

*Old Age
is a Terminal Illness*

How I Learned to Age Gracefully
and Conquer My Fear of Dying

Alma H. Bond, Ph.D.

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Introduction

I have been asked why I kept a death journal and why I have written this book. In the last decade, five dear friends died. When Kendall Kane*, my closest friend for twenty years, committed suicide two years ago, I went into a deep depression. For the first time in my life I found myself experiencing a writer's block. Neither consultations with colleagues, talking with friends who were still alive, nor time itself seemed to speed along the healing process. I still felt wretched and was unable to write.

Whenever I experience a conflict I do not understand, I keep a dream journal. I have done this since I was twenty-one years old. Studying my dreams often has helped me discover what is percolating in my unconscious, the first step toward resolution of the problem. For those readers who are not familiar with dream interpretation, I

* Kendall Kane and many other names in this book have been changed to protect the living. In addition, certain identifying facts have been modified. Nevertheless, in every case, I believe I have kept to the spirit of the truth.

quote Freud, “An unexamined dream is like an unopened letter.” He meant that every dream carries a message within it. Else why dream the dream or read the letter?

What are the encoded communications in dreams? They consist chiefly of forbidden thoughts and situations that bring about great anxiety when brought to consciousness. Human beings are taught as children there are many thoughts and emotions that are “not nice.” For example, “nice” children don’t get angry or have sexual feelings. Therefore we shove the offending material to the bottom of our minds where it doesn’t have to frighten us. Thus we can continue to feel we are good people whom mommy and daddy will find loveable, and we don’t have to deal with the overwhelming anxieties triggered by “sinful” sensations. Unfortunately, once the objectionable material is pushed into the unconscious, for all ostensible purposes it is locked away and cannot be corrected by experience and maturity. For example, as adults, there is no need to repress sexuality, but many neurotic people continue to do so and live impoverished lives. People think we cannot bear the pain of grief, but it is surprising how much we can live with once we accept that there is no alternative. There are a number of ways sealed off material can seep back into consciousness, but insight into dream life, like a carefully read letter, is perhaps the most revealing.

When my “death depression” wouldn’t heal, I made an effort to examine my dreams to determine the cause of the problem. This book is the tale of an odyssey to accept the inevitable, the deaths of those dear to me and the idea of my own demise.

My dream work made conscious that I was denying the entire aging process. Since I never gave it much thought, I wasn’t in touch with my terror of dying. It was something that happened to other people, not me. While I would have denied it vociferously had anyone asked me, inside I felt impervious to death. But with people of my age dying like flies, it became impossible to keep away the knowledge that soon, too soon, the bell would toll for me.

You might ask why an analyst in practice for over thirty-five years would not be aware of such fears, without

all the rigmarole of journals, dreams, etc. I was well aware of the ways in which I kept myself from knowing what I didn't want to know. Refusal to accept the idea of death is not the first time I experienced the need for such a defense, nor in all probability will it be the last. Denial is a mechanism I have used at each new phase of life. Until it was worked through, I denied my burgeoning sexuality as an adolescent, the passing of an era at menopause, and my grief at the deaths of my husband, mother, father, and brother. In similar manner, acceptance of my own seniority was hard to come by. Yet self-understanding is not something that is achieved once and for all, but is a hectic battle that must be re-fought by each of us at every stage of development. Each new phase of life necessitates a further undoing of defenses.

There is a lot of emotional work to be done before we can accept the inevitability of death. Isn't the real despair of the human condition that, street people or kings alike, eventually we all go the way of the cockroach? And there is nothing anyone or anything can do about it. Not doctors. Not diet. Not exercise. Not potions. Not lotions. Not creams. We die when we die. And I damn well better accept it.

This insight came to me in a dream about Rudy, my late husband Rudy, who died in 1982.

He is leaving the house and mumbling something about terminal illness. I am a bit incredulous, and sputter, "What...what?" I say perhaps there is some treatment for the condition. Rudy abruptly states, "Horse piss."

The doctor has prescribed an amber-colored pseudo-scientific concoction for me, ostensibly to prolong youth. It looks like Aslavital, the supposed cure for aging developed by Ana Aslan in Rumania, which I tried for a while. The liquid runs out of the faucet into the kitchen sink. I realize the "treatment" will be as useful to me as water is to cancer. I am going to die; if not now, soon enough. There are no two ways about it.

Rudy's comment, "horse piss," epitomizes his direct manner, his emotional honesty, and his awareness that there is nothing one can do to escape the painful exigencies of life.

How *does* one accept the idea that death is not far down the pike, when one is still healthy, vigorous, and in

love with life? Freud believed that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced we will live forever. Such emotional blinders ward off feelings too painful to bear, and permit us to enjoy life. Nevertheless, there is a terrible emotional and physical cost for maintaining such illusions, and the truest wisdom lies in facing the seemingly intolerable. "If you want to endure life," Freud stresses, "prepare yourself for death."

My agent speaks of the WHIFM Factor, "What's in it for me?" What is in it for you, dear reader, should this book help you face the inevitability of your own death? Why would you want to pierce the iron veil of repression, which saves you so much pain and grief? Well, better health, for one thing, along with less conflict in daily living, and the likelihood of a fuller, richer life. Freud's greatest discovery is that fear of knowledge itself is the major cause of much illness. To constantly hold down the lid on fear is exhausting, and such depletion of energy keeps our capacities from unfolding to the fullest. Beneath the surface of repression lies the promise of improved emotional and physical health, as well as the possibility of developing all our potentialities.

When you accept that you are going to die, reader, each day becomes a gift. You are free to treasure each moment of love, memorize your children's faces, gently touch your grandchildren, glory in the sunset, and use your creativity to shape the golden years into the apex of your life.

Part 1: Alma Bond's Unexamined Musings

This chapter is largely the “intellectual part of the book.” You are welcome to skip it, if you’d rather go on to the stories, but it is part of how I choose to think about death. My aim is to dissect it philosophically as well as emotionally and to examine what others wiser than I have said about it over the years.

May 14

I was swimming in a hotel pool. It was a cloudy, dreary day. My goggles had fallen into the water and slowly disappeared. I had jumped in after them, even though I was wearing a jacket. Electric wires were attached to the glasses, and I was afraid I would get a shock if I wore them.

When I awakened, I recalled a myth retold by Oliver Sacks in “The Island of the Colorblind¹.” Long ago on the island of Pohnpei in Micronesia there was a magic pool where the ruling Sandeleurs could see what was taking place on Pohnpei. After the brave hero Isohkelekel finally vanquished the Sandeleurs, he came to the pool. Looking down into its sacred waters, he saw the reflection of his aged face for the first time. He was so distraught he threw himself

into the pool and drowned himself.

If so imposing a conqueror can be brought to suicide by viewing the ravages of age, what, I asked, can I expect of myself? I decided that if I really wanted to discover how I feel about “The undiscovered country, from whose bourne/ No traveler returns²,” I’d better keep a “death journal” of my thoughts and feelings. A few nights later another dream confirmed my decision to keep this death journal.

May 17

There were lines in red on my computer where it asks for input, but the rest of the screen was in the shadows.

Growing old is a new role for me, and there is much about it I do not understand. The questions are written in my mind in blood red, but a black shadow shrouds the answers. I hope writing this journal will cast some light on the unknown and bring me to terms with my fear of dying. But then it’s not dying itself that bothers me. I can live with that. The truth is I don’t want to be dead! I feel like Woody Allen: “I’m not afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

I was there when it almost happened. Ten years ago I was hit by a taxi, and knocked unconscious. I came close to dying, even to going through a “near-death experience” in which I was drawn to a light at the end of a tunnel. I woke up from a coma in the hospital with a concussion and seven broken bones. I discovered that dying isn’t so bad: You simply don’t wake up. Modern science confirms this by suggesting that we are equipped with a mechanism to make death easier, that when we are close to death we turn off suffering by releasing natural opiates called endorphins that block the experience of pain³. So I am not afraid to die; it is *not living* I find offensive.

Throughout the ages humankind has sought *ars moriendi*. Everybody seems to worry about achieving the “good death.” I don’t understand it. Of course it is desirable to avoid pain. Certainly if one has to die it would be good to die “well,” preferably at home, surrounded by loved ones, with an absence of pain. Yes, that would be nice, if one has to die. But I don’t understand the emphasis that people put

on the kind of death they and those they love will experience. Even a bad death is no worse than the innumerable bouts of pain and loss we experience in a lifetime. These episodes passed. So will the instant of death. To me that's not what is most important. What matters is the life one has lived, if it was full, if it was gratifying, if one did and accomplished and loved as one wanted. *Dying is only one moment in time.* What matters to me is that it will be the end, and I will no longer be alive.

When one is in good health and in love with life, how *does* one comprehend the thought of leaving this earth? Sophocles⁴ said it all twenty-four centuries ago when he wrote that the one thing in the universe that has defeated man is death:

“And he masters by his arts the beast whose lair is in the wilds...he tames the tireless mountain bull...and speech and windswept thought, and all the moods that mould a state, hath he taught himself; and how to flee the arrows of the frost...and the arrows of the rushing rain; yea, he hath resource for all; Without resource he meets nothing that must come: only against Death shall he call for aid in vain.”

According to Freud⁵, we all tend to “shelve” death, to eliminate it from our thinking, because the idea of an end to our consciousness is intolerable. In the unconscious, he says, every one of us is convinced of his own immortality. He gives an amusing example of the “normal attitude” to death, in which a man says to his wife, “If one of us dies, I shall go and live in Paris.” I first became aware of this outlook as a child. Whenever anyone mentioned the possibility of dying, my mother, in a perfect demonstration of Freud’s “normal attitude,” would exclaim, “Bite your tongue!”

Freud said we have to live as if we were immortal, because otherwise for the average person the stress would be unbearable. Nevertheless, he advised if we would tolerate life, we should be prepared for death, because if the highest stake in living, life itself, is not at risk, life is impoverished and loses its interest.

Maybe. I'm not so sure. I don't think Freud was either. Elsewhere he wrote⁶, “A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less

lovely.” I don’t think visitors to Key West enjoy the perennial sunshine any more than its year round inhabitants do. The bougainvillea that blossoms eternally is just as lovely in my eyes as the roses that bloom in the springtime. Life is good enough as it is. I don’t believe we need the idea of death to make us appreciate living.

To face the truth of death can be devastating and terrifying. The world is choked with violence and senseless accidents. We are destroying our beautiful planet. Soon we must die. What can possibly be offered in exchange for living with such anguish?

When I asked a friend who had recovered from a stroke and near death how he felt about his ordeal he said, “I feel a new sense of freedom. When you’ve faced the worst, you’ve done it already. There’s nothing to be afraid of anymore. You think, oh, here’s another day; you’d better not waste it. I’ll never be unhappy about trivialities again.”

I’m told that if I can accept the idea of my own death, my life too will become more precious. Each day will be a gift. I will memorize my children’s faces, lovingly stroke my grandchildren, tell my friends I love them, and eagerly write what might be my last book. But then I do these things anyway. It seems less and less like a bargain.

There must be something good about dying; Kingsley Amis⁷ found something he liked about it:

Death has got something to be said for it:

There’s no need to get out of bed for it;

Wherever you may be,

They bring it to you, free.

But I’ll cast my lot with Shakespeare⁸, who said, “Of comfort no man speak. / Let’s talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs.”

May 19

(The night after I began this journal)

I dreamed of a headless man staggering around like a chicken without a head.

When I awoke, I recalled the time my mother had taken me to a kosher butcher shop. Standing in a room stinking of bloody chicken coops piled on a sawdust floor, I

watched the proprietor yank a squawking chicken by the neck and slam it against a wooden block. Then, hoisting a bloody ax, she whacked it down on the screaming chicken's head. Imagine my disbelief when the decapitated chicken lunged up from the block and wobbled down the length of the entire counter, its neck gushing blood straight up in the air like a geyser.

"Verte geharget, gey in drerd!" (Drop dead, go to Hell) shouted the woman, as she chased the chicken down the room.

No, no, my experiences with death are not designed to make it appealing. I'm with Jesus, when he said, "Let the dead bury their dead⁹."

John Wheeler, in Lisl Goodman's¹⁰ *Death and the Creative Life*, says that a great spreading tree kills the future for promising young trees that are too close to it. "Death is essential for renewal," he said. "The world is renewed from underneath."

My father was "a great spreading tree" with the desire to preserve the future for his children. He had advanced diverticulosis, and was close to death. I've never felt he had to die. I believe if he had tried harder, he could have made it. But he told me he didn't want to use up all his money on heroic efforts to save his life. His death was a sacrifice that enabled him to leave an inheritance to his children. He died for us.

Like my father, I don't want to kill the future for "promising young trees." But science is learning to keep us alive long past the given biblical life span. Why not root for technology finding room for us all, such as expanding civilization to other planets or developing life beneath the sea? Trash is recycled; why not recycle the old and the dying into new roles of mentors and role models? Young people could benefit from their wisdom and experience.

Perhaps science will advance in its fight against the decay of human powers to the point where a human life will be terminated only by unforeseeable accident. In that distant utopia, the time between human birth and death will expand beyond any limits imaginable today, and like a well tended old car, what psychoanalyst Alex H. Kaplan¹¹ called "the

rusting years” will be kept at bay all our lives. Then the kind of thinking I saw on a bumper sticker: “The older I get the better I used to be,” will no longer be appropriate.

May 20

No! I’m definitely not in a hurry to leave this incredibly beautiful world. I intend to snub the uninvited guest as long as I can, and try to behave as the great activist and philanthropist Lily Peter planned¹²:

Tell Death I am not here,
When he comes for me.
He will find me standing yonder
Under a quince tree,
With violets in my hair
Jasmine in my hand,
Looking for the last time
At the lovely land:

Feeling for the last time
The wind in my face
Watching the clouds go over
In their tall grace,

Death may have the body
In the room at the head of the stair,
But I shall be under a quince tree
With violets in my hair.

I find it touching that Lily Peter’s friends saw to it that she was buried under a quince tree with violets in her hair. But I say, spare me the quince tree, with or without violets. No, I won’t make it easy for Death to claim me. I will kick and scream and holler and make such a racket it will chase him away, more like Edna St. Vincent Millay¹³ than Lily Peters:

Withstanding Death
Till Life be gone,
I shall treasure my breath,
I shall linger on.

I shall bolt my door

With a bolt and a cable;
I shall block my door
With a bureau and a table;

With all my might
My door shall be barred.
I shall put up a fight,
I shall take it hard.
With his fist on my mouth
He shall drag me forth,
Shrieking to the south
And clutching at the north.

May 21

I read a lot about death these days. Anatole Broyard¹⁴ impresses me with his notion that the patient must treat his disease not as a disaster or an occasion for depression and panic, but as a narrative or story. In that way, Broyard says, the writer has an antibody against illness and pain.

What a good idea, I think. So I pull out my neglected notebook from under the pile of *Victoria's Secret* silk underpants and determine to write the "narrative" of my journey to the grave.

Eliot Jacques¹⁵ says that one of the crucial aspects of emotional maturity is to resign oneself to the aging process, to assimilate one's true age, to stop pretending that life has no end. He says there is a need for "self-mourning" or grieving for the inevitability of one's own eventual death.

I guess that's what I've been doing lately, mourning the inevitability of my own death, along with the deaths of my friends. When I saw the Key West turquoise sea the other day, my eyes teared up as I realized I may not be standing there admiring it many more times. Seeing my grandchildren last weekend made me cry as I pictured how sad they would be at my funeral, as distressed as my seven-year-old son Zane was at the funeral of my mother. When he cried, it made me cry even more.

Yes, Broyard has something. Writing about aging can be an antibody against depression.

Broyard believed that one must be ill and die with style¹⁶. He found a way of being an invalid that was unique to him, and died with elegance and grace. Ill people can go on being themselves. Perhaps even more so than before, for each person has a distinctive way of being ill. In the depth of his infirmity, all Broyard's old, trivial selves dissolved and he was reduced to his essence.

Fritjof Capra¹⁷ quotes Carlos Castenada in a similar philosophy, to the effect that "An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if your death makes a gesture to you, or if you catch a glimpse of it...Death is the only wise adviser that we have."

I had seen such a transformation in my son Zane after he recovered from a debilitating illness. He waited in line at a restaurant for an hour to be seated for his dinner.

"Weren't you angry?" I asked him.

"No," he said. "I've learned the hard way what is important."

Let's hope I can do the same. Right now my style of aging seems to be grumbling and bemoaning the passage of time. Perhaps I can find my own style of growing old, so that when the time comes, I too can leave the earth in a manner unique to myself.

During his illness Broyard utilized every sensation to expand his consciousness while waiting "for the next phase¹⁸." He believed "Illness is primarily a drama, and it should be possible to enjoy it as well as to suffer it." I'm not so sure. My philosophy is more like that of psychologist Erving Goffman's, who speaks of the "spoiled identity of the sick¹⁹." When I read such lines as, "O death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?²⁰" I can only mutter, "Whistling in the dark...."

May 24

The final pages of the life of the artist Willem de Kooning, as told by Calvin Tompkins²¹, tell a different kind of tale about life winning out over death. It is similar to Broyard's in that both men preserved their "style" until their late years. When De Kooning was ninety-three years old, he was virtually immobilized by Alzheimer's Disease. In 1978,

after a lifetime of drinking, the artist was an alcoholic disaster. With the support of his ex-wife, Elaine de Kooning, he began a program of psychotherapy and Alcoholics Anonymous, during which he “recovered” from alcoholism. During this period, he painted little, but came out of it with a new style of painting. He formerly had been a perfectionist in his art, sometimes painting the same work hundreds of times. Perhaps in his therapy (as frequently happens) his conscience softened up.

According to Tom Ferrara, one of his two major assistants, de Kooning “made a conscious decision to be less self-critical.” Tompkins says, “The paintings became less and less crowded, the fluid, undulating forms more clearly defined.” During this period, the artist worked frantically, turning out a painting a week. He would begin by sketching a few abstract forms, usually borrowed from one of his earlier works, and then would paint in and around them, reworking as he proceeded. According to Tompkins, “the late paintings have an airy lightness and a lyricism for which there is no precedent in a half century of the artist’s work.”

Many artists paint in different styles at different periods of their lives. What is uncanny about de Kooning is that although practically incapacitated by Alzheimer’s, he nevertheless continued to paint until the age of ninety. How could it be that someone incapable of signing his name, who was unable to function in the most basic aspects of living, was able to paint in a manner some compare to the late style of Matisse’s cut-paper masterpieces? Tompkins quotes the neurologist Oliver Sacks, who says he has seen “all sorts of skills (including artistic ones) preserved or largely preserved, even in advanced stages of dementing diseases such as Alzheimer’s...Style, neurologically, is the deepest part of one’s being, and may be preserved, almost to the last, in a dementia.”

I have always felt that creativity and the source of life are of a piece, and that when we are able to understand one, we will also understand the other. The other day, my granddaughters and I were working on a few pieces of sculpture. When we finished, there stood a little man and his dog, looking as alive as we did. It was uncanny. Out of

nothing, a lump of clay, there now was something. It reminded me of the feeling I had on first seeing Zane as a newborn child. There was nothing there, and then all of a sudden, there was a person!

Out of nothing, the gases in the universe became the planets and the stars. Out of nothing comes something. That is the similarity between life and creativity. In one's creative self reposes the essence of being, a mini-example of the origin of life. No wonder creative people tend to live a long time. De Kooning was on to this similarity. In one of his last interviews, he said, "You have to keep on the very edge of something, all the time, or the picture dies." The person dies too, Mr. de Kooning.

May 30

Why am I even thinking about death? Even the bible says, "A living dog is better than a dead lion²²." Like Edna St. Vincent Millay²³, I am interested only in living:

Life must go on,
And the dead forgotten;
Life must go on,
Though good men die;
Ann, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on;
I forget just why.

My seven-year-old granddaughter Mia apparently is also worried about my approaching demise. Reading a questionnaire which asked the respondent to check the proper age box, Mia said sadly, "You're in the last box of life, Nana."

Jungian psychoanalyst Lisl Goodman²⁴ suggests a technique for living comfortably and intimately with death that interests me. She makes a number of daring recommendations, including that we reckon our age by counting not from birth onward but from death backward, based on how much longer we can reasonably expect to live. Oh goody, I quipped to the mourning dove keening in my garden. Since I'm planning to live to be one hundred, this means I am only thirty years old.

I often think about Philip Kane, the handsome, forty-year-old blond and blue-eyed son of Kendall, who was the most recent of my intimate friends to die. Although Philip was terminally ill with cancer, he refused to give up. He hadn't slept or eaten for weeks, or expelled waste products. His massive stomach bulged through the bedclothes. Finally, Philip decided to give in to the inevitable. He kissed his wife and children goodbye and lay back in his bed to die. He lay there a long moment. Nothing happened. He tried some more. Still nothing happened. A peculiar expression dented his bloated face.

"What's wrong, dearest?" his wife asked.

"I never died before," Philip replied. "I don't know how to do it."

Bertram, my friend Anna's husband, feels equally rejecting of death. His pal of a lifetime died recently. Thinking, no doubt, of his flourishing chiropractic practice, his wife, children and grandchildren, Bert declared, "Not me! I'm not going to die and give up all this!"

Arnold Hutchnecker, Richard Nixon's psychoanalyst, said, "The strong and mighty fear death most²⁵."

These men must be among the strong of the earth, I mused this morning as I brushed my teeth and squinted in the mirror at my curly (dyed) dark brown hair cut around my only slightly crinkled face, and well-exercised figure which has not changed much except to improve for thirty years. (I started exercising at age forty.) I've spent more than half a century becoming my own person, developing the talents I was born with, trying to overcome my shortcomings, broadening and curtailing my appetites, learning to live with disappointment and sorrow, standing with some dignity in the closed world of men, and transcending the animal condition.

I am no longer driven by uncontrollable urges or stamped out of any mold. I have learned to be a good enough daughter, wife, friend, lover, mother, scholar, and writer. It has taken me seventy years to fashion all this, and now it seems I am fit only as a target for the Grim Reaper. Isn't this the real despair of the human condition, that whatever our value to humankind we must go the way of the ant and the

fruit fly? Moliere said it: "Life is a play with a badly written third act."

Psychoanalyst Sam Atkin²⁶ had a philosophy similar to Broyard's, which kept him joyous and life-seeking to the moment of death at the end of his ninetieth year. Despite being severely ill with Parkinson's disease and often unable to speak or sit upright, he considered his life "a journey into the creation of the ever new phases of existence." Incredibly, he was able to continue with his practice and writing his papers, and through his own capacity to overcome defeat and despair, teach his patients to do the same.

I greatly admire these creative men, but fear I cannot emulate their heroic stance. I am too angry at the idea of falling off the horse at what feels to me like midstream. Everyone tells me I am the picture of health, and look at least fifteen years younger than my age. Recently I went to my Scandinavian physician with various minor complaints. The youthful doctor didn't take them seriously. "You are a lucky woman," he said. "In Sweden nobody your age runs two miles a day or has all their teeth."

"Remind me never to visit Sweden!" I replied.

June 6

A prescient dream warned me I had better prepare myself for what lay ahead.

The dream pictured a cat, with beautiful multi-stripped fur of orange and brown, who playfully leaped onto my lap. A voice announced that the creature will need blood transfusions one day, and should prepare for that eventuality by putting aside blood now.

Much as I fight the knowledge, a spasm in my intestines insists that the message in the dream is authentic, and I should begin to build all possible assets, physical, financial, social, and emotional, as a bulwark against the problems old age almost certainly will bring.

Little things are beginning to go awry. My balance is not what it used to be. (I bought a book about improving balance in old age, but I keep forgetting to read it.) My teeth are beginning to chip and crack-last year I needed two new caps. I who was once known for my "iron" stomach have

joined that battalion of people I formerly considered pitiful who can't eat fats and can't eat sweets and can't eat this and that because it is "hard to digest." In discussing his digestive problems, my friend Sol Dorman said that people who ride a bicycle don't produce as much gas. Standing in line in a packed theatre lobby, Sol called out, "Somebody in here hasn't been riding a bicycle." I hope I won't have to do a lot more bicycle riding.

My "perfect" heart has begun to palpitate a bit now and then. I say, "Stop that, heart! I won't have it!" Sometimes it actually does. But it has never needed instruction before.

My back goes out more than it used to, and I have recently become a regular visitor to the chiropractor. The calcium level in my bones is slowly dropping, and medication has been prescribed to prevent osteoporosis. My cholesterol is too high, and I have begun treatment or that, too. My list of medications is expanding geometrically every year. But as the expression goes, it's better than the alternative. I feel like the Mexican American described by Studs Terkel²⁷, whose buddy was sad that his friend needed to walk with a cane. The lame man replied, "It beats not walking at all." True. Nevertheless, Mr. Shakespeare had it right when he said, "From hour to hour we ripe and ripe, from hour to hour we rot and rot, and thereby hangs a tale²⁸."

June 8

When I was five years old I saw a movie called *Just Imagine*. It pictured a future in which people swallowed pills dispensed by a slot machine, instead of eating food. What with calcium, amino acids, vitamin A, B's, C, D, zinc, selenium, pantothenic acid, PABA, and beta-carotene, *Just Imagine* is no longer a fantasy: the future is now.

Fighting old age means waging a war on many fronts. There is the physical aspect, fought primarily by diet. What is important is not just what you eat, but what you don't eat: Gone forever are the noble treats of yesteryear, like ice cream, cake, and candy. In its place we are permitted soups, salads, and delicious treats like cauliflower and broccoli. To

my mind, the best thing the first President Bush ever said was, "I am President of the United States, and if I don't want to eat broccoli, I don't have to!" In one prison, where inmates in solitary confinement need further discipline, their diet is changed. All sugar, salt, fats, and meats are removed from their menu. When I read that, I thought, just like my Pritikin diet! (I'm only kidding-it really isn't so bad.)

Of course we must exercise daily. Swimming, running, or riding my exercycle for at least a half hour has become as automatic as brushing my teeth. But it is not enough just to exercise. My daughter, the nutritionist, says I cannot merely swim; I must also run and lift weights for the ultimate good of my bone density. When my doctor at Pritikin watched me swimming, he said, "You swim like a mermaid, but you must go faster to raise your heart rate." When I told my friend Arlene Richards what the doctor had said, she commented, "You won't live longer; it will just seem that way!"

We must have a physical examination every six months, with annual flu shots a necessity after sixty-five, not to mention the gynecologist, the eye, ear and nose specialist, the audiologist, and the ophthalmologist we oldsters are supporting so nicely.

For each part of the body there must be a guardian: Mevacor to keep down cholesterol, aspirin to guard against strokes and heart disease, calcium supplements and Fosamax to avoid osteoporosis, and now it is even suggested that Ibuprofen can help stave off Alzheimer's Disease.

Then there is one's emotional health, which is developed through lifelong study of the self, if we are fortunate enough to be able to skip the therapists and counselors. If one knows oneself, it is easier to follow the rest of the health regime. And let us not forget the spiritual self, for those so inclined. And the philosophical aspect: what cannot be changed must be accepted. And there are the unexpected guerilla fighters that can fire pot shots at any time: to avoid them one must go through the yearly terrors of mammograms and pap tests. And of course the usual biannual trip to the dentist, the more numerous teeth cleanings necessitated by the natural yellowing of teeth that

have been around for almost three quarters of a century, and the ever more frequent flossing demanded by the aging process. And the chiropractor for the back, of course, along with the daily exercises for back strengthening.

Then there are the little irritants like eye drops and anti-histamines for allergies, the requisite protein base for one's nails, less they split and crack, and the fact that one's calluses must be trimmed and foot fungus fought. We need Retin-A to avoid wrinkles (hah!), skin moisturizer for the face, hair moisturizer for the hair, lotion for the body, a different sort for the hands, etc., etc., etc. And we won't even begin to discuss what is necessary to sustain the health and regularity of the digestive system. No wonder people retire. We haven't time to do anything but take care of our health. And that's for a well person! I understand what my friend's husband meant when he said his wife looked as good as ever; it is just that maintenance takes longer. I didn't realize how much time and money I spend on preservation of my health and appearance until I began to catalog this list.

I had my hearing checked recently, and the otolaryngologist said it was fine.

"But it is not as good as it used to be," I protested.

"It's not supposed to be," he laughed.

One night while I was reading Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death*²⁹, the lights seemed dim.

"Uh oh," I said aloud, "It's happening! I knew it. My vision is beginning to go!"

Then the lights flickered and went back on full force. It was only a power outage. But I wasn't too relieved. It'll happen sooner or later.

If anything is going to go wrong, I want advance notice. When I was forty-seven years old, I couldn't find the eye of the needle. I, who always had twenty\twenty vision, panicked. I'll bet I have Glaucoma, I thought. I went immediately to an ophthalmologist, who examined my eyes and said I was merely suffering from presbyopia, or old age vision.

"Didn't anyone tell you that people in their forties become far-sighted?" he asked.

No, nobody had. I want to make good and sure that kind of surprise doesn't slip up on me again. I feel like a friend who developed a severe case of arthritis and chastised her mother: "Why didn't you tell me getting old was like this?" But then I probably wouldn't have listened if anyone *had* told me. I remember my father saying, "It's tough to get old!" Now, when it is too late, I regret not having asked him what he meant.

I now need an eye check-up twice a year. "Your vision is excellent," the ophthalmologist reassured me, "I just want to keep checking for cataracts and macular degeneration."

I sprinted to my *Merck's Manual*³⁰, where the disease is listed as Macular Degeneration of the Aged. The physician told me he was not worried about it. Nevertheless he gave me an Amsler Grid to reveal pigmentary or hemorrhagic disturbance in the macular region of my left eye.

According to Merck (p. 3223), "No medical therapy is effective." But all is not lost. It advises, "Patients should be informed they will not lose all sight."

Thank God for small favors! But such deterioration is a harbinger of worse to come, to say nothing of the final departure blueprinted for us all. How I hate that little speech the flight attendants give just before the plane lands, when they lecture on disembarking at your final destination! I don't know about my fellow passengers, but I have no intention of making the landing my final destination on earth.

I am convinced that airlines are insensitive to the feelings of their aging population. Evidence can be found in the receipt handed out by a well-known airline when I purchased a ticket recently to visit my daughter Janet. The voucher listed times and airports for the journey, etc. etc. Then, at the bottom of the slip, I was shocked to see a huge END.

Are the airlines trying to get rid of their Senior Citizens? Why not write "End of trip," or "Hope to see you again?"

Another expression I hate is killing time. Why would anyone want to, when it is so precious? There are so many

things to do. When I have a few minutes before a guest arrives, I listen to the news or read the second string mail I've put aside or do those little jobs like paying bills that I detest. I might even, God forbid, straighten up the house. I refuse to kill time. It is all we have.

And then there is "time is money". What an insult to humanity that one is! Time is life. Time is joy. Time is beauty. The one thing it is not is money.

This morning my bedroom was an ungodly mess. (The more I write, the less I clean.) Better tidy up, I told myself. It would be dreadful if you dropped dead, and people found you keeled over in the middle of this pigsty!

I know why I am so touchy about intimations of mortality. Everybody says "You look good for your age." But slowly, slowly, I am realizing that I have begun the downward slide that is the lot of all living species. I am beginning to glimpse my final destination, the END.

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In contrast to adolescence, where the sensation is like living in a house being constructed around one, old age feels as if one is occupying a home that is crumbling. Loss of height, weight gain, wrinkles, and a matronly spread of hip and thigh have altered the appearance of many of my friends. Some of them are unable to accept the fact that they have changed and thus are unable to correct their self image. As Faith Baldwin said, "Time is a dressmaker specializing in alterations." And the alterations rarely make for a better fit. Unlike my death-denying friends who remain in a fool's paradise each alteration leaves me breathless, as though I had been punched in the stomach.

Life is a world class boxer; no sooner have I recovered from one blow than it socks me another. Nevertheless, I prefer acknowledging painful facts rather than deceiving myself. At least that is what I tell myself. But looking at the naked truth is not always easy to do. I pity an acquaintance who was once a beautiful actress, but fails to realize she now is old, with sagging body and wrinkled face. This woman continues to flirt with men young enough to be her sons, who laugh behind her back and make dates with