


THE FRENCH BESTSELLER

The 
Warmth
of the Heart
Prevents Your
Body from
Rusting



A French Recipe

for a Long Life, Well-Lived

MARIE de HENNEZEL

“You finish this book more alive than ever.”

—NOTRE TEMPS

Previously Published as *The Art of Growing Old*



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Marie de Hennezel

Translated by Sue Dyson



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*If the only thing I had to say
was that all is lost, I would keep my mouth shut.*

—Jean-Louis Chrétien

*The cruelest kind of growing old is not organic:
it is the growing old of hearts.*

—Christiane Singer

Foreword

In my work as a therapist and a counselor, as well as in the hundreds of conversations I've had around the world since publishing this book, I've found, to no one's surprise, that there is nothing older than not wanting to grow old. This is as true at home in France, where sixty-eight-year-old Catherine Deneuve is still considered a sex symbol, as it is in the United States. Our world presents us with a disastrous image of old age. Women and men everywhere fear dying badly, of ending their lives alone, unloved, perhaps dependent or suffering from dementia, in lifeless places, far from everything.

Instead of confronting this fear, we ward it off by clinging to our youth in a rather pathetic state of denial. In so doing, we run the risk of missing out on what I call here "the work of growing old"—that is to say, cultivating a positive awareness of aging.

I embarked on writing this book in order to set the record straight about the reality of aging, in France and everywhere else. I read documents and listened to accounts that discouraged me. But as my research progressed, I became aware of an exciting new understanding of age, guided by some exemplary characters to whom I'll introduce you. They convinced me that the worst is not inevitable. The keys to a fulfilling old age do exist, and it's up to our generation to discover them and pass them on. It's up to us, the baby boomers, to invent a new art of growing old—which is a

paradox, as it means accepting the inevitability of aging without becoming “old.”

How are we to become the bearers of good tidings rather than poisonous ones to those around us? I propose that our exploration be guided by the belief that something within us does not grow old. I shall call it the heart. I don't mean the organ, which does of course age, but the capacity to love and to desire. The heart I refer to is that inexplicable, incomprehensible force that keeps the human being alive, and which Spinoza christened *conatus*: primordial energy or vital endeavor.

It is this heart that can help us push on through our fears, and bear us up amid the worst ordeals of old age.

I Write for My Generation

Abbé Pierre, a well-known French priest who dedicated his life to helping the poor and the destitute, has just died.¹ I queue up for an hour in the Rue Saint-Jacques to bow my head before his coffin, laid out in the Val-de-Grâce chapel. An immense photograph hangs on the hospital gates, showing passers-by a face that overwhelms them, a face that emanates both profound torment and an immense tenderness.

Abbé Pierre used to say that we must always keep both eyes open: one eye on the world's suffering so that we can fight against it, and the other on its wondrous beauty so that we may give thanks for it.

I have just devoted two years to writing about the experience of growing old, and throughout this exploration of the aging process I have attempted to keep both eyes open: one on all the inevitable pain, which frightens us so much, and the other on the joys that are in store for us. In order to do so, I have attempted to distance myself from the negativity, from the ambient pessimism, which foresees only bad experiences at this stage of life, and at the same time I have tried to avoid slipping into euphoria and embracing the myth of an idyllic old age.

Obtaining a balance has not been easy, for our society has a discouraging view of old age. The words *decline*, *horror*, and *afflic-*

tion, which spring to our lips, speak volumes about the disgust and fear that the sufferings of aging and death inspire in us.

We could leave it be, not discuss it, allow ourselves to forget about it, think about something else. That is what senior citizens do when they refuse to grow old and try to remain pathetically young and active for as long as possible.

Or, on the other hand, we can tackle old age with humor—even deride it.

Personally, as I kept one eye open to all the evils that threaten us, I began my own long descent into hell. The catastrophic image we have of old age is contagious, and I began to understand why my generation would rather close its eyes, why people change the subject as soon as I ask them what they imagine their later years will be like. In fact, I was so downcast that I almost abandoned my plan to write about such a depressing subject.

And then, one day, something inside me rejected this disastrous portrayal; something in me suddenly decided to react. You could say that the other eye, the one that appreciates the positive side of life, suddenly opened.

Thus, this book is the story of a turnaround. I had to go to the heart of the suffering and fear that the experience of growing old generates in order to understand everything it has to offer in terms of human and spiritual enrichment.

The Island of Long Life, and the Warmth of the Heart

This journey began four years ago, when I led an evening discussion at the Place de l'Étoile in Paris devoted to the question: How should we accept growing old?² While I was preparing for this discussion, I discovered the island of Okinawa and its centenarians. There, in Japan, on the island that the World Health Organization has nicknamed the “Island of Long Life,” people live to a

great age—the oldest is 115. They are very happy, for they are regarded as good-luck charms.

Not surprisingly, researchers from all over the world have tried to discover their secret. We know that it is not genetic, because as soon as inhabitants of the island emigrate elsewhere and begin to live in a different way, their life expectancy is reduced.

There are certainly credible links to the mild climate and dietary habits. The people of Okinawa eat little and slowly, savoring each mouthful and stopping before they feel too full. They consume fish, soybeans, algae (rich in iron and calcium), the inevitable rice, and green tea (rich in diuretics); they never eat sweet foods or pastries.

But the contents of their dinner plates do not explain everything. The extraordinary longevity of these island people, like their happiness in old age, is also linked to a cultural state of mind and a well-developed social life. These centenarians have an enhanced spiritual consciousness, which is nurtured by practices such as prayer, meditation, and focusing on the present moment, and by a determination to remain positive and optimistic in difficult times. They have that precious ability that we might term resilience: an ability not to let themselves be demoralized. Vitality, dynamism, and emotional energy—these are the keys to their inner youth, celebrated in the song they sing every morning: “The Warmth of the Heart Prevents Your Body from Rusting.”³

They also continue to participate in the life of the community, enjoying conversations every day with friends, neighbors, and family members. The *yuimaru*, or spirit of mutual cooperation, is very deeply rooted in their culture, and they do their gardening, their shopping, and their Tai Chi together. In short, they are happy to live to be old, and this happiness quite clearly protects them from any feeling of exclusion. They do not think that they represent a burden on society—quite the reverse. In Okinawa, people say: “*Tusui ya takara*” (The elderly are our treasure).

Why can't we, too, be good-luck charms to those around us? That is the question I asked the audience of nine hundred people who had come to hear us talk about old age.

People of our generation know that they are going to live for a long time—that's a promise. Some of us have every chance of making it to one hundred. But is this increased longevity good or bad news? That is the question that people around me are asking. We are told that this is a "golden age" for senior citizens, and some people have no hesitation in persuading us that we are the first generation to benefit from a whole new slice of life. If we take care of our health and are responsible in our diet, if we play sports and keep our minds active, then when we reach eighty we will be in the same mental and physical shape our parents were in when they were only sixty. We will have gained twenty years! Specialist literature even declares that with the decoding of the human genome, gene therapy, and the potential for nanotechnology (which will create robots so small that they can clean even the inside of our cells), we will soon be capable of permanently reconstructing a healthy, nondegradable, almost immortal body. It is a veritable revolution.

And yet we do not find this offer of a longer, healthier life reassuring. It is possible to imagine the body's cells being replaced and renewed, but things are rather more complicated when it comes to neurons and their connections. What is the good of a longer life if it means eternal dementia? Moreover, what would be the demographic impact of this progress? It has been calculated that in the global population, by 2050 there will be three people aged over sixty for every child aged four and younger.⁴ How sad! If death were to be indefinitely postponed, all our benchmarks would be turned upside down. We would no longer be obliged to procreate, and we would have no further need of spiritual transcendence, as it is death's boundary that incites us to reproduce and to develop our spirituality. Death gives us the ability to imagine an existence beyond the self. Life without death would be hell!

Nevertheless, it is true that science currently offers us a real chance to extend our lives, as it is now capable of combating the “rust” that threatens our bodies. What are we going to do with this extra time, all the while knowing that we cannot escape either extreme old age or death?

This is an adventure for which we have been chosen, for we are the first generation to undertake it. As we have no points of reference, we shall have to make them up as we go along.

That is why I felt motivated to write this book. I decided that its starting point would be this question: Why shouldn't we be inspired by the example of Okinawa?

I set to work collecting personal accounts and reading a great deal about the difficulties posed by the aging population. And when I met some radiant elderly people who helped me to see old age in a different way, I realized that their radiance was very much the fruit of deliberate, clear-headed work.

One cannot lay claim to a serene, luminous old age without bidding farewell to one's youth and meditating upon one's impending death.

Dear reader, you are perhaps one of those people who prefer not to think about such things. That is understandable. You're quite happy to get older, as long as you can remain youthful. As you suspect, however, there is the unavoidable risk that you will fall prey to ageism, that you will swell the ranks of those senior citizens whom young people detest because they find them arrogant and selfish. And then the day will come when some specific event will make you topple over into true old age. On that day, you will step onto the banks of old age with terror, realizing that you will never again recapture your youth. You will face a one-way, inevitable decline. One day, perhaps, you will become completely dependent on others for survival.

This inevitable decline is well illustrated by an anecdote told to me by the French author Antoine Audouard, the former director

of a large publishing house, who is often a partner to me in my writing projects.

While visiting his father, the writer Yvan Audouard, who was living out his last days as a patient in the palliative-care center of the Maison Médicale Jeanne Garnier, Antoine brought up the subject of my book. Yvan was lying down, his eyes closed, weak but very alert. When Antoine mentioned the song sung by the old people of Okinawa, “The Warmth of the Heart Prevents Your Body from Rusting,” Yvan opened one eye and retorted mischievously: “Yes, but it doesn’t remove the rust that’s already there!”

And he was right: aging is a merciless ordeal. But this anecdote also shows that even on the threshold of death, the man who spoke these apparently pessimistic words was capable of humor and distance.

If you are not prepared for growing old, if you have not developed the necessary inner resources for getting through this last stage of life, you risk going through hell. It is possible, however, to remain happy throughout life without denying the aging process. Perhaps you are ready to confront the challenges of old age, to compensate for its inevitable losses by developing an inner life, by exploring emotional youthfulness, which can grant a certain radiance to the elderly that is obvious to those around them. If so, then this book is for you.

The pages that follow are a meditation on the art of growing old. It is a paradoxical art, for from one point of view, old age is a shipwreck; from another, it is a time of growth. From the outset, I would like to make a distinction between “growing old” and “being old.” Being old is a state of mind. It is possible to feel old at sixty, and it has happened to me. It is possible to feel young at eighty. My friend, the philosopher Bertrand Vergely, recently said while attending a workshop on old age: “A person becomes old the day he becomes sad and bitter about life.” We become old when

we refuse to age—that is to say, when we refuse to move forward in life. This is a great paradox.

Our society forbids us to grow old, commanding us to remain young for as long as possible. This stupid prohibition contrasts with another, much more interesting one: “It is forbidden to be old,” says the Hassidic mystic Rabbi Nachman of Braslaw. Grow older, but do not *be* old; that is to say, do not be bitter and despairing. Do not oppose reality, but do not prevent life from fulfilling its potential to bring forth new things, right up to your very last breath.

I am convinced that the period of time, however long it is, that separates us from old age is a chance we have been given to learn how to age, to “work at growing old,” to prepare ourselves psychologically and spiritually for this final stage in our lives.

How can we accept the transformations that make our bodies ugly if we do not at the same time explore the power of emotions such as joy or gratitude? How can we accept these things if we do not stop looking at ourselves, and instead see the world around us and marvel at it? How can we accept loneliness if we have not learned to be at ease with ourselves, at peace, reconciled with our lives and with those around us?

How can we accept the constraints of limited time and space if we have not explored the limitless nature of our minds and our hearts?

Louis-Vincent Thomas wrote in his preface to my first book, *L'amour ultime* (The Final Love), that only through love, faith, and humor can we confront and perhaps transform the terrible realities of old age, decrepitude, and death. So I have chosen to don the spectacles of love, faith, and sometimes humor in order to examine the experience of growing old.

I know that in making this choice I am going against the prevailing views on old age. These views are somber and sad, and the

media do not look kindly upon attempts to change them. Attempts to challenge these ideas are not well received, and anyone who wishes to display deliberate optimism is liable to face ridicule. In talking about love and faith, we run the risk of falling into the trap of edifying, moralizing, soothing language. The inane, comforting images of a happy, serene old age are for other people—don't insult us with fairy tales! Yet, on the other hand, if we acknowledge only the dark shadows of old age, the horrors of growing old and the shipwreck that awaits us, we also end up lying. The reality is not as bleak as that; it is always and everywhere a mixture of the best and the worst.

Old age is neither a complete disaster nor a golden age. It is an age that is just as rich and as worthy of being lived as all the others—an age that is exciting to live, with its joys and its difficulties. Of course, it poses problems at economic, social, and psychological levels, but we should look these straight in the eye and have the courage to anticipate them. We must find the means to light the way down our own personal path toward old age. If we try, we can discover the promises of this age, and tap into hitherto unsuspected resources that will enable us to live courageously and simply.

It is obvious that the way in which we grow old depends upon each of us. Through our own actions and with the aid of our innermost resources, we can turn our advancing years into a fulfilling adventure, a time of growth, not of decline.

Between letting go of our youth and accepting our inevitable death, there is a time when we may feel deeply happy and free. That time is a unique opportunity to discover aspects of ourselves that we did not know, to see, to feel, and to love in a new way. Instead of becoming embittered, unattractive old people, we can hope to surround ourselves with joy and human warmth.

It is not a matter of idealizing old age, but of revealing what deserves to be revealed, without sentimentality and without complacency.

When the Fear of Growing Old Assails You

I recently celebrated my sixtieth birthday and am now a senior citizen. What's more, I have applied for a pass that will enable me to travel on public transport at a reduced fare. So I am officially entering my old age—my young old age, really, for I am in good health, active, and busy with a host of different projects. But, all the same, it is old age, and if all goes well, it will lead into extreme old age.

On the day I turned sixty, I recalled a scene from my childhood. I was fifteen at the time. A favorite aunt of mine came into the sitting room where my father was peacefully smoking his pipe, seated in an Empire-style wing chair upholstered in golden velvet. "Jean, I've just turned fifty!" she cried. "That's it! I'm old. Men won't turn and look at me as I walk past them in the street anymore!"

My aunt made a great impression upon me, for she was tall and beautiful, and had great presence. She had completed her college entrance exams late in life, with the intention of studying psychology at university; she wanted to be a psychoanalyst. I admired her courage, her determination, and her clearheadedness. When I heard her that day, I told myself that when I was fifty, I, too, would be old. But when I reached that age, I remembered that scene and laughed, as I had never felt so alluring and self-confident. Old age seemed a very long way away.

Ten years later, I am beginning to understand what my aunt

meant. It's not true that birthdays don't change anything; they are important symbolic stages. I am experiencing my admission into the ranks of sexagenarians as a kind of bereavement, with sudden attacks of sadness and a desire to do nothing, to fold in upon myself. It has to be said that I am going through some real bereavements, too: a painful divorce, and a love affair that ended in disappointment. I feel alone and vulnerable.

I have attempted to get closer to my children, but I'm well aware that it's not their job to carry my loneliness, for they have their own lives.

So I sit down at my desk and try to impose some order upon my research, to analyze the articles I have collected over the past few months. The information I have obtained about old age doesn't help to reestablish my *joie de vivre*, for the books I read present me with a very bleak image of old age—giving me the impression that in our world, being “old” is a fault. In his speech at the UNESCO Congress in May 1998, Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel roundly denounced the ageism that is rampant in our youth-oriented society, and summed up all the unhappiness of being old: “The old? Their job is just to stay at home and not get in the way. They should be content that they're fed, clothed, and kept warm. . . . By turning them into recluses, we make them feel that they are excess baggage. As victims of a permanent system of humiliation, they cannot but feel ashamed that they are no longer young and in fact ashamed that they are still alive.”

This contempt for the elderly is so strong that some very old people feel they are no longer worth anything. They would rather die than go on living with this loss of self-esteem, and I can understand why. When you are constantly being told that you are a burden on your family, or when you have become invisible to the world, why stay alive?

This fear of becoming a burden to loved ones is shared by the majority of people in my generation. We know that the older we

become, the more we are perceived as burdensome. One day our children and grandchildren may perhaps feel that we are costing them too much. Will they then try to exert pressure on us to make way for them, as people did in former times in poor societies?

This brings to mind Imamura's film *The Ballad of Narayama*. In the Middle Ages in certain regions of Japan, it was the custom for elderly people to go and die alone in the forest, in order to spare the young the cost of having extra mouths to feed. In Canada in the days before the government instituted social-protection laws for the Inuit, the oldest would go off alone to die in the ice fields, although not before selecting a pregnant woman in the family circle in order to be reincarnated in the child she was carrying.

In his book *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing, and Dying*, Richard Alpert, alias Ram Dass, tells a story that clearly illustrates this fear that exists in us:

A Chinese story I love points this out beautifully. It tells of an old man who's too weak to work in the garden or help with household chores. He just sits on the porch, gazing out across the fields, while his son tills the soil and pulls up weeds. One day, the son looks up at the old man and thinks, "What good is he now that he's so old? All he does is eat up the food! I have a wife and children to think about. It's time for him to be done with life!" So he makes a large wooden box, places it on a wheelbarrow, rolls it up to the porch, and says to the old man, "Father, get in." The father lies down in the box and the son puts the cover on, then wheels it toward the cliff. At the edge of the cliff, the son hears a knock from inside the box. "Yes, Father?" the son asks. The father replies, "Why don't you just throw me off the cliff and save the box? Your children are going to need it one day."¹

Nowadays, our fear of being “eliminated” when we become too old and useless, too heavy a burden for society to bear, is a constant presence in our nightmares. And there is a direct link between contempt for the elderly and the feelings of loneliness and exclusion that so many older people experience. The burden of Alzheimer’s disease, for example, falls to a large extent upon families, who sometimes have to sell their possessions in order to pay for institutional care for an elderly relative stricken with this illness.

So why did I hear the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville ask one day, Why shouldn’t the lives of those who request death be shortened?² Why should we not legalize the option of granting death to those who no longer wish to be a burden to others? There is a clear economic argument in favor of euthanasia, but is this really the solution that our society wants to embrace?

In twenty years’ time, much of the West will consist of continents of old people. This inversion of the age pyramid will endanger government budgets and pensions, employment prospects, and the comfort of younger generations. A ratio of one working adult per pensioner has been cited, which represents an extreme financial burden for our children and grandchildren. This cannot last. There will be a clash of interests and consequently a painful conflict. According to the French journalist François de Closets, we are heading for an intergenerational war:

The new generation will have to pay for their children’s education, their parents’ retirement, their grandparents’ extremely heavy health-care costs, the debts contracted by the preceding generations, and the retirement of foreign shareholders! They will work like madmen, under appalling pressure, in the hope of swiftly reaching the blessed moment when they can finally be paid for by their own children! What a wonderful outlook! Can we imagine everyone between the ages of

fifty-eight and one hundred being a pensioner? It's obvious that such a system cannot work.³

It would be wise to heed François de Closets' words, for we must indeed plan for the financial shock of growing older.

When I first suggested to my publisher that I might write about aging well, I intended to write about the radiance of old age, about the dynamism of one's senior years. I had in mind a few wise sayings, such as Cocteau's: "I love growing old; age brings calm, equilibrium, altitude. Friendship and work take up all the room"; or the words spoken by Rita Levi-Montalcini, winner of the Nobel Prize for medicine: "Old age is, for me, the most beautiful period of my life."

I thought also of the words of a university professor stricken with Charcot's syndrome, taken from *Tuesdays with Morrie*: "Growing old is not just deterioration, it is growth."⁴ It was this serene, luminous face of old age that I wished to encounter.

But later on, I was overwhelmed with shame. I couldn't do it. I felt totally paralyzed in my writing, old and worn out before my time. I had always regarded life with an air of confidence, but now, as I entered the "third age," the specter of loneliness struck me down—plunged me, in a way that surprised even me, into unexpected depression.

In this detestable state of mind, I was rendered incapable of writing. Moreover, I barely recognized myself, overcome as I was with sadness and lethargy. I realized that the subject of my book kept bringing me back to the problem of isolation, of loneliness, so it was particularly difficult for me to tackle it in such a state. I needed to be capable of feeling a degree of optimism, even enthusiasm, a "warmth of the heart"—all of which evaporated that summer. At that moment, each thought I had about old age made me feel that I was plunging ever deeper into a colorless world. I could feel the anguish of my contemporaries. What's more, when I ven-

tured to ask the elderly what they thought of old age, how they regarded it, I read fear in their eyes. Their faces became expressionless. Faced with their embarrassed silence, I swiftly understood that no one wanted to tackle a subject that was quite clearly sad and depressing.

The Worst Is Not Inevitable

That summer passed, and I was unable to write a single line. And then two events set me back on track. The first was a horseback ride in the Camargue, a beautiful region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Rhône River delta in the south of France; the second, a meeting with the psychogeriatrician Olivier de Ladoucette.

I had promised my granddaughter Marie that I would take her to the Camargue for her tenth birthday. It is the region my grandmother came from, and we love it for its immense sky, the silvery light of its marshes, and its white horses.

We always stop off at the Hôtel de Cacharel, at Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer. It is run by Florian, the son of Denys Colomb de Daunant, whom we have to thank for that wonderfully poetic film that all French children know from fifty years ago: *White Mane*.

On this particular day, Florian took us horseback riding in the marshes that border his estate. It was warm, and the light was magnificent. In the distance, a few pink flamingos were fishing elegantly. It was a moment of peace. Our horses walked into the watery gray marshes. Splashes of water sparkled in the sunlight. Marie was happy. I could see her in front of me, beautiful and straight-backed, sitting well in the saddle. Suddenly my horse, Flamand, stopped in his tracks as his legs sank into the mud, right

“Yes. Today we can talk about sixty-year-olds. We want to see them endowed with the qualities of seduction, youthfulness, vitality. It is still a little caricatured, focusing on a few stars, but at least we can identify with them. In ten years’ time, we’ll be able to talk about seventy-year-olds without any problems.

“What is still mysterious,” Olivier went on, “is the fact that people don’t perceive growing old as a progressive process but as something that ‘attacks’ you around the age of seventy-five or eighty. Between fifty and seventy-five, we don’t know what is going on. We don’t know what people are experiencing. We don’t know who they are. They are probably afraid of growing old; they try to prolong their youth and they don’t want to plan too much because they think things will go badly. They have realized that if they don’t do too many stupid things, they can remain fit until they’re seventy-five or eighty, but after that they are convinced that it will end badly and that their existential ticket beyond that limit will be seriously compromised.”

“But isn’t there a grain of truth in that?”

“Personally, I say no. A person can still be in good condition after the age of seventy-five. The increase in life expectancy is not an increase in the expectancy of a dependent life, but an increase in the expectancy of a healthy life.”

“But there is a moment when things go downhill, and one goes into a serious decline, and sometimes this takes place over a long time.”

“Yes, but that end period is going to arrive later and later, and it will also be increasingly short. We are living longer in good health, and then we are declining more quickly, and later. So we must reassure people who are afraid of an interminable end. This translates into very simple statistics: life expectancy is growing less quickly than the expectancy of a life without disabilities. So there is no need to panic. Of course, aging well demands that you

have a healthy life, stay physically active, eat well, and have a social life. And you can't improvise all this at the age of seventy-five. You must be thinking about it from the age of sixty.

“When I tell people that they are going to live to a hundred, they are terrified. But I point out to them that they won't grow old the way their parents did. They have made different life choices, they have different ways of eating and doing sports, and they have access to medical care that didn't exist in earlier times. They have different ways of dealing with problems, of prioritizing leisure activities and enjoying themselves. Their parents lived through wars, they frequently didn't have enough to eat, they all smoked, and they didn't play sports.

“We are living in a society that hasn't realized that the physiological age and the social or subjective age no longer coincide. We talk about 'old people,' but that covers a wide variety of subgroups. This fifty-five-to-eighty age bracket is brand-new. It is up to our generation to explore a new way of growing old.”

I was happy to hear Olivier de Ladoucette confirm my initial intuition. We then talked about the example of the centenarians on the island of Okinawa. Olivier was quite convinced that the heart does not age. Right to the end of a very long life, one can experience genuine surges of emotion and, in certain cases, even retain a sex life.

“It is much more active than one might imagine. It is a factor in equilibrium and longevity. Look at retirement homes! It's a totally taboo subject, but the reality is very touching. There are affectionate rapprochements, amorous impulses, even among dementia patients. The staff who work in retirement homes accept the residents' private lives relatively well. It is the families who are most intolerant. When their widowed papa starts flirting with Mrs. So-and-so, takes her by the hand and kisses her on the mouth, that embarrasses the children a great deal and they exert

pressure for the culprits to be separated. This attitude on the part of the children clearly displays the difficulty we all have in visualizing our parents' sexuality.

"People imagine," Olivier continued, "that once we are past a certain age, we lose interest, that life no longer has any meaning and nothing makes us happy anymore. They are mistaken. They do not realize that as they grow older, their psyche evolves. Things that are unimportant when we are young take on an incredible importance when we grow older: a child's smile, for example. For an eighty-year-old, it's worth as much as a good three-star banquet when you're forty. You're no longer in the same space and time; you no longer have the same points of reference."

"Do you meet many people who are happy at an advanced age?"

"Yes, some even tell me that they are happier today than they were twenty years ago."

"But then why do so many elderly people commit suicide?"

"The fact that it's possible to be happy and old doesn't mean that all old people are happy—far from it. I believe that apart from the loneliness and possible mistreatment of our elders, they suffer above all because of the way we view them. They have the disastrous impression that they have become useless, transparent. It is absolutely vital that we stop seeing them as a burden to society."

I talked briefly about the fears we all have of becoming a burden to society. Olivier pointed out to me that the economic prospects are not as bleak as some might wish us to believe. First, the expenditure linked to growing old will be compensated for by a reduction in other social expenditures—such as on family allowances, education, and unemployment benefits—as the number of people of an age to procreate, train, and work will continue to diminish. Next, we must not forget the pool of jobs that will be created in the years to come through the management of old age and dependency. Last, senior citizens are excellent consumers and are reputed to be generous with their children and grandchildren.¹

Returning to the feeling that the old are useless, Olivier stressed:

“We must learn to call on them, to appreciate everything that they can bring to us in terms of compassion, wisdom, time, and spirituality. It is clear that the countries that have the lowest numbers of suicides among the elderly—such as ultra-Catholic Ireland, England, and also the Nordic countries—have a real policy of taking responsibility for retired and elderly people. In these countries, the ‘old’ have their place, and a certain unity between the generations exists.”

“Basically, in France, we grow old for a long time because our medicine is good and the environmental, economic, and cultural factors favor longevity,” I suggested. “But we’re not happy about getting old! One has the feeling that people get old in spite of themselves, and even we can do this better.”

“Exactly!” Olivier agreed. “What can we do to ensure that our elders retain the feeling that they are worth something, that they are still useful? What can we do to make them feel less rejected, less unloved?”

As I took my leave of Olivier, I had the feeling that the future is bound to be less somber than we think. We will grow old for longer, but in a better way. We still have to construct a more positive image of this time of life, confront our fears in order to overcome them, and work out a real policy for preventing unhappy old age. Last, it is up to us to combat the denial of old age and death, by working at growing old.

The Golden Age of Senior Citizens

A drawing by the cartoonist Georges Wolinski that appeared in the *Paris Match* shows a group of healthy, laughing senior citizens, happy to be alive and sharing a bottle of wine in a bistro.¹ At the next table is a group of young people, shoulders bowed, looking sad and at a loss. A child is commenting on the scene: “Seventy, that’s the age when life begins! The old folk make the most of the time they have left. They go to the gym, travel, and joke about their past.” He points out that the young people are having no fun: “Look at them, they’re grim-faced, unshaven, with their shirts hanging out of their trousers. They don’t know how to read, write or express themselves anymore . . . their girlfriends are Goths, tattooed and pierced.” Before concluding, he says: “You can’t imagine how much I’m looking forward to becoming a senior citizen!”

Wolinski has skillfully depicted this new youth of robust and carefree “happy granddads and grandmas,” who travel the globe on guided tours, enjoy a life of comfort and idleness, have the time to improve their minds by joining third-age clubs, and purchase staggering quantities of antiaging creams and pills to combat free radicals.

For our generation’s obsession is, in fact, to stay young—a fact that the cosmetics companies and pharmaceutical and food-producing firms have clearly understood. They exploit the im-

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