

INTRODUCTION

THE PHONE RANG. My friend Nancy had just returned from a visit with her ninety-year-old mother on the East Coast.

“Paula, I thought about your research and teaching work so often while visiting my mother. I found myself just collapsing, regressing into a childish role around her. She’s so negative and self-centered. I’d ask her how she slept, she’d say, ‘Awful.’ I’d ask her how she felt and she’d say, ‘Terrible.’ I’d encourage her to come to Illinois and visit more often and she’d say, ‘I can’t do that, who’ll drive me to the airport?’ as though it was impossible to take a taxi.

“Paula, Mother will never change. She’ll stay in that big house, feel sorry for herself, and try to make the rest of us feel guilty. She’s absolutely miserable—and it’s just getting worse. Toward the end of the trip I found myself clenching my jaw all the time—I talked to Mother through clenched jaws!”

Nancy is a woman with a reputation for taking things in stride, yet what she was confronting overwhelmed her. Nancy was witnessing the painful process of her mother becoming a burden to herself, to her family, and to society. She was afraid for her mother’s future and its impact on her own life. Anna, Nancy’s mother, is an example of unsuccessful aging.

Facing Life’s Challenging Journey

We come into the world full of potential that can be encouraged or repressed. Each of us is dealt a unique set of circumstances, liabilities, and resources, and it is our responsibility to sort these out and nurture our lives. We must learn to play the hand that has been dealt to us with skill, integrity, and imagination, so that our promise is nurtured and not lost.

Each of us sculpts our destiny every day of our lives, and at the same time, we are sculpted upon. Inner and outer forces and events shape and reshape us continuously. Each new stage in life presents us with different challenges, and it takes courage and flexibility to live through these passages fully and vitally.

Most of us face hazards in the course of our lives, especially after age forty or so, which may include sickness, loss, financial reversals, divorce, or loneliness. We may suffer from broken dreams, forced retirement, or reduced circumstances. Loved ones can be ungrateful and thoughtless. Tragedies, physical deterioration, deaths of friends or family—all these can visit us.

Some people fail to negotiate adversity well; they fall into chronic anger, joylessness, unnecessary physical deterioration, or isolation. Sometimes despair, low vitality, complaints, and even meanness of spirit rule their daily lives. Others, however, seem to have found something valuable, enduring, and joyous in life in spite of obvious difficulties. This group has made contact with a creative inner core, and has gained strength, humor, wisdom, and much more.

to shape her life and engage in the task of exercising the only true power any of us really has—the power to change ourselves.

Aging well does not mean the absence of problems. It does mean we can choose to prepare for and recognize a fork in the road that comes to us during the second half of life. We can recognize some problems that may confront us as we grow older. We can learn to avoid unnecessary suffering, and focus on attitudes and activities that bring us joy and fulfillment.

This book is about looking with courage and honesty at the road on which you are traveling during your life journey—noticing in what direction you are going, and checking to see if this is the way you really want to go. I hope you bend your ear toward the deep inner call that comes to you in midlife, urging you to become more than you realize you are.

I have looked at the phenomenon of the middle years as a gateway to the second half of life through the eyes and experiences of many people, and have listened from various levels and perspectives. My method has been to walk around this subject and catch a few of its many facets. I've painted word pictures of my observations and experiences rather than moving linearly from one point to the next.

Although the inequities and wrongs in our social systems and institutions often discourage our human promise, I believe that creative soul change comes from the grassroots—from you and me. So I have focused in this book on how we can claim the power of our middle years and together become a force for good.

What is this inner core? This is only one way of describing an essential aspect of ourselves—some call it the inner self, the higher self, the real self, the center, or the God within. Whatever the name, it feels like “home” when we connect with it. Swiss psychiatrist and innovative thinker, Carl Jung, used the simple word Self with a capital “S” to indicate that this essential place in us is connected to that which is greater than our individual identity. This concept of inner core is a key theme throughout the book.

Those who have connected with their inner core can face life’s inevitable hazards with nourishing resources. Their sense of meaning and their belief in themselves has grown until it has become unshakable. Richly connected to others and to something greater than themselves, their lives have a compelling personal grace and naturalness. But some, like Nancy’s mother, don’t fare so well in the later years of life.

What went wrong in Anna’s life? This basically well intentioned, religiously inclined woman slipped onto a negative track—and stayed there. It is easy to do. Some inevitable disappointments and losses came to her and she fell under the load. In her pain she began to blame others for not rescuing her. She began to see people only in terms of how they could meet her needs. As Anna spent her energies trying to make others fit into her life scheme and play the parts she wanted them to play, she alienated the ones she truly needed. Trying to control others and force them to change to fulfill our expectations will not work. Anna’s desperate attempts sabotaged her ability

to shape her life and engage in the task of exercising the only true power any of us really has—the power to change ourselves.

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Kahlil Gibran observed, “The river continues on its way to the sea, broken the wheel of the mill or not.” Time keeps moving us, like a river, inexorably along to our destination whether we are productively engaged with life’s flow or not. We can learn to tap into the life-flow, the Tao, and when we do, life gains the effortless beauty of which the wise ones speak.

We can learn to form a partnership with time, harnessing the energy of the river of life. We can engage the mill wheel with creativity and skill so it grinds the flour to make the bread that nourishes us and those around us. And when we do, we will find we are supported, guided, and blessed beyond what we could imagine—we will find Life a generous giver.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

TWENTY-SIX YEARS HAVE PASSED since the 1st edition of *What Are You Doing With the Rest of Your Life? Choices in Midlife* was published. Twenty-six years during which I have changed, experienced, lost loved ones, had colon cancer, forgiven and been forgiven, and found my way. I am now age 85, at the last part of the second half of life. Surprised I am, at finding life richer, more fulfilling, than had ever entered my mind as possible in earlier years.

Even though aging requires us to face changes in our biological processes, I know that is not all this stage of life is about. There is a deeper call and when this expansive realm beckons and we take time to listen; when we say “yes” to the call, we move from the “doing” of our earlier years to the “being” of our wisdom years. This is a choice. Too many of us miss a real opportunity, hugging adolescent values close—afraid to let go to find the deeper call.

When we say the yesses that lead into new territory (remember there are no authentic yesses without the freedom to say no), we learn to trust the knowing of our hearts and find ourselves expanding in amazing ways. Perspectives change; we move to an inclusive *both/and* attitude; we embrace and integrate the seeming negatives. We come to experience a Greater Reality, or Life Force, a Creator, God, who loves all equally.

One of the great opportunities that is presented to humankind at this time of an extending life span is the exploration of this last stage of life. Midlife is a fertile time to begin. Is there a deeper design seeking to emerge? What are these “extra” years for? Can they benefit the world and not just feel like a burden? I wrote the following poem about this (or maybe it wrote me).

NEEDED: SEASONED ELDERS

Attention! Attention!

This is an age when the tides are unpredictable, dangers lurk

Cruel and useless wars are set in motion

Human greed ignores human need.

Bizarre and challenging

With enormous potential for enormous destruction

It is a time unlike any faced by any generation

Until now---Until now.

To whom can we turn?

Where are the visionaries who have the skills

Wisdom and integrity required?

Where are leaders sensitive to evolution's inner compass?

Some see a force field quietly forming

Seasoned, empowered Elders gather

These courageous ones (distinct from those just getting old)
Use everything in life as curriculum
Baptized through their many failures and losses
Tested on every side--- they keep on keeping on.
“Wisdom-keepers,” they are in touch with possibility
Their playful spirits are wild and liberated
Listening deeply they see beneath surfaces.

Refusing to stay stuck in quagmires of fear and negativity
They transcend yet include
Watching and praying they know our blue green home can
Discover and recover its intrinsic harmony.

Capable of emancipated love that knows no opposite
They are midwifing a world that works for everyone
This is the next heart-step
In our swiftly turning planet's
Mysterious evolution.

Dear Readers, as an Elder now, I have found a secret only hinted at in earlier life. I want to share it with you. It is the key to life. I want to describe it in different ways. I want to live it the rest of my days.

Some wise souls through all the ages have found this key to life. They wrote, painted, sang songs, told stories and shared this truth. Their witness lights a shining path for the rest of us.

In spite of goodness everywhere, my life as I experienced it in earlier years was often dark and difficult. The secret was hidden. When the secret is lost, pain takes its place. Eyes grow cold and hearts harden. Words have sharp edges that cut child flesh. Things turn rigid and terribly stern as joy lies silently in a far off grave.

Color and spontaneity turn grey like stones and people stumble over them in their darkness. But even in this sad state the secret glimmers deep in each heart. If we dare to listen, to look, to keep on keeping on, here's what we'll learn. Here's what I learned.

Everything was made by Love, for Love. Nothing happens outside the realm of Love. This Love is a primordial force that is in us, in all things, surrounding everything, known and unknown. It is the force upholding the universe. We can be blinded, we can be ignorant, we can think otherwise, but this is so.

Seek to know the Love deep inside you, the Love in a tree, in a stream, in the blowing wind, in a purring kitten, in a shooting star, in the flesh and organs and love secretions of your partner.

Feel the pulse of Love in all that is true and beautiful—but don't stop there—seek the Love in the darkness, the depression, in the garbage.

Everything that happens is from Love (although I can see that this is a difficult place to come to—until the heart opens to wisdom). Do not cast Love away because it arrives in a form unexpected, harsh-seeming.

Hold your head high, open your eyes, don't go back to sleep—the sleep that misses what is essential and gives in to the tyranny of what appears to be. Whatever happens, whatever is, we have a choice, to feel abused and cry out “why me?” or we can bow before our new teacher and accept this new direction in our lives, knowing Love is in us, around us, before us and behind us.

In spite of the seriousness of life circumstances at times, we can have fun, lots of fun! We can dance and play, feel safe and warm, live in expansiveness, in wisdom and giggles. Even through the times of tears, we can feel blessed, most truly blessed. The big yes to all this often begins in our middle years—but it is never too early or too late. Let us begin!

Paula Payne Hardin

October, 2018

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THE REST OF YOUR LIFE? CHOICES IN MIDLIFE in its best sense is a thought-provoking piece. This book is filled with stories, poetry, quotes, as well as facts, theories, and true-life experiences. This comprehensive study of midlife provides a unique opportunity to develop your awareness of your own true inner voice.

What is the inner voice? It is that part in all of us that causes us to prick up our ears when we hear something or read something or see something with which we deeply connect. This connection can come through for any number of reasons: we are inspired, we are intrigued, we begin to question, or we find comfort in listening to it.

Throughout WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THE REST OF YOUR LIFE? CHOICES IN MIDLIFE references are made to the inner core, the Real Self, or the True Self. Others refer to it as the intuition, the Spirit, the Soul. Whatever name you give it, it is this voice inside of us that tells us what is right and true. One of the most important responsibilities we have to ourselves is to acknowledge and respond to that voice.

Depending on the path of our lives, sometimes we become less attuned to that voice or perhaps we have never had cause to recognize or utilize it. The longer we ignore this voice or refuse to listen, the quieter the voice becomes until sometimes it stops speaking to us altogether.

Let the reading of this book help you become better acquainted with that part of yourself.

Anytime you read something that 'speaks' to you, resonates with you, makes you prick up your ears, don't hesitate to stop reading and allow yourself to dwell on what affected you. Take the time you need to fully contemplate whatever compelled you to seek out this book in the first place.

Perhaps getting into nature, taking a walk to think about it, will allow you to understand its impact. Meditation is a great way to let an idea simmer and develop within. Meditation offers time and quiet to discover a deeper meaning. Writing or journaling about it a bit might illuminate the significance of what has spoken to you. Keeping a journal throughout your experience of WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THE REST OF YOUR LIFE? CHOICES IN MIDLIFE is a terrific way to remember and later reflect on the various points that were impactful.

Allow your thoughts to marinate – you will know when it's time to continue. Your inner voice will tell you.

Paula Payne Hardin

Kelley Hazen

October 2018

PART I

The challenges



CHAPTER ONE

Successful, Unsuccessful Aging

Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued, it must ensue...as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself.

—VICTOR FRANKL

I FEEL MY LIFE, like a river, moving steadily through the years and I am powerless to stop this process called aging. Questions plague me now in a way I have never experienced before and I feel restless, afraid.

There are plenty of people around me who are models for various ways of getting older. I look at some of their lives and know I want mine to be different. I wonder what part of the aging process I can influence. I want to find out and learn from those who are further along in life and who are richly aging.

In the night when I cannot still my mind, something keeps asking: “What’s ahead for you?” “How can you live so that your future is fun, rewarding, and useful?” “Will you have decent health, enough money?” “What do you really want to do, have, give, and be in the years ahead?” “What

do you need to accomplish so you feel your life has counted for something good?”

When I turned fifty I finally let myself realize just how afraid I was. Some people do it sooner—maybe I am a late bloomer. I didn’t expect depression because my fortieth birthday had sailed by and I had congratulated myself on looking and feeling young. Turning fifty was different. It was a real marker event for me. The term “half-a-century” kept roving through my mind.

For three days I could hardly get out of bed. I knew that I had to stop denying a lot of things, stop playing the game of fooling myself. Time was inexorably moving me on and I felt helpless before its power. Fears I had not faced before reared their heads, forcing themselves into my thoughts. I felt compelled to look on the unthinkable: what if I turned into a miserable old person, lonely, sick, a burden to myself and others? It was one of my possible futures.

More of Us Are Living Longer

Over the past few decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the average human life expectancy in the United States. For example, those born in 1900 expected to live about forty-seven years. That was the average. Today’s average life expectancy is about seventy-six. Twenty-nine extra years have been added to life for most of us, sometimes even more. What an opportunity—what a challenge.

Are some of our medical breakthroughs sabotaging our right to die with dignity?

One visit to a nursing home and we are sobered: palsied hands, blank eyes, wheelchairs, missing teeth, diapers, unpleasant smells, childishness, loss of dignity, suffering, irrelevancy, boredom, and so much more. Even though only a small percent of us will finish our days like this, we fear even the possibility of such a future.

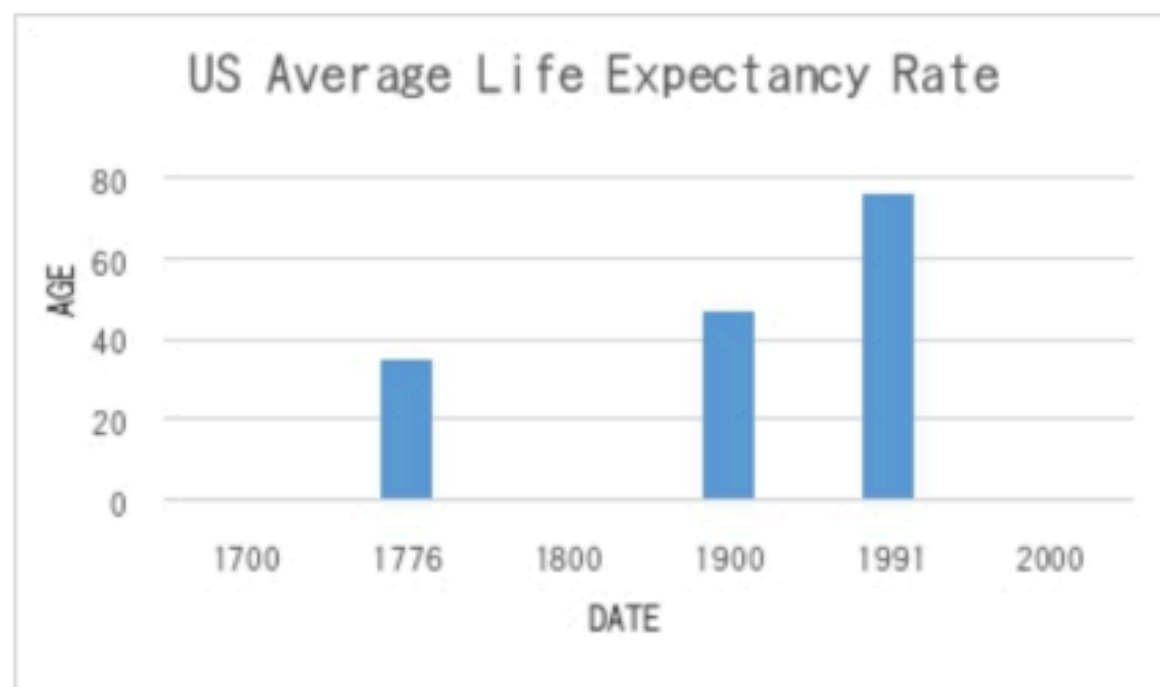
Is it possible to prepare for an old age that is useful and rewarding to ourselves, our families, and our society? Can we have not only a good second half of life, but also a good death as well? These were some of the questions fueling my personal quest, questions that also helped produce this book.

Fears at Forty

As a nation we adulate youth. It dominates our ideas of the “good life.” Looking and acting young, we are told, is to be valued more than anything else. This adulation tells us that there must be something “bad” about getting older, as though the process is unnatural. Women sometimes fear the process of menopause and see it as part of the whole unpleasant process of getting old. People (and sometimes the medical profession) treat aging as the enemy—to be subdued—and so denial of the aging process becomes an expensive way of life. As a society we spend thousands, millions on anti-aging procedures. It is a seductive trap.

This extension of life is seen by some as a problem, a burden on society. Programs designed to assist people in their later years are faltering under the weight of sheer numbers. Social Security is in trouble; Medicare is fraught with inequities. Many families feel burdened by the increasing demands of frail, elderly parents. Our society appears underprepared for the twenty first-century challenge of a greatly extended lifetime, and we have many questions and concerns.

Fears of aging haunt us. What does it mean to be old? What does it feel like? When is one old? How do you tell? What is it like to be in middle life, no longer young but certainly not old?



Adapted from

U.S. census data.

How do we care for greater numbers of old people without overburdening the young? Is life-support at any price a realistic and culturally useful goal?

Using large portions of our energy and time in such ways will eventually sabotage us, stealing the very resources we need to explore what it means to age successfully. Often we focus too much attention on our bodies, and we miss the larger picture of who we *really* are—spiritually, mentally, emotionally. Unsuspecting, with our priorities askew, we can easily and gradually slip onto an unrewarding and eventually futile path.

Over half a century ago, Carl Jung decried the absence of preparation for those who are entering the second half of life. He found that most people enter life after forty with the false assumption that the values, truths, and ideals that had served them adequately so far will continue to do so. Because of this false assumption, people make choices in the second half of life that invite unhappiness—and also make them difficult to be with. Jung chose harsh words to describe people caught in this negative process: hypochondriacs, niggards, doctrinaires, applauders of the past, and eternal adolescents, to name a few.

When Is Midlife?

In my business as a midlife consultant, one of the first questions people often ask me is, “When is midlife?” They seek a definition of the age range that constitutes midlife, or the middle years. I respond at a different level: “Midlife happens when it happens...” I speak of midlife in terms of its psychological and spiritual demands, in terms of maturity and life’s landmark events. I avoid reducing midlife to a certain number of years.

Passing years determine only how long a person has lived; they do not represent *how* that person has lived.

Researchers do not agree on the age range that constitutes midlife. Some assign ages forty to sixty as midlife; some include ages thirty-five up to seventy.

When I say “Midlife happens when it happens,” I am trying to convey that there are certain awarenesses, recognitions, and shifts in mind, body and spirit that seek to emerge in the middle of one’s lifespan. For some, these develop in their thirties; others seem to pass through their thirties and forties uninitiated into the call of new tasks, only to be confronted when they reach their fifties or sixties. I was fifty before I really let myself feel the pain of knowing I was mortal—on a feeling level—and that my life on this earth would come to an end. Only then could I open positively to the new responsibilities and perspectives that wanted to come forth.

To enter the spirit of the middle years means that one must have accomplished certain things and have met certain requirements—prerequisites for the next stage. The challenging and potentially rewarding tasks of the middle years cannot come to those who are stuck at some earlier developmental stage, such as in adolescent values and goals. Our developmental process is influenced by how we have reacted to all that has gone before: our childhood, adolescence, and adult past. These experiences have shaped and molded what we are today.

Jan, a forty-year-old woman who was attending one of my workshops, spoke of getting her eyes checked and being told that the time had come for bifocals. Jan told us that it had felt like someone had punched her in the stomach. She associated bifocals with old age; surely she was not that old! Tears stung her eyes. To make matters worse, the lovely and competent twenty-two-year-old lab technician fitting the glasses condescendingly tried to soothe her.

This natural resistance to the realities of time passing can become a way of life. When we focus exclusively on beating the time clock, we squander vital energies needed to negotiate the tasks of the middle years with elegance and courage—energies needed to create a future rich with rewards.

A Realistic Assessment— The Choice Is Ours

Successful aging begins with a realistic assessment of our life situation and the challenges that will undoubtedly confront us. We can choose to meet our futures more fully prepared. The choice not to choose means that we choose to live irresponsibly. If we do not select our activities and attitudes with clear judgment coming from a courageous and realistic assessment of our lives and circumstances, we fall into poor unconscious choices. We usually choose what seems easiest and most comfortable in the moment, not realizing the terrible price we will pay later on.

Our development is also deeply influenced by our bodies and their physical changes in appearance and functioning. We can remember how our maturing bodies affected our childhood and teen years (often embarrassingly!). In midlife also we are confronted with the inevitable fact that our bodies are changing; they are no longer as reliable and as resilient as they used to be. Women know that menopause and loss of reproductivity faces them. Our natural response to all this may be fear and denial.

I notice that in my own life and in the lives of friends, colleagues, and workshop participants there is a palpable resistance to looking ahead and admitting that we are getting older, that if we continue to live we will all someday be forty-one, fifty-five, seventy-three, ninety. I notice that the forty-year mark seems to be especially painful for many. There is an assault on the image of our youthful selves that propels us into the painful awareness of aging. Many still look remarkably young—but they can no longer successfully ignore the inroads of time.

Some speak of fears centered around their physical prowess. For some, a malaise comes unbidden and their careers no longer bring the same meaning and vitality. People in midlife often feel squeezed between the younger generation's demands and the older generation's increasing dependency. Some fear looking older, watching as wrinkles encroach, hair thins, and body shape sags. Meanwhile, their children are maturing, wearing youth like a glow around them. This serves only to accentuate inner feelings of loss of youth and beauty.

We are always making choices, whether we realize it or not. Responsible choosing envisions the consequences that will follow each choice. It requires that we take time to reflect. In projecting the outcomes of our current ways of life we should ask ourselves:

- What will probably happen if I continue this path?
- Is that what I really want for myself?
- Am I ready to accept the consequences of what I am choosing for both myself and others?

Through such a reasoned and responsible choice process, combined with careful listening to our intuition and insights, we can contribute to a fulfilling future—for ourselves and for those around us.

Although we have incredible power to forge our destinies, outside influences invade our lives. At such times, our power lies in our ability to choose our responses. We are both the potter and clay. When we are the potter, we have the opportunity to shape our clay-self. When we are the clay, we can choose creative acceptance with the student's mind: "What am I to learn in all this?" Or, we can resist and feel defensive and victimized: "How could this happen to me?" Our power of choice lies in assessing our particular situation and learning to use whatever is happening for our long-term benefit.

Cultivating the creative attitude can change everything. Conscious choosing like this will take work. Sometimes the way of wisdom means we seek counsel.

Recognizing the need for change and then following through with that change is not easy. One prerequisite to positive change is the willingness to face the truth about life—and about our own life in particular. Facing the truth includes recognizing our fears of the future.

Fear as the First Motivator for Change

Daring to realistically assess where we are in the life span takes courage. Before we gain this courage, we must pass through the ordeal of acknowledging our fears about the future. Fear makes us feel helpless and can be a barrier to choosing well.

During an exercise in a group discussion I led, we all imagined ourselves ten years older. In the middle of the session, Kurt, a man of forty, abruptly left the room. Later he explained that the idea of turning fifty made him sick to his stomach. He was struggling just to accept being forty and it was impossible for him to imagine being fifty without feeling physically ill. Kurt could use this experience as a way of accepting his fear of aging.

Some questions he might ask himself: “Why did I become so afraid when imagining myself ten years older?” “What do I think of people in their fifties?” “What can I do right now to make it safer for me to consider my future in five years, or in ten years?” “How are my parents aging?” “Are

my attitudes toward their process contributing to my feelings?” “Do I know anyone from the older generation that I could admire and accept as a model?”

Zanya, a lovely artist in her early forties, tried to imagine herself in ten years. But as she pondered an image of an older, wiser self, it was interrupted by an image of her mother. Zanya was visibly angered by this unexpected vision. One of her fears for her future centered around her mother—she did not want to repeat her mother’s aging pattern. Zanya’s experience shows us it’s important to understand and study our close relationships, particularly those of our childhood family. If we are not aware of these lives and dynamics, we tend to repeat them, mistakes and all.

Kurt and Zanya illustrate that the journey into realistically assessing where one is in the life span takes honesty and perseverance. To move beyond our fears we dare not ignore them, but begin to recognize and accept them. Fear of aging is justified because of the obstacles to be negotiated—it is easy to get on a negative track. Our fears, however, can serve as a healthy motivating force that stimulates us to begin the work of necessary changes.

Facing the Truth—Useful Pain

Truth by its nature is empowering. Avoiding the truth sabotages us because we then make decisions based on illusion. The essential nature of truth brings light, awareness, honesty, health. These are the building blocks for successfully living the second half of life.

birth to our future and the quality of that future. We can deny the passing of time, we can delay our developmental tasks, but mercifully they will not leave us alone and will continue to call to us throughout life.

When we travel on this road of new birth, the road leading to successful aging, we start by wondering who we really are and why we are here. Cosmic questions regarding the meaning of life force their way into our awareness. Everything comes up for inspection. Activities that once brought meaning and rewards lose their vitality.

This intense questioning period can be disorienting. We find ourselves asking, “What is it I really want and need to do?” “What gives me energy?” “What do I need to clear from my life to make room for what I really must do?” “What will it cost?” “What are my deepest values that I want to honor?” “Are there interest and skills I want to develop?”

When we engage in this process of questioning and sorting out we begin to take more responsibility for how our daily choices affect our future and the future of others. Perhaps, for example, we become more concerned about the needs of the planet and seek opportunities for thoughtful service. Our personalities expand to include others in our thoughts, energies, and love. This helps keep life in perspective, enabling us to transcend many everyday irritations with a balancing peace and joy.

Our resistances to the changes that are called for in the second half of life can be formidable and may have roots deep in our family patterns. How our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents handled their lives and aging

processes influences us. Cultural anthropologist and author Angeles Arrien spoke of the combined wisdom that comes to us from indigenous peoples around the world. They feel that the ancestors are watching each one of us, very interested in our choices—in our life direction. The old ones stand by our shoulders and whisper amongst themselves: “Oh, maybe this will be the one who will break the harmful family patterns; maybe this one will bring forth the good medicine in our family line—the loving, the true, and beautiful—to give mother earth.”

If we do break negative family patterns, we should be prepared to overcome the guilt that may emerge if we claim for ourselves a new and better way. Experiencing our anxiety and taking the time to listen to ourselves with compassion invites a positive change.


Taking a new path can encourage the blossoming of our higher potential, helping us to avoid the dead-end of self-absorption and stagnation, components, of unsuccessful maturing. Moving beyond our fears puts us in touch with our inner power, and we assess our life choices with greater truthfulness, clarity, and potency. We are freer to choose the positive path leading to an abundant future.

CHAPTER TWO


Growing Older Richly—Through All Life's Stages

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU



TO UNDERSTAND MORE CLEARLY what is meant by successful aging, we need to gain perspective on successful living. The work of Erik Erikson, one of the most influential developmental psychologists of our time, provides us with a model. In the 1950s he first proposed that development occurs throughout our entire life span. Psychologists and educators had accepted that children passed through developmental stages, but the theories seemed to stop there. Somehow at age twenty-one we were supposed to emerge out of childhood fully formed with generous qualities of wisdom, love, and integrity to manage the rest of our lives.



Erikson, a keen thinker and observer of life, noticed that human growth seems to occur in certain sequential segments over one's entire life span. Each segment has specific tasks that can be negotiated successfully or

unsuccessfully. Whatever the outcome, the results have significant impact on an individual's future.

Erikson came to the field of psychology from the field of art, so his work was enhanced by the artists' ability to see deeply into life. His theories are grounded in what he observed to be the essential realities of being human.

In developing the concept that human life unfolds in an orderly manner, Erikson and others uncovered some key principles. Each stage of human development contains new hopes and new responsibilities—and also new pitfalls. The way we move through the stages and their specific tasks affects our future: either we move on or we regress.

Each succeeding stage builds on the previous ones; we cannot skip over them. When something is amiss, our development can be stunted or distorted, but we can go back and reclaim missing elements at a later time. Reclaiming a missing piece influences our entire development, past and future.

A new stage is often introduced by a crisis or a marker event in our external lives, like marriage, the birth of a child, job change or loss, death of a loved one, divorce, sickness, accident. Sometimes the pressure that upsets our usual patterns and heralds a change comes from our inner lives instead. We find new questions emerging, new awarenesses, or perhaps a depression.

As with most change, we endure a time of instability while the new challenges unfold. Because the challenges of each transition period are often a little more than we can master easily, we face a time of both vulnerability

and potential. Successful negotiation of the tasks inherent in each state contributes new strengths and resources to our personalities. This prepares the way for higher and still-developing powers.

Although this book concentrates on the second half of life, obviously we cannot discuss it separately from the first half. How we reacted to the events and people that filled our childhoods and young adult lives is crucial to who we are today.

Our little child of yesterday, who lives deep within us holds the secret to our creativity and the keys to our future. (Chapter eleven deals with this important topic in more depth.) Midlife is often a time to recognize the little child's needs, a time to go back and reclaim wounded and missing pieces from the first part of life.

When we return to reclaim missing pieces or when we move to the next developmental stage, the additions are not just layered on top of what we already are, like putting on a coat. Instead, everything in our developmental journey interconnects—when one piece is added or shifted, a new cloth is woven.