

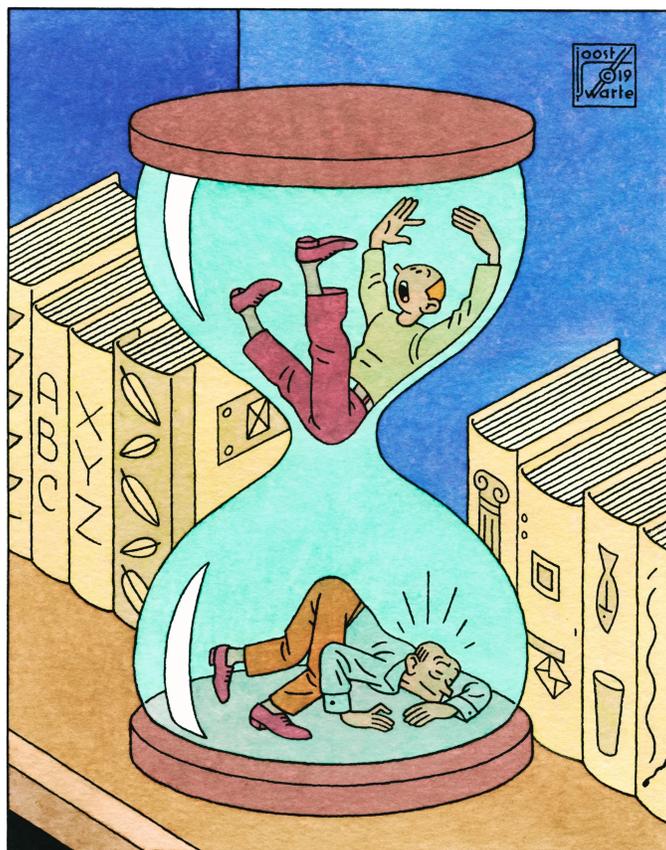
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WHY WE CAN'T TELL THE TRUTH ABOUT AGING

A long life is a gift. But will we really be grateful for it?

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The current prevailing wisdom insists that aging is natural, and therefore good. Illustration by Joost Swarte

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In days of old, when most people didn't live to be old, there were very few notable works about old age, and those were penned by writers who were themselves not very old. Chaucer was around fifty when "[The Merchant's Tale](#)" was conceived; Shakespeare either forty-one or forty-two when he wrote "[King Lear](#)," Swift fifty-five or so when gleefully depicting the immortal

but ailing Struldbruggs, and Tennyson a mere twenty-four when he began “Tithonus” and completed “Ulysses,” his great anthem to an aging but “hungry heart.”

One might think that forty was not so young in Shakespeare’s day, but if you survived birth, infections, wars, and pestilence you stood a decent chance of reaching an advanced age no matter when you were born. Average life expectancy was indeed a sorry number for the greater part of history (for Americans born as late as 1900, it wasn’t even fifty), which may be one reason that people didn’t write books about aging: there weren’t enough old folks around to sample them. But now that more people on the planet are over sixty-five than under five, an army of readers stands waiting to learn what old age has in store.

Reading through a recent spate of books that deal with aging, one might forget that, half a century ago, the elderly were, as V. S. Pritchett noted in his 1964 introduction to Muriel Spark’s novel “Memento Mori,” “the great suppressed and censored subject of contemporary society, the one we do not care to face.” Not only are we facing it today; we’re also putting the best face on it that we possibly can. Our senior years are evidently a time to celebrate ourselves and the wonderful things to come: travelling, volunteering, canoodling, acquiring new skills, and so on. No one, it seems, wants to disparage old age. Nora Ephron’s “I Feel Bad About My Neck” tries, but is too wittily mournful to have real angst. Instead, we get such cheerful tidings as Mary Pipher’s “Women Rowing North: Navigating Life’s Currents and Flourishing as We Age,” Marc E. Agronin’s “The End of Old Age: Living a Longer, More Purposeful Life,” Alan D. Castel’s “Better with Age: The Psychology of Successful Aging,” Ashton Applewhite’s “This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism,” and Carl Honoré’s “Bolder: Making the Most of Our Longer Lives”—five chatty accounts meant to reassure us that getting old just means that we have to work harder at staying young.

Pipher is a clinical psychologist who is attentive to women over sixty, whose minds and bodies, she asserts, are steadily being devalued. She is sometimes tiresomely trite, urging women to “conceptualize all experiences in positive ways,” but invariably sympathetic. Agronin, described perhaps confusingly as “a geriatric psychiatrist” (he’s in his mid-fifties), believes that aging not only “brings strength” but is also “the most profound thing we accomplish in life.” Castel, a professor of psychology at U.C.L.A., believes in “successful aging” and seeks to show us how it can be achieved. And Applewhite, who calls herself an “author and activist,” doesn’t just inveigh against stereotypes; she wants to nuke them, replacing terms like “seniors” and “the elderly” with “olders.” Olders, she believes, can get down with the best of them. Retirement homes “are hotbeds of lust and romance,” she writes. “Sex and arousal do change, but often for the better.” Could be, though I’ve never heard anyone testify to this. Perhaps the epicurean philosopher Rodney Dangerfield (who died a month short of his eighty-third birthday), having studied the relationship between sexuality and longevity, said it best: “I’m at the age where food has taken the place of sex in my life. In fact, I’ve just had a mirror put over my kitchen table.”

Applewhite makes an appearance in Honoré’s book. She tells Honoré, a Canadian journalist who is now fifty-one, that aging is “like falling in love or motherhood.” Honoré reminds us that “history is full of folks smashing it in later life.” Smashers include Sophocles, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Bach, and Edison, who filed patents into his eighties. Perhaps because Honoré isn’t an American, he omits Satchel Paige, who pitched in the majors until he was fifty-nine. Like Applewhite, who claims that the older brain works “in a more synchronized way,” Honoré contends that aging may “alter the structure of the brain in ways that boost creativity.”

These authors aren’t blind to the perils of aging; they just prefer to see the upside. All maintain that seniors are more comfortable in their own skins, experiencing, Applewhite says, “less social anxiety, and fewer social phobias.” There’s some evidence for this. The connection between happiness and aging—following the success of books like Jonathan Rauch’s “The Happiness Curve: Why

Life Gets Better After 50” and John Leland’s “Happiness Is a Choice You Make: Lessons from a Year Among the Oldest Old,” both published last year—has very nearly come to be accepted as fact. According to a 2011 Gallup survey, happiness follows the U-shaped curve first proposed in a 2008 study by the economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald. They found that people’s sense of well-being was highest in childhood and old age, with a perceptible dip around midlife.

Lately, however, the curve has invited skepticism. Apparently, its trajectory holds true mainly in countries where the median wage is high and people tend to live longer or, alternatively, where the poor feel resentment more keenly during middle age and don’t mind saying so. But there may be a simpler explanation: perhaps the people who participate in such surveys are those whose lives tend to follow the curve, while people who feel miserable at seventy or eighty, whose ennui is offset only by brooding over unrealized expectations, don’t even bother to open such questionnaires.

One strategy of these books is to emphasize that aging is natural and therefore good, an idea that harks back to Plato, who lived to be around eighty and thought philosophy best suited to men of more mature years (women, no matter their age, could not think metaphysically). His most famous student, Aristotle, had a different opinion; his “Ars Rhetorica” contains long passages denouncing old men as miserly, cowardly, cynical, loquacious, and temperamentally chilly. (Aristotle thought that the body lost heat as it aged.) These gruff views were formed during the first part of Aristotle’s life, and we don’t know if they changed before he died, at the age of sixty-two. The nature-is-always-right argument found its most eloquent spokesperson in the Roman statesman Cicero, who was sixty-two when he wrote “De Senectute,” liberally translated as “How to Grow Old,” a valiant performance that both John Adams (dead at ninety) and Benjamin Franklin (dead at eighty-four) thought highly of.

Montaigne took a more measured view. Writing around 1580, he considered the end of a long life to be “rare, extraordinary, and singular . . . ’tis the last and extremest sort of dying: and the more remote, the less to be hoped for.” Montaigne, who never reached sixty, might have changed his mind upon learning that, in the twenty-first century, people routinely live into their seventies and eighties. But I suspect that he’d still say, “Whoever saw old age, that did not applaud the past, and condemn the present times?” No happiness curve for him.

There is, of course, a chance that you may be happier at eighty than you were at twenty or forty, but you’re going to feel much worse. I know this because two recent books provide a sobering look at what happens to the human body as the years pile up. Elizabeth Blackburn and Elissa Epel’s “The Telomere Effect: Living Younger, Healthier, Longer” and Sue Armstrong’s “Borrowed Time: The Science of How and Why We Age” describe what is essentially a messy business. Armstrong, a British science and health writer, presents, in crack Michael Lewis style, the high points of aging research along with capsule biographies of the main players, while Blackburn, one of three recipients of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Physiology, focusses on the shortening of telomeres, those tiny aglets of DNA attached to our chromosomes, whose length is a measure of cellular health. Basically, most cells divide and replicate some fifty-plus times before becoming senescent. Not nearly as inactive as the name suggests, senescent cells contribute to chronic inflammation and interfere with protective collagens. Meanwhile, telomeres shorten with each cell division, even as life style affects the degree of shrinkage—data now suggest that “married people, or people living with a partner, have longer telomeres.”

Walt Whitman, who never married, made it to seventy-two, and offered a lyric case for aging. “YOUTH, large, lusty, loving—youth full of grace, force, fascination,” he intoned. “Do you know that Old Age may come after you with equal grace, force, fascination?” It’s pretty to think so, but the biology suggests otherwise. The so-called epigenetic clock shows our DNA getting gummed up, age-

related mitochondrial mutations reducing the cells' ability to generate energy, and our immune system slowly growing less efficient. Bones weaken, eyes strain, hearts flag. Bladders empty too often, bowels not often enough, and toxic proteins build up in the brain to form the plaque and the spaghetti-like tangles that are associated with Alzheimer's disease. Not surprisingly, sixty-eight per cent of Medicare beneficiaries today have multiple chronic conditions. Not a lot of grace, force, or fascination in that.

In short, the optimistic narrative of pro-aging writers doesn't line up with the dark story told by the human body. But maybe that's not the point. "There is only one solution if old age is not to be an absurd parody of our former life," Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her expansive 1970 study "The Coming of Age," "and that is to go on pursuing ends that give our existence a meaning—devotion to individuals, to groups, or to causes—social, political, intellectual, or creative work." But such meaning is not easily gained. In 1975, Robert Neil Butler, who had previously coined the term "ageism," published "Why Survive? Being Old in America," a Pulitzer Prize-winning study of society's dereliction toward the nation's aging population. "For many elderly Americans old age is a tragedy, a period of quiet despair, deprivation, desolation and muted rage," he concluded.

Four years later, the British journalist Ronald Blythe, who must be one of the few living writers to have spoken to the last Victorians (he's now just shy of ninety-seven), had a more sanguine perspective. His "The View in Winter," containing oral histories of men and women at the end of their lives, is a lovely, sometimes personal, sometimes scholarly testament that reaches "no single conclusion. . . . Old age is full of death and full of life. It is a tolerable achievement and it is a disaster. It transcends desire and it taunts it. It is long enough and it is far from being long enough." Some years after that, the great Chicago radio host Studs Terkel, who died at ninety-six, issued an American version of Blythe's wintry landscape; in "Coming of Age" (1995), Terkel interrogated seventy-four "graybeards" (men and women over the age of seventy) for their thoughts on aging, politics, and the American way of life.

Now that we're living longer, we have the time to write books about living longer—so many, in fact, that the Canadian critic Constance Rooke, in 1992, coined the term "Vollendungsroman," a somewhat awkward complement to "Bildungsroman," to describe novels about the end of life, such as Barbara Pym's "Quartet in Autumn," Kingsley Amis's "The Old Devils," and Wallace Stegner's "The Spectator Bird." Since then, plenty of elderly protagonists have shown up in novels by Louis Begley ("About Schmidt"), Sue Miller ("The Distinguished Guest"), Saul Bellow ("Ravelstein"), Philip Roth ("Everyman"), and Margaret Drabble ("The Dark Flood Rises"). The realm of nonfiction has more than kept pace. Today, there's a Web site that lists the top fifty books on aging, which, alas, omits William Ian Miller's eccentric "Losing It: In Which an Aging Professor Laments His Shrinking Brain" (2011); Lynne Segal's judicious but tough-minded "Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing" (2013); and Martha C. Nussbaum and Saul Levmore's smart, provocative "Aging Thoughtfully: Conversations About Retirement, Romance, Wrinkles, & Regret" (2017), in which a philosopher and a law professor discuss everything from "Lear" to the transmission of assets. And, as was bound to happen, gerontology meets the Internet in "Aging and the Digital Life Course," a collection of essays edited by David Prendergast and Chiara Garattini (2017). The library on old age has grown so voluminous that the fifty million Americans over the age of sixty-five could spend the rest of their lives reading such books, even as lusty retirees and power-lifting septuagenarians turn out new ones.

The most recent grand philosophical overview of aging is also by a woman, and lighting upon Helen Small's "The Long Life" (2007) is like entering the University of Old Age after matriculating at a perfectly good college. Small, an Oxford don (and just forty-two when the book came out), wants to integrate old age into how we think about life. Pondering what it means to be someone who has completed a life cycle that Montaigne thought unnatural, she considers old age to be "connected into larger

philosophical considerations,” whose depiction, whether literary or scientific, both drives and reflects emotional and ethical attitudes. And, echoing the philosopher Bernard Williams, she suggests that our lives accrue meaning over time, and therefore the story of the self is not complete until it experiences old age—the stage of life that helps us grasp who we are and what our life has meant.

Not everyone wants to find out if Small’s equation between old age and self-knowledge holds up. In 2014, *The Atlantic* ran an essay by the oncologist and bioethicist Ezekiel J. Emanuel, then fifty-seven, whose title alone, “Why I Hope to Die at 75,” caused uneasy shuffling among seventy-year-olds. Emanuel believes that, by the time he hits this milestone, he will have lived a full life. He argues that by seventy-five “creativity, originality, and productivity are pretty much gone for the vast, vast majority of us.” Unlike Honoré and Applewhite, Emanuel thinks that “it is difficult, if not impossible, to generate new, creative thoughts, because we don’t develop a new set of neural connections that can supersede the existing network.” Although he doesn’t plan on suicide, he won’t actively prolong his life: no more cancer-screening tests (colonoscopies and the like); no pacemaker or stents. He wants to get out while the getting is good.

It’s an unselfish outlook, but not quite credible to unevolved people like me. Having entered my seventies, I don’t care that I may not have much to contribute after I’m seventy-five. I’m not sure I’ll have had that much to contribute *before* turning seventy-five. Also, Emanuel seems to be talking about artists, intellectuals, and scientists who will be pained by the prospect that their brain power and creativity may ebb in their twilight years, and not about your average working stiff who, after years of toiling in factories or offices, may want to spend more time golfing or reading books about golf. A grudging admiration for the good doctor ultimately gives way to disappointment when he reserves the right to change his mind, thereby confirming Montaigne’s gloomy projection that “our desires incessantly grow young again; we are always re-beginning to live.”

Let’s grant that there are as many ways to grow old as there are people going about it, especially since more of us keep chugging along despite our aches and ailments. “If I’d known I was going to live this long,” said Mickey Mantle (or possibly Mae West or Eubie Blake), “I would have taken better care of myself.” Mantle was only sixty-three when he died, but the truth is that many of us are going to be physically better off at eighty than Shakespeare’s Jaques could have imagined—*avec* teeth, *avec* sight, and *avec* hearing (which is to say: dental implants, glasses, and hearing aids). A long life is a gift. But I’m not sure we’re going to be grateful for it.

Normal aging is bad enough, but things become dire if dementia develops, the chances of which double every five years past the age of sixty-five. Applewhite, however, citing recent research, no longer thinks that dementia is “inevitable, or even likely.” May she live long and prosper, but, for those of us who have cared for spouses or parents with dementia, it’s not always a simple matter to know on whom the burden falls the heaviest. (One in three caregivers is sixty-five or older.)

Obviously, I’m not a candidate for the Old Person’s Hall of Fame. In fact, I plan to be a tattered coat upon a stick, nervously awaiting the second oblivion, which I’m reasonably certain will not have the same outcome as the first. Nonetheless, I like to think that I have some objectivity about what it’s like to grow old. My father lived to be almost a hundred and three, and most of my friends are now in their seventies. It may be risky to impugn the worthiness of old age, but I’ll take my cane to anyone who tries to stop me. At the moment, we seem to be compensating for past transgressions: far from devaluing old age, we assign it value it may not possess. Yes, we should live as long as possible, barring illness and infirmity, but, when it comes to the depredations of age, let’s not lose candor along with muscle tone. The goal, you could say, is to live long enough to think: I’ve lived long enough.

One would, of course, like to approach old age with grace and fortitude, but old age makes it difficult. Those who feel that it's a welcome respite from the passions, anxieties, and troubles of youth or middle age are either very lucky or toweringly reasonable. Why rail against the inevitable—what good will it do? None at all. Complaining is both pointless and unseemly. Existence itself may be pointless and unseemly. No wonder we wonder at the meaning of it all. "At first we want life to be romantic; later, to be bearable; finally, to be understandable," Louise Bogan wrote. Professor Small would agree, and though I am a fan of her book, I have my doubts about whether the piling on of years really does add to our understanding of life. Doesn't Regan say of her raging royal father, "Tis the infirmity of his age: yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself"? The years may broaden experience and tint perspective, but is wisdom or contentment certain to follow?

A contented old age probably depends on what we were like before we became old. Vain, self-centered people will likely find aging less tolerable than those who seek meaning in life by helping others. And those fortunate enough to have lived a full and productive life may exit without undue regret. But if you're someone who—oh, for the sake of argument—is unpleasantly surprised that people in their forties or fifties give you a seat on the bus, or that your doctors are forty years younger than you are, you just might resent time's insistent drumbeat. Sure, there's life in the old boy yet, but certain restrictions apply. The body—tired, aching, shrinking—now quite often embarrasses us. Many older men have to pee right after they pee, and many older women pee whenever they sneeze. Pipher and company might simply say "Gesundheit" and urge us on. Life, they insist, doesn't necessarily get worse after seventy or eighty. But it does, you know. I don't care how many seniors are loosening their bedsprings every night; something is missing.

It's not just energy or sexual prowess but the thrill of anticipation. Even if you're single, can you ever feel again the rush of excitement that comes with the first brush of the lips, the first moment when clothes drop to the floor? Who the hell wants to tear his or her clothes off at seventy-five? Now we dim the lights and fold our slacks and hope we don't look too soft, too wrinkled, too old. Yes, mature love allows for physical imperfections, but wouldn't we rather be desired for our beauty than forgiven for our flaws? These may seem like shallow regrets, and yet the loss of pleasure in one's own body, the loss of pleasure in knowing that one's body pleases others, is a real one.

I can already hear the objections: If my children are grown and happy; if my grandchildren light up when they see me; if I'm healthy and financially secure; if I'm reasonably satisfied with what I've accomplished; if I feel more comfortable now that I no longer have to prove myself—why, then, the loss of youth is a fair trade-off. Those are a lot of "if"s, but never mind. We should all make peace with aging. And so my hat is off to Dr. Oliver Sacks, who chose to regard old age as "a time of leisure and freedom, freed from the factitious urgencies of earlier days, free to explore whatever I wish, and to bind the thoughts and feelings of a lifetime together." At eighty-two, he rediscovered the joy of gefilte fish, which, as he noted, would usher him out of life as it had ushered him into it.

"No wise man ever wished to be younger," Swift asserted, never having met me. But this doesn't mean that we have to see old age as something other than what it is. It may complete us, but in doing so it defeats us. "Life is slow dying," Philip Larkin wrote before he stopped dying, at sixty-three—a truth that young people, who are too busy living, cavalierly ignore. Should it give them pause, they'll discover that just about every book on the subject advocates a "positive" attitude toward aging in order to maintain a sense of satisfaction and to achieve a measure of wisdom. And yet it seems to me that a person can be both wise and unhappy, wise and regretful, and even wise and dubious about the wisdom of growing old.

When Socrates declared that philosophy is the practice of dying, he was saying that thought itself is shaped by mortality, and it's because our existence is limited that we're able to think past those limits. Time has us in its grip, and so we devise stories of an afterlife in which we exist unshackled by days and years and the decay they represent. But where does that get us, beyond the vague suspicion that immortality—at least in the shape of the vengeful Yahweh or the spiteful Greek and Roman gods—is no guarantee of wisdom? Then again, if you're the sort of person who sees the glass as one-eighth full rather than seven-eighths empty, you might not worry about such matters. Instead, you'll greet each new day with gratitude, despite coughing up phlegm and tossing down a dozen pills.

But what do I know? I'm just one person, who at seventy-one doesn't feel as good as he did at sixty-one, and who is fairly certain that he's going to feel even worse at eighty-one. I simply know what men and women have always known: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever." If only the writer had stopped there. Unfortunately, he went on to add, "In much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. . . . The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise? This too is meaningless." No young person could have written that. ♦

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