



The Oxford Book of Aging

Thomas R. Cole, Mary C. Winkler

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Most of us today can expect to live into our seventies in reasonably good health. (In fact, the fastest growing segment of the population is the group eighty-five and older.) Yet our culture offers few convincing ways to help us find purpose in our later years. The ancient and medieval vision of aging as a mysterious part of the eternal order of things has given way to the secular, scientific, and individualistic outlook of modernity. No longer seen as a way station along life's spiritual journey, old age has been redefined as a problem to be solved by science and medicine. Older people have been moved to society's margins, and, as a result, we have become uncertain about what it means to age.

To help us make sense of our journey through life, *The Oxford Book of Aging* offers some two hundred and fifty pieces that illuminate the pleasures, pains, dreams, and triumphs of people as they strive to live out their days in a meaningful way. Fiction, poetry, memoirs, essays, children's stories, reflections by philosophers, historians, and psychologists, African and Japanese legends, excerpts from the Koran and the Bible, scientific and medical tracts--the variety of writings is remarkable. The excerpts shed light on the many aspects of later life, including creativity, love, memory, spiritual growth, and the value of work. The perspectives range from Schopenhauer's dark "Disillusion is the chief characteristic of old age" when we come "by degrees to see that our existence is all empty and void," to Robert Browning's uplifting "Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be" (a vision so idealistic that Ogden Nash was moved to write "Such a statement, certes, / Could emanate only from a youngster is his thirties"). We read Mozart's letter to his dying father, Alice Walker's endearing "To Hell With Dying" (about the vital ties between children and the old), Annie Dillard's meditation on her mother's hands, and Mark Twain's tongue-in-cheek formula for reaching age seventy ("It has always been my rule never to smoke when asleep, and never to refrain when awake"). There's a marvelous vein of poetry woven through the volume, ranging from Shakespeare's seventy-third sonnet ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold"), to Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night," to the Bible's Psalm Twenty-three, to Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium." And there is a great diversity of voices, from Huang Ti (a Chinese physician who lived some 4700 years ago), to Black Elk (an Oglala Sioux holy man), to Alifa Rifaat (a contemporary Egyptian writer), to an Appalachian woman's oral history. Through these carefully chosen writings, Thomas R. Cole and Mary G. Winkler demonstrate that the joys, fears, sufferings, and mysteries of aging *can* be successfully explored, with humility and self-knowledge, with love and compassion, with a sense of the sacred, and with acceptance of physical decline and mortality. "We who are old know that age is more than a disability," Florida Scott-Maxwell wrote while in her early eighties. "It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our capacity at times, but something to be carried high." In *The Oxford Book of Aging*, we find this "intense and varied experience" captured before our eyes.

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