

Healthy Aging

by

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Introduction

In 2002, I turned sixty. To help celebrate the occasion, friends organized a surprise party for me. After the festivities, there came a time to reflect, and when I did I came to an uncomfortable conclusion: I am closer to a time when my energy and powers will diminish, when I will lose my independence. Sixty is about the time that organs of the body begin gradually to fail, when the first hints of age-related disease begin to appear.

I hardly notice my aging on a day-to-day basis. When I look in the mirror in the morning, my face and white beard seem the same as the day before. But in photographs of myself from the 1970s, my beard is completely black. Looking at old photographs, I can't help but notice the physical change that has taken place in the course of thirty years. If I pay attention, I can notice other changes in my body: more aches and pains, less resilience in meeting the challenges of traveling, less vigor on occasion. And my memory may not be quite what it used to be. At the same time, despite the evidence, some part of me feels unchanged, in fact feels the same as when I was six. Almost everyone I talk to about aging reports similar experiences.

Some years ago I went to my twenty-fifth high school

reunion, the only school reunion I have ever attended. I had not seen most of my classmates since our graduation in 1959. A few of them were just as I remembered them, hardly changed at all, closely matching the images in my memory from a quarter century earlier. Others looked so aged that I could barely find points of coincidence with the pictures of them I had in my head. Why the difference? Why are some individuals so outwardly altered by time and others not? Or, in other words, why is there often a discrepancy between chronological age and biological age? I believe that the answer has to do with complex interactions of genetics and environment. I also believe, based on evidence I have reviewed, that we have control over some of those factors.

I do not subscribe to the view that aging suddenly overtakes us at some point in life, whether at sixty or some other milestone. I meet researchers, physicians, and others who believe that we are born, grow rapidly to maturity, and then coast along on a more or less comfortable plateau until we begin to decline. They call the period of decline *senescence* and consider it distinct and apart from what came before. If one looks only at the physical aspects of life, especially on the cellular level, this is a plausible view.

Cells from old organisms are different from cells of young ones, and observations about how they differ are the basis of biogerontology, the new science of the biology of aging. It is biogerontologists who promote the idea that aging is a programmed phase of decline following the plateau of maturity. In their view senescence is a discrete phase of cellular life coincident with loss of the cells' ability to divide. Senescent cells can still perform many of the functions of life, but they cannot reproduce. When researchers attempt to take cells from organisms, whether plants or animals, and grow them in test tubes, senescence soon overtakes the cul-

tures, cells stop dividing, and the cultures die. (In human life, senescence equates with the period of functional decline that precedes death, with the appearance of age-related diseases.)

By contrast, when cells turn malignant, they often become immune to senescence. Cell biologists refer to this change as *immortalization*. It is one of the most curious and important characteristics of cancer, and I will describe it in more detail later. It points to an equally curious and important possibility about aging, namely, that the mechanics of aging in cells may have evolved as defenses against cancer. Malignant growth may be immortal at the cellular level, but it has the potential to disable and kill entire organisms prematurely—that is, before they can pass on their genes and contribute to the survival and evolution of the species. For life to continue, prevention of malignant growth must be a priority.

In any case, I find it more useful to think of aging as a continuous and necessary process of change that begins with conception. In the words of an Eastern philosopher:

*The sun at noon is the sun declining;
The person born is the person dying.*

Wherever you are on the continuum of aging, it is important to learn about how to live in appropriate ways in order to maximize health and happiness. That should be an essential goal for all of us. What is appropriate when you are in your twenties is likely not to be appropriate when you are in your fifties.

But I also want to say at the start that I do not believe aging to be reversible. In taking that position, I realize I am taking a risk with those who want to hear that aging is

reversible, that we will all get to age magnificently. I could say those things, but I won't. If you want to read them, go into any bookstore and you will find no end of titles that are variations on those themes.

The hard fact is that aging will bring unpleasant changes, among them, aches and pains; decreased vigor, healing ability, sensory acuity, muscle tone, bone density, and sexual energy; memory deficits; wrinkles; loss of beauty, friends, family, and independence; increased reliance on doctors and pills; and social isolation. We can mask the outward signs of the process or try to keep up old routines in spite of it, but we cannot change the fact that we are all moving toward physical decline and death. The best we can do—and it is a lot—is to accept this inevitability and try to adapt to it, to be in the best health we can at any age. To my mind the denial of aging and the attempt to fight it are counterproductive, a failure to understand and accept an important aspect of our experience. That attitude is a major obstacle to aging gracefully. To age gracefully means to let nature take its course while doing everything in our power to delay the onset of age-related disease, or, in other words, to live as long and as well as possible, then have a rapid decline at the end of life.

There is a great deal of good news to report about aging too. Happily, most of us will not have to age the way our parents and grandparents did. We have access to better medical treatments for age-related diseases and better knowledge about how to prevent them. We eat better food. We have access to dietary supplements with beneficial effects on health, as well as to other products and services that can help us meet the challenges of growing older. We understand the importance of physical activity and the management of stress. As a result, we are already seeing more and more people in their seventies who look and act the way most people

used to look and act in their fifties and sixties, and more eighty-year-olds who are still active, healthy, and enjoying life.

Furthermore, I believe that aging brings rewards as well as challenges and losses. In this book I want to direct your attention to areas of our experience where “old” and “good” are synonymous. What is it that moves us in the presence of old trees? Why are old wines and whiskeys valued much more than young ones? What is it about aged cheeses that improves them so much? Why does age benefit some violins? Why are some antiques so valuable? I want you to consider the qualities in these things that age develops, then look for corresponding qualities in people.

Yes, aging can bring frailty and suffering, but it can also bring depth and richness of experience, complexity of being, serenity, wisdom, and its own kind of power and grace. I am not going to tell you that this or that diet, this or that exercise routine, or this or that herb will make you younger. I am going to try to convince you, however, that it is as desirable to accept aging as it is to take any other steps to improve your health throughout your life. To age gracefully requires that we stop denying the fact of aging and learn and practice what we have to do to keep our bodies and minds in good working order through *all* the phases of life.

The first step toward aging gracefully is to look at the process squarely and understand it for what it is.

a sense of humor. Soon the faked laughter turns into real laughter that goes on for fifteen to twenty minutes, leaving everyone feeling great. To be able to laugh at a bad experience—a loss, for instance—is the surest sign of healthy acceptance of it and adaptation to it.*

*One of the most affecting depictions I know of this potential of the mind is in an early (1957) film by Federico Fellini, *Le Notti di Cabiria* (*Nights of Cabiria*), about a young prostitute in Rome who truly loses everything, including her life savings and love. Though devastated by what life has handed her, she is nonetheless able to find a different way of interpreting her experience and in a triumphant last scene recover her sense of humor and self-worth. Giulietta Masina, who plays the prostitute brilliantly, expresses this shift of consciousness without uttering a word—so brilliantly that many viewers regard that last scene as the greatest three minutes in the history of cinema. It is a very powerful expression of the philosophy I urge you to apply in your own life.

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MIND III: MEMORY

“Age-related cognitive decline” is the medical term for one of the most terrifying changes that aging can bring: erosion of the mind. Recall that the MacArthur Foundation study identified maintenance of social and intellectual connectedness throughout life as a chief characteristic of successful aging, along with lifelong physical activity. If your intellect, memory, learning, use of language, concentration, and attention decline as you age, you will not be able to meet that requirement.

Of the many functions of mind, it is memory that seems most vulnerable with the passage of time. Age-related memory loss is the hallmark of what used to be called “senility” and now is more usually regarded as an early sign of Alzheimer’s disease, a dreaded ailment that attacks the essence of an individual, leaving the body intact while it destroys the mind. Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is the most common cause of dementia in older people. It is an age-related neurodegenerative disease of unknown cause, emphatically not a consequence of normal aging.

Of course, you will want to do whatever you can to prevent AD, especially because there is presently no cure and treatments for it are dismally inadequate. A larger issue is

what can be done to preserve mental function in general, to protect ourselves from age-related cognitive decline, which some authorities do regard as part of the normal aging process, much like declining muscle mass and bone mineral density.

All of the advice I have given you in Part Two of this book will help you keep your wits about you. I have told you that AD begins with inflammation in the brain, as do other neurodegenerative diseases, and that the stress hormone cortisol is toxic to nerve cells in the part of the brain (the hippocampus) concerned with memory. Oxidative stress also undermines brain function. The anti-inflammatory diet described earlier, selected supplements, physical activity, proper rest and sleep, and neutralization of stress all work in different ways to protect the brain and mind. Another common cause of dementia is cardiovascular disease, which can deprive areas of the brain of blood supply. If you follow the recommendations in these chapters, you can reduce that risk as well.

Two factors that offer further protection against age-related cognitive decline deserve more comment. They are education and nicotine.

The more education you have, the less likely you are to develop AD or to experience age-related cognitive decline; if you do get them, they will appear later in life than in less educated people. Education thus compresses brain/mind morbidity. The reason for this seems to have to do with "neural redundancy," the total of extra connections between nerve cells in the brain.

The central nervous system is highly plastic. Its structure and function are always in dynamic flux, responding to changing needs and stimuli. Learning causes structural changes in the neural network, in how individual neurons

connect to other neurons. The more learning you have had, the more connections you have in your brain, and many of these connections are redundant; that is, they are extraneous and duplicative but add to the richness and plasticity of the whole. A practical consequence is that more of such a network can be lost or damaged without loss of function, so that if some degenerative process does occur, it will take longer for it to produce symptoms of cognitive decline or dementia.

Nicotine affects brain chemistry in several ways that protect against both AD and Parkinson's disease. Some research suggests that smokers are at half the risk of nonsmokers for developing AD. The problem is that inhaled nicotine is highly addictive and has other, damaging effects on health in general and brain health in particular. It is a powerful constrictor of arteries, for example, reducing blood flow to the brain and other organs. And in cigarette smoke it comes along with a host of noxious chemicals that greatly increase oxidative stress. Research also clearly demonstrates that heavy smokers are at much greater risk for developing cognitive impairment earlier in life than nonsmokers, perhaps as early as age fifty.

What are we to make of this paradox? Certainly, no one should take up smoking for health reasons, and no one, I hope, would argue for health benefits of moderate smoking, as many legitimately do for the health benefits of moderate alcohol consumption. You should know, however, that pharmaceutical researchers are looking for less toxic analogs of nicotine that could be used for both the prevention and treatment of neurodegenerative diseases. Also, these observations about nicotine raise a more general question: are other natural products available that might stave off age-related cognitive decline?

You will find extravagant claims of this sort made for many products in health-food stores, on the Internet, and in antiaging books. In fact, there is a whole class of so-called smart drugs that have been popular for several decades. Some are prescription drugs, some are pharmaceuticals available abroad, and many are dietary supplements supposed to increase levels of neurotransmitters in the brain. Most are safe, but evidence for their efficacy is scant. I will mention three of the more promising ones here, an herbal remedy and two supplements.

Ginkgo, an extract of the leaves of the ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba*), is a well-studied botanical remedy that increases blood flow to the head and has been shown to slow the progression of dementia in early-onset AD. It has a reputation as a memory-enhancing agent—some students even take it before exams—but I believe it is useful only in people with impaired circulation to the brain (as a result of atherosclerosis, for example), and, in any case, it takes six to eight weeks of continuous use to produce an effect. You can get standardized extracts of ginkgo in any health-food store. (They should contain 24 percent ginkgo flavone glycosides and 6 percent terpene lactones; the dose is 60 to 120 milligrams twice a day with food.) Ginkgo has low toxicity. It may cause mild stomach irritation and may have some anti-clotting effect, which suggests caution in using it together with prescribed blood-thinning medication.

I mentioned acetyl-L-carnitine (also called ALC or ALCAR), an amino acid derivative, in an earlier discussion. It is one of the two components of the rejuvenating formula that Bruce Ames developed and studied in rats. A typical statement from literature promoting sales of ALC products is “Acetyl-L-carnitine easily crosses the blood-brain barrier and its potential role in protecting neurological function is clear.” In fact, clinical studies of this compound are few,

and evidence from them is mixed. An objective group, the Alzheimer Research Forum, says: “There is some evidence of a modest effect of ALCAR on younger-onset AD patients [but] the evidence of ALCAR’s efficacy is not very substantial or convincing. Moreover, some evidence suggests that it actually hastens the cognitive decline in some older-onset AD patients.” Many people are taking ALC as a cognitive enhancer. The dose is 500 to 1,000 milligrams twice a day on an empty stomach. ALC is nontoxic, but this is an expensive regimen.

Phosphatidyl serine, or PS, is a naturally occurring lipid that is a component of cell membranes. It is considered a brain cell nutrient, and human studies using PS supplementation have reported positive effects on memory and concentration. PS may improve cognitive function in normal adults and may help reverse age-related cognitive decline. The supplement form, derived from soybeans, is readily available, though, again, not cheap. The starting dose is 100 milligrams two or three times a day; if this produces benefits after a month or more, it may be possible to go on a lower maintenance dose. PS is nontoxic, and of these three natural products it is the one I would try first.

I would not, however, rely on supplements to preserve your memory and other aspects of mental function as you age. What I would do, in addition to following all of the general lifestyle advice I have given you, is to go back to the protective effect of education and try to identify the particular kinds of learning that keep your brain and mind resilient. I meet many people who are very conscientious about physical activity. They give their bodies workouts, but they do not consider ways of working out their minds. “Use it or lose it” does not apply just to muscles; it is equally true of brain functions.

There is actually a trademarked system called Brain Gym

that claims to develop neural pathways, facilitate learning, and improve memory and concentration, but it uses physical exercises to do so. And there are many books, games, and interactive computer programs that claim to do the same, for both children and grown-ups. (Someone recently sent me a board game called GinkGo! that is supposed “to stimulate and activate the memory centers of the brain.”) I have often recommended card games and word puzzles to people interested in exercising their cognitive functions.

But as I've thought more about it, I've realized that there is a particular cognitive experience that gives the most essential kind of mental workout. You can get it in various ways. I will discuss two of them: learning to use a new computer operating system and learning a foreign language.

If you use a computer, you surely know the particular kind of frustration associated with switching to a new operating system. (If you do not use a computer, think of your frustration in trying to learn.) It is maddening. Just when you had everything down and were used to the commands and formats on your screen, everything is different. You want it back the way it was. It is a real effort to make the change. It gives you a headache, causes fatigue. That feeling—the frustration, the headache, the fatigue—is exactly the kind of mental challenge that forces the neural network in the brain to change, to make more connections, to stay flexible and young. It is just like the inertia of the physical body that does not want to be worked out but is later grateful for it.

Getting used to a new computer operating system keeps you in that state for a relatively short time, usually a matter of days. Learning to use a computer if you have never used one is going to keep you there for a much longer time. It is a perfect mental challenge for older people.

At this moment in our society, there is a generational divide between the computer literate and computer illiterate. Most everyone under age sixty knows how to use one; many people over sixty do not. Among people in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, facility with computers is not so common. This is too bad for many reasons, chief among them that e-mail and the Internet provide wonderful opportunities for social and intellectual connections to people who may be physically unable to get out and about as much as they did earlier in life. Obviously, this situation will be quite different thirty years from now.

When my mother was in her mid-eighties, I tried hard to get her to use e-mail. I bought her several different devices that I thought would be easy for her to learn. I arranged for her to be tutored and had friends stop by to help whenever possible. All efforts failed. She had a mental block about that kind of technology that she could not surmount, and, eventually, she draped a decorative cloth over the computer, an announcement to me and her friends that she was done with it forever. I wish I had made the effort to train her earlier, because I know it would have enhanced her life and been good for her brain.

Try to think of kinds of learning that create that kind of intense frustration for you. Then just make yourself do them. You don't have to succeed; it is the effort that increases brain plasticity and flexibility.

This is why learning another language may be a perfect challenge for people at any age. It is an ongoing, open-ended commitment that keeps you in a continuous state of mental workout, both frustrating and rewarding. There is even fascinating research showing a direct link between bilingualism and improved brain function. We know that children raised in a bilingual environment acquire language skills more

slowly than their monolingual counterparts but end up with greater mental proficiency. A recent study reports that bilingual subjects, both young and old, have faster reaction times and are better able to screen out distracting information than subjects who speak only one language. The researchers suggest that the same brain processes involved in using two languages are needed to stay focused and manage attention while ignoring irrelevant information, a facility called "fluid intelligence." Fluid intelligence is one of the first aspects of brain function to suffer in age-related cognitive decline. Therefore, proficiency at two languages ought to be protective—more so, I think, than any so-called smart drugs or supplements.

I was not exposed to a second language until I took German in high school—four years of old-fashioned language instruction that I found very hard but that allowed me to become almost fluent in that language when I spent time in Berlin during a year of travel between high school and college. Much later, I learned Spanish fairly quickly, not by studying it in school, but simply by living in a Mexican village where I was forced to speak it. I found that as I was doing so, a lot of my high school German came back, as if some language-processing center in my brain were being exercised. I am fluent in Spanish and am now determined to learn Japanese. I already have a large vocabulary and a good accent as a result of making many trips to Japan. I am confident that I would speak it passably after living there for just a couple of months and not spending time with English speakers.

By the way, I do not regard learning another language as an intellectual feat. The only talents required are the abilities to hear and to imitate sounds. After all, infants learn to speak without developed intellects and without the use of

grammar books. Motivation to acquire language is essential. Infants are highly motivated, as are adults who place themselves in situations where they have to understand and make themselves understood.

To keep your brain young and protect yourself from age-related cognitive decline, learn to use a computer if you do not now use one, change your operating system frequently, and learn another language. By the way, I am not at all convinced that cognitive decline is an inevitable consequence of aging. Rather, I think most people simply do not give themselves the kinds of mental challenges that brains need to retain their functionality.

SPIRIT I: UNCHANGING ESSENCE

Here is an experience I have often had. I meet someone I once knew very well—say, a college friend—but have not seen in twenty years or more. This is not one of those people who looks just the same as I remember them. In fact, the changes that time has made are drastic, so great that I can barely find any resemblance between the mental picture I carried of that person and present reality. So great is the shock that social interaction is awkward. But after a few minutes, as we converse and begin to relax, I gradually adjust to the change and can again identify the person in front of me with the memory. I begin to see through the changed appearance to some unchanged essence.

This parallels another experience, one that I cited in the introduction and that I believe everyone has. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, some part of me feels the same as it always has since my earliest memories of childhood. Obviously, that is not my body, which now looks and feels different from what it was ten years ago, let alone fifty. Nor can it be my mind, which has learned so much and stored so much experience in more than half a century. I call it the unchanging essence: that part of the self that is unaffected by time. But what I'm really pointing to is spirit, the non-physical core of our being.

One of the tenets of the integrative medicine that I practice is that health and illness involve more than the physical body; good medicine must address whole persons, meaning bodies, minds, and spirits. When I have lectured on this topic in Japan, I have encountered a problem with translators. The usual translation of the English word “spirit” leads Japanese audiences to think I'm talking about ghosts, about ancestor worship and spirit possession. I'm not, of course. I'm just trying to call attention to our unchanging essence.

It is clear, however, that a great many people here as well as in Japan accord that concept no more reality than they do ghosts. If you are a materialist, if you believe that all that is real is that which can be perceived by the senses, then you will have trouble following what I have to say in this chapter and the next. Read them anyway. And then I hope you will test out the ideas in them against your own experience. They can be very useful, I believe, in coming to terms with the process of aging.

Nonmaterial reality is often the province of religion and faith. If you believe in something you cannot perceive with the senses, you will have to take it on faith. To many, faith is simply unfounded belief, belief in the absence of evidence, and that is anathema to the scientific mind. There is a great movement toward “evidence-based medicine” today, an attempt to weed out ideas and practices not supported by the kind of evidence that doctors like best: results of randomized controlled trials. This way of thinking discounts the evidence of experience. I maintain that it is possible to look at the world scientifically and also to be aware of non-material reality, and I consider it important for both doctors and patients to know how to assess spiritual health.

There is a minor trend in medical education today to offer some instruction in this area. More often than not, it is

offered as an elective rather than a required subject, and often it is linked to teaching about death and dying. At its best, it makes medical students aware of this other dimension of human life and gives them tools to help patients know their strengths and weaknesses, whether or not they have life-threatening illnesses.

Kathleen Dowling Singh, a transpersonal psychologist and former hospice worker, has written of the value of doing a spiritual assessment or inventory:

It is not too late to take stock of our lives, even in the last weeks and days of terminal illness. And for those of us in the midst of life, in the apparent safety and security of our health, it is not too early. No matter how much time we have left to live, the answers to the following questions, voiced in the quiet honesty of our own hearts, provide direction to the rest of our living.

Who have I been all this time?

How have I used my gift of a human life?

What do I need to “clear up” or “let go of” in order to be more peaceful?

What gives my life meaning?

For what am I grateful?

What have I learned of truth and how truthfully have I learned to live?

What have I learned of love and how well have I learned to love?

What have I learned about tenderness, vulnerability, intimacy, and communion?

What have I learned about courage, strength, power, and faith?

What have I learned of the human condition and how great is my compassion?

How am I handling my suffering?

How can I best share what I've learned?

What helps me open my heart and empty my mind and experience the presence of Spirit?

What will give me strength as I die? What is my relationship with that which will give me strength as I die?

If I remembered that my breaths were numbered, what would be my relationship to this breath right now?

Who am I?

Asking and answering such questions can help you connect with the core of your being and through it become more connected to others, to nature, and to higher consciousness.

Change is universal. Everything changes—everything we perceive, that is, including our thoughts, which are constantly arising, persisting for a while, and fading away. At the same time, some essence of everything is unchanging. Meditating on this paradoxical nature of reality can profoundly affect how we view ourselves and how we think

about aging and death. It can be a stimulus to spiritual awakening and development, whether or not you adhere to any religion.

The best example I can give of what I mean is a story passed down through 2,500 years of history. It is the beginning of the legend of the Buddha's enlightenment, an archetypal account of an epic hero. As Joseph Campbell wrote in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the hero's journey begins with a call to adventure, an event that sparks the awakening of the self. Here is Campbell's retelling of the story:

The young prince Gautama Sakyamuni, the Future Buddha, had been protected by his father from all knowledge of age, sickness, death, or monkhood, lest he should be moved to thoughts of life renunciation; for it had been prophesied at his birth that he was to become either a world emperor or a Buddha. The king—prejudiced in favor of the royal vocation—provided his son with three palaces and forty thousand dancing girls to keep his mind attached to the world. But these only served to advance the inevitable; for while still relatively young, the youth exhausted for himself the fields of fleshly joy and became ripe for the other experience. The moment he was ready, the proper heralds automatically appeared.

Now on a certain day the Future Buddha wished to go to the park, and told his charioteer to make ready the chariot. Accordingly, the man brought out a sumptuous and elegant chariot, and, adorning it richly, he harnessed it to four state horses of the Sindhava breed, as white as the petals of the lotus, and announced to the Future Buddha that everything was ready. And the Future Buddha mounted the chariot, which was like a palace of the gods, and proceeded toward the park.

"The time for the enlightenment of the prince Sidhartha draweth nigh," thought the gods; "we must show him a sign": and they changed one of their number into a decrepit old man, broken-toothed, gray-haired, crooked and bent of body, leaning on a staff, and trembling, and showed him to the Future Buddha, but so that only he and the charioteer saw him.

Then said the Future Buddha to the charioteer, "Friend, pray who is this man? Even his hair is not like that of other men." And when he heard the answer, he said, "Shame on birth, since to every one that is born old age must come." And agitated in heart, he thereupon returned and ascended his palace.

"Why has my son returned so quickly?" asked the king.

"Sire, he has seen an old man," was the reply; "and because he has seen an old man, he is about to retire from the world."

Three more messengers continue the call. On subsequent excursions, the prince sees a sick man, a dead man, and a monk, and the effect of these four encounters is to drive him from the protected environment of the palace to renounce worldly life and seek enlightenment. The spiritual awakening of the Future Buddha began with his awareness of aging, with the realization that life is not static but ever changing and that the end result of that change is senescence and decay.

The story hints at a potential of aging seldom acknowledged: contemplation of it can catalyze the awakening of the self and propel spiritual growth and development. One way it does so is by forcing us to consider what aspect of the self does not change, even as time alters our bodies and minds. Furthermore, awareness of aging and mortality can inspire

us to engage more with life, to live it to the fullest, and to fulfill our potential for accomplishment. My personal reflection is that as I have advanced in age, I have become more productive, more focused, and more concerned with what I will be leaving behind as a legacy. By the way, it is because of this potential that I take the position I have, counseling against the denial of aging.

In *8 Weeks to Optimum Health*, I wrote out week-by-week suggestions for making changes in lifestyle that address all three components of human beings: the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. Here, at the risk of repeating myself, are some of the recommendations I made for enhancing spiritual health and well-being:

- Pay attention to your breath. Many cultures identify breath with spirit, seeing the breath cycle as the movement of spirit in the physical body. Practicing keeping your attention on the breath without trying to influence it is a way of increasing awareness of your nonphysical essence. (It is also much safer than focusing your attention on thoughts and images, which are often sources of negative emotions.) Finally, breath is the link to the basic life energy that circulates through us—what the Chinese call *qi* (chi) and yogis *prana*—and connects us to the source of universal energy. Simply minding the breath is a way of expanding consciousness beyond the ego, of experiencing transcendence.
- Connect with nature. You can do this by walking or sitting in a natural setting; a city park will do just fine. Allow yourself to slow down, drop your usual routines, and just absorb the influence of the place.
- Make a list of people in your life in whose company you feel more alive, happy, and optimistic. Make an effort to

spend more time with them. Our spiritual selves resonate with others, and that connection is healing.

- Bring flowers into your home and enjoy their beauty.
- Listen to music that you find inspirational and uplifting.
- Admire a work of art that raises your spirits: a painting, sculpture, or work of architecture.
- Reach out and try to resume connection with someone from whom you are estranged; practice forgiveness.
- Do some sort of service work. Give some of your time and energy to help others. The possibilities are endless but do not include just writing a check to charity.

When you read this list, you might not think these are spiritual activities. That might be due to the common confusion of spirituality with religion in our culture. Religious practices, like prayer and other rituals, may have spiritual purpose, but spiritual practices need not have anything to do with religion. The suggestions above are intended to help you become more aware of your spiritual self. Any activity that makes you feel more alive, more connected to others and to nature, less isolated, more comfortable with change, is beneficial. It will enhance your physical and mental health. It will help you accept the fact of your aging. It will help you to age gracefully.