’re wasting time. Get up and do something with your life.”

We’re expected (or we expect ourselves) to respond to a fast-paced life in the same way we did when we were twenty. Are we obliged to keep up with the latest in technological advances such as texting, Twittering, and Facebooking so as not to be out of step? Or do we have the privilege by virtue of age of opting out or being selective in our adoption of this new wave of fast-paced technology?

Try slowing the tempo down once in a while. Personally, I prefer pen and paper for personal letters even though communicating by email is faster and more convenient. I like holding a real book in my hands instead of an electronic reading device. I enjoy meandering slowly through a gift shop, touching and smelling the trinkets, and smiling at the cashier. Yet, I also enjoy ordering online and not having to fight the crowds during the holidays!

It feels essential to my well-being at this time in my life to slow the tempo a bit. My children are completely launched, my writing and counseling career are going well, and I feel fortunate to not have to care for older parents, so I have time to indulge myself. I must admit, I like the new pace.

How do you feel about changing tempo?

BEING VULNERABLE

Pay attention to your gut feelings—the gut doesn't lie. And, by all means, don't be afraid to say "no"!

—MARILYN HOUSTON

Each year, thousands of Americans over fifty fall prey to a wide variety of scams. The most common type of frauds committed against older Americans are email phishing, telemarketing, and mailbox scams (i.e., illegal sweepstakes, bogus charities, unlicensed health insurers, investment scams, and deceptive lotteries). Here are some recent examples quoted from *www.snopes.com* (a great website to check out if you're unsure about the validity of an offer):

- **Nigerian Scam:** A wealthy foreigner who needs help moving millions of dollars from his homeland promises a hefty percentage of this fortune as a reward for assisting him.
- **Foreign Lottery Scam:** Announcements inform recipients that they've won large sums of money in foreign lotteries.
- **Secret Shopper Scam:** Advertisers seek applicants for paid positions as "secret" or "mystery" shoppers.
- **Work-at-Home Scam:** Advertisers offer kits that enable home workers to make money posting links on the Internet.
- **Family Member in Distress Scam:** Scammers impersonate distressed family members in desperate need of money.

Older women are sometimes considered easy targets for con artists because we don't want to be considered rude—we were taught to be nice at all costs. Some are at a disadvantage because they live alone or are desperate for money to meet some need.

For example, we often lack the skills to end a phone call when we feel pressure from the person on the other end of the line. Are you sometimes reluctant to hang up the phone or say, "No, thank you,"

because you're afraid of offending someone? I have no problem deleting email, reporting spam, and hanging up the phone. It took practice, but now the older I get, the easier it gets!

Not all business and investment seminars are scams. One of the key warning signs is being told you'll get rich quickly, that you'll earn up to \$100,000 a year, that no experience or training is necessary, that the program will deliver security for years to come, or that it worked for hundreds of others, including the seminar leaders.

The Federal Trade Commission is working hard to prevent us from becoming victims of these schemes. Local agencies have stepped up their efforts to combat the problem, and several states have laws that make scams against senior citizens a serious offense. But no commission or agency is a substitute for your own intuitive sense and willingness to say no.

What will you do if you sense that an offer of any kind isn't on the up-and-up?

AGING CAN BE FUN?

It really IS funny to see an adult looking all around the room for her glasses without noticing that they are on top of her head.

—HELEN HEIGHTSMAN GORDON

Is it possible that growing older can be fun? Perhaps our negative expectations have something to do with our experiences. Since my friend Joan turned fifty-five, she laments the aging process every chance she gets. She defines it solely as the breakdown of the body and its functions. She seems to be creating more discomfort for herself all the time—more aches, more pains, more visits to the doctor.

On the other hand, my over-eighty friend Tita talks of what is exciting, fulfilling, and fun in her life. When she has aches, she doesn't focus on them. She travels, she reads, she laughs, and she nurtures her relationships with her friends, children, and grandchildren.

I'm looking forward to becoming more outrageous, aches and pains and all. If I someday need to walk with a cane, it won't be an ordinary one. I'll paint it red and white to look like a candy cane. If I must use a walker, it will be equipped with a bicycle horn. Beep, beep—out of my way! If the arthritis in my hands bothers me, I'll wear green polka-dotted mittens indoors in the winter. Aging can be an outrageously validating experience if you learn to laugh at yourself and focus on the fun instead.

Write about something outrageous you could do to make aging more fun.

ACCEPTING CHANGE

Life is change. It will change around you if you don't change with it.

—HELEN GURLEY BROWN

Everything is in a constant state of change—our bodies, homes, families, spiritual connections, and whole world. We can use our energies to fight and resist change. But there is something bold and strong about surrender. Change is inevitable, and resisting it causes our souls great sorrow and pain. While we're so busy resisting, we risk missing out on the potential for enormous joy.

There probably isn't a day that you're not acutely aware of change. Your body is changing, your family and friends are changing, your strength and speed of mental processing are changing, and your priorities are changing. How are you dealing with these changes? Denial? Acceptance?

As for me, if acceptance means approval, I say no, I don't approve of some of what is happening as I age. If acceptance means I will work change into my life, then I say yes. If change means painful loss and disappointment, I say no, I don't want any of that! (And do I have a choice?) If change means growth, forward movement, and a refreshed

attitude, I say yes. If acceptance means I will let myself go as I age, then I say no.

Author Frances Weaver tells us it's our attitude toward all these changes that's most important. She wrote, "The sincere desire to lead a productive, interesting life at any age depends upon our own imagination and acceptance of new ideas."

If you embrace this time of dynamic change, you will feel more peaceful. You're on an adventure. Say yes to feeling peaceful—and say yes to adventure.

Write about how your life is changing.

AGE GRIEF

You know what surprises me most as I cycle through the five stages of age grief? How did I . . . end up sounding like my parents?

—J. EVA NAGEL

Shock, denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance—these are the identified stages of grief. I find I am reluctant to believe the grief associated with aging is similar in its stages to the grief one feels around death, though. Yet after considering this a while, I believe it is.

One day I woke up to find that I was showing the inevitable signs of moving toward an older age. That's shock. Denial set in as I tried to stay up as late as I used to and when I tried to work all day in the garden without a rest. Certainly I had always been able to push myself when it came to physical work, but now I had to enjoy the same activities in shorter blocks of time. My denial didn't last long because I was too busy being angry. Angry that it was different now. Angry that my back and legs hurt after stooping over the weed patch. Angry that I was now falling asleep before ten p.m.!

Bargaining? Not sure about that one. I still haven't tried to bargain with my higher power to make me young again. I haven't said, "God,

if you give me the energy and looks of a thirty-year-old, I'll pledge more money to charity." So, I'm working on acceptance. You see, I had planned on aging naturally, with grace and faith, with a nonattachment of sorts. I knew reincarnation and heaven were possibilities, so I wasn't so concerned with death. I don't take myself too seriously. My eyes are focused and wide open, yet some days I still mourn aspects of my younger years.

It's normal to miss our youth to some degree. Identify where you are in the process, and then give yourself permission to move through the grief and come out the other side energized and ready to face the future.

Are you grieving for your lost youth? What stage of age grief are you experiencing? What can you do to move through it?

AGES AND STAGES

There's something so liberating about this stage of life. It's not that you know more, necessarily; it's that you accept not knowing and experience a different kind of ease.

—SUSAN SARANDON

People are staying healthy and living longer, and the old stages of life no longer hold. According to some scientists, a woman who reaches age fifty-two today and remains free of cancer can expect to live to age ninety-two. Author Gail Sheehy writes, "People now have three adult lives to plan for; a provisional adulthood from 18 to 30; a first adulthood from about 30 to the mid-40s and a second adulthood from about 45 into the 80s." She says that the key to mastering this passage is to do something people generally haven't done before, which is to *plan* for this second adulthood.

It's heartening to know that other women have philosophical thoughts about aging. There's a broad range of expectation, capabil-

ity, and emotional experience in aging—what is true for one person may not be true for another. The voices of the women in the following quotes are some of my favorites and will give you an idea of the diversity of experiences at the various ages and stages of a woman's life.

Fifty to Sixty Years Old

Old folks today are doing more than anyone ever thought they could. Why, when we were children, folks were knocking on death's door after turning fifty. Sixty was ancient.

—SARAH L. DELANY, *ON MY OWN AT 107*

Sixty to Seventy Years Old

Sixty years bring with them the privilege of discernment and vision: a capacity to behold, in the blink of an eye, the sweeping panorama of a life fully lived.

—CATHLEEN ROUNTREE, *ON WOMEN TURNING 60:
EMBRACING THE AGE OF FULFILLMENT*

Seventy to Eighty Years Old

When I think that I'm seventy-eight, I think—how could that be? I just don't feel like whatever I would have thought seventy-eight would feel like. I just feel like myself.

—BETTY FRIEDAN, *LIFE SO FAR*

Eighty to Ninety Years Old

I am more and more aware of how important the framework is, what holds life together in a workable whole as one enters real old age, as I am doing. A body without bones would be an impossible

mess, so a day without a steady routine would be disruptive and chaotic.

—MAY SARTON, *AT EIGHTY-TWO: A JOURNAL*

Ninety to One Hundred-Plus Years Old

Yes, being over ninety is different. . . . I can say with all honesty, I'd rather be a very old woman than a very young one.

—REBECCA LATIMER, *YOU'RE NOT OLD UNTIL YOU'RE NINETY*

Somewhere along the line I made up my mind I'm going to live, Bessie. I guess I probably don't have that much longer on this Earth, but I may as well make the best of it.

—SARAH L. DELANY, *ON MY OWN AT 107*

Which quote do you relate to the most? Write a quote of your own in your journal.

AGING IS ANOTHER COUNTRY

Actually, aging, after fifty, is an exciting new period; it is another country.

—GLORIA STEINEM

We've never had the real possibility of living beyond a hundred years. To be truthful, there are days when that prospect excites me. Is it possible that I may have more time to realize a few of my dreams, finish reading all the books I bought, make new friends, have new adventures, repair screwed-up relationships, and organize (once and for all) my front hall closet?

Then there are the days when the thought of one hundred (or even ninety) gives me the willies. All that sagging skin, all those dead friends,

all those lost umbrellas and gloves, pills to take, young know-it-all doctors to undress for, insurance and Medicare forms to fill out.

I'm in a constant debate with myself: should I age into decrepitude or call the cosmic taxi for a fast ride to the Other Side while I still have gray matter that functions, while I still look and feel pretty good? We must all plan and prepare to live long, healthy, and productive lives. So perhaps we should keep our hearts and minds open to ways we can debunk the myths, fight the worn-out stereotypes—become warriors of a kind. I think about being a warrior, and I want to take a nap. Then I shift to a burning curiosity that asks the question, what will that “other country” that Gloria Steinem refers to have in store for me? And for heaven's sake, as I prepare for my trip there, what will my passport picture look like?

What are you going to do with your bonus years?

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

The image in your mirror may be a little disappointing, but if you are still functioning and not in pain, gratitude should be the name of the game.

—BETTY WHITE

Self-help gurus have lectured to us about gratitude for years now. How much more harping are we willing to endure before we take their advice to heart? They're right, you know. Gratitude for even the smallest of things can magically shift a tough day from gray to sunny bright just like that.

Here is a case in point. I wake up mopey, eyes crusty, hair sticking up at right angles, the result of a crummy night's sleep. Groaning, I slide out of bed. Barefooted and stiff, I slog across the icy kitchen floor, reach for the coffeepot, realizing as I lift it that I've forgotten to set it up the night before. Now I must endure the noisy coffee bean grinder,

put the coffee into the filter, pour water up to the line. It feels like three weeks until the damn java trickles into the pot. I desperately need my sanity, my caffeine. There is no joy in my life at this moment.

Then, like the GPS voice that says, “Recalculating,” I get back on the right road. I remember the self-help gurus and decide to be grateful. I decide to focus on the positive, like author Ruth Turk who wrote, “To my amazement, I continue to find each decade of my lifetime more rewarding and exciting than the preceding ones.” Let’s see—I’m grateful I have a husband (snoring and all). I’m grateful I have a house and a warm bed to sleep in. I’m grateful for my sticky kitchen floor, and I’m grateful the floor is cold because it reminds me that I’ve forgotten my slippers (which I’m very grateful I have). I’m grateful for my coffeemaker and the aroma of freshly ground beans. And I’m thankful for the nose that enables me to smell the coffee brewing.

Got the idea? You can spend the day grouching because you forgot why you walked into the living room or you can be grateful for the legs that got you there.

Write about what you’re grateful for today.

AN ATTITUDE OF SOLITUDE

It took some hard lessons for me to learn that I needed to be what I had thought was selfish; that I needed to take time to myself to write, to go to the brook, to be.

—MADELEINE L’ENGLE

I remember coming upon my eighty-nine-year-old grandmother sitting in a chair, a tranquil look on her face. When I asked if she was okay, she said she was reliving a wonderful time in her younger years. At that time, Grandma still led a busy life—seeing friends, going to her club, listening to recorded books, caring for her grandchildren. Yet she knew how to be still. She was comfortable with solitude.

I was once afraid of solitude, afraid of my internal thoughts. As I age, I find I need time to be in touch with quiet me. Twitter, Facebook, Skype, cell phones, and email can put us in constant touch with each other but not necessarily in touch with ourselves. I now make a real effort to set aside time to get away from all of it. I have a need to know myself, to sort things out, to regroup. I want to understand how I think and feel and where I want to go with my life. I've come to realize that my need to pull away from other people is as universal as the urge to connect.

Time alone in quiet will serve to restore your integrity, allow you to think about your beliefs and what you value most. A self-imposed quiet can fertilize your creative side as ideas emerge, long buried by the daily noise and rush. Alone time replenishes energy, so when you resume interacting with others, you do so with renewed insight and strength.

Don't wait until you have a whole day or week free to incorporate a bit of solitude and reflection into your day. Walk in the park, sit in a room and listen to music, sink into a warm bath, meditate for ten minutes, or pet your cat. If you aren't used to being alone, you might feel a little bored at first. Stay with it. After a few tries, you may like it.

How can you create more solitude and quiet in your life?

BIRTHDAYS

If things get better with age, then you're approaching magnificent.

—NICOLE BEALE

Just before my fiftieth birthday, I suffered a concussion and damage to my neck in a car accident and consequently missed having the celebratory party I had envisioned. When I finally started to feel well enough to give a party (it took two years), I decided I would celebrate my fiftieth at age fifty-two. Now when my birthday rolls around, I feel each birthday is once again my fiftieth because, having survived that accident, I'm so glad to be alive.

I plan to celebrate my fiftieth over and over until I'm one hundred. I will never deny my true age, but when I send out the invitations to my birthday party each year, they will say, *I am celebrating my fiftieth again*, because that was the year I realized how precious and precarious life can be.

Gifts are another issue. Don't we have enough stuff at this point?! My eighty-year-old friend Alma suggested we should all get a hobby so our friends and our kids will know what to buy us. Then we won't end up with a bunch of extraneous nonsense. My friend Clarice told me, "When I turned fifty, I asked my husband to give me a gift that was older than me, and he gave me a bonsai tree!"

Negative feelings abound on the issue of birthdays. As author Mary McConnell says, "Turning sixty sneaks up on you, like a difficult guest you know is coming . . . and suddenly sixty knocks at the door." Some women I've spoken to barely enjoy their birthdays anymore. That's a shame, because for most, birthdays were so special when they were younger. Other women dread celebrating their birthdays because they don't like calling attention to their age.

Not everyone is negative when it comes to celebrating their years. On her sixtieth birthday, my friend Patty told me this, "On reaching sixty, I'm feeling a new freedom—total permission to be me. If I want to do anything, good or bad, the decision is totally mine. In recent years, I've rented a house on the beach where I celebrate my birthday with friends. My time at the beach house gives me a sense of peace and calm, and brings me back to who I am."

Try not to think too much about the accumulation of your birthdays and consider spending your birthday in a way that feels best to you—with others or alone. Or try one of these:

- Do something daring like rent a convertible and drive with the top down, or arrange for a hot air balloon ride.
- Throw yourself a party for an in-between birthday—like fifty-seven instead of sixty.

- Before your birthday, buy a beautiful journal. Fill every page with things you're proud of, and then give it to yourself as a birthday present.
- Spend part of the day meditating and reflecting on your life.

What would you like to do for your birthday this year?

SAYING WHAT I MEAN

Perhaps one can at last in middle age, if not sooner, be completely oneself. And what a liberation that would be!

—ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH

Gloria Steinem said, “Women may be the one group that grows more radical with age.” Lynne Zielinski wrote, “Like autumn fruit, I’ve mellowed and thrown off inhibition to say what I mean.” So has my sister, who wrote this poem:

Cookie Cutters

Aaaah, the scene opens . . .
 whether you like it or not
 rain punctuates puddles marking cadence
 for a spotty spring ballet of fools
 it’s a goose-step two-step,
 so very tiring especially if you do it right
 I’m a sun-dancer with a tie-dye mind
 running from clones in Cadillacs
 drones in cathedrals, perpetually
 harping we’ve fallen from grace
 they’re expecting the worst
 and it never disappoints . . .
 so many blank faces, so little time

how can anyone deny God's sense of humor
while under the sublime influence of Heaven
or is it advertising?

I declare war on snobbish university poets
their self-proclaimed perfectionism incensed
that we don't follow their rules,
their pentameters, particulars and perpendiculars
ha, you can't stop me now with your parameters,
there's a lot more where that came from
and I'm not about to do it your way
even if your power trip
IS bigger than I am
'cause I gotta voice

—MARILYN HOUSTON

Listening to your inner voice makes it possible to start living more authentically—to speak with your own true voice and from your own system of values and beliefs. Telling it like it is invites women to go beyond the superficial injunctions of the culture, which tell us to be pleasant individuals, to be invisible or nice. As we age, it becomes even more important to assert our power in relationships and work. It's time to become more direct and more outspoken. We are entitled to feel wiser, less constrained by what others think. We become less judgmental and more capable of unconditional love—at the same time, we're tired of putting up with others' nonsense and unreasonable demands. We tell it like it is and have more of our authentic selves available to invest in friendships.

If you could broadcast a belief about a political, personal, or world issue that you haven't had the courage to express, what would it be? Write it out as a poem or a speech.

THE DECISION

*People decide to get old. I've seen them do it. It's as if they've said,
"Right, that's it, now I'm going to get old." Then they become old.
Why they do this, I don't know.*

—DORIS LESSING

Perhaps you've entered a time in your life when your strength or abilities have diminished some. You were active in one pursuit or another your entire life, and now you're not as able to continue those activities. It's time to find a new purpose, a new reason for living, and it's time to find new opportunities that will cause you to stretch and grow. Where do you begin? Begin with a decision.

About fifteen years ago, I decided that I'm not aging—I'm evolving. I'm evolving and resolving not to get old. I plan to continue evolving until I die (and even beyond that, but that's another book).

If you must, decide to be old one day each year—the day you go for your physical and the doctor says, "You know, at your age, you should . . ." The other 364 days a year, when you're not in your doctor's office, put your energy into evolving. Here's another idea. Gather up all your health statistics (cholesterol numbers, and so on) and put them in a file. You know the statistics I'm talking about—those numbers that remind you that you're aging. Visit your statistics once a year or so (unless your health requires on another regimen) so you're aware of them but not fixated on them or what they signify. You have a choice—you can make the decision to put meaning and excitement into your life, or you can decide to get old.

What's your decision?

WAITING

The older one gets the more one feels that the present must be enjoyed; it is a precious gift, comparable to a state of grace.

—MARIE CURIE

As I age, I'm at the same time getting better at waiting and more impatient with it. When I barrel through my days at high speed, I'm increasingly aware that I miss the nuances of the moments that are only available when you are still.

I remember my grandmother, Grandma Agda. If someone was coming to take her out, she was always ready to go an hour ahead of time. She would sit patiently by the front door, coat on, purse held tightly on her lap, waiting. I felt uncomfortable seeing her sit there so long, but I now believe that it was a productive time for her and that she used those quiet, unhurried moments as an opportunity to be in the moment, to experience more fully what was happening inside and around her.

I want more slow time these days, more patience, more internal peace while I wait. When I was younger, waiting for anything made me anxious. I couldn't wait for Christmas, my birthday, to turn twelve, to turn twenty-one. I couldn't wait until graduation, until my baby was born, until the tulips came up, until summer arrived. I couldn't wait to get married, to buy a house, to receive the blouse I ordered, to go out on Saturday night.

I'm trying to slow down and live in the present. It becomes a balancing act between learning how to wait and not passively waiting for life to show up. Peaceful waiting means trusting that I am in the right place and that all is evolving in the universe as it was intended. So I wait, not for life to pass me by—but so that I can more clearly see life as it unfolds.

Sit quietly and bring yourself into the present with all its gifts.