

HOW TO LIVE

A SEARCH
FOR WISDOM FROM
OLD PEOPLE

(While They Are Still on This Earth)

HENRY ALFORD

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PART ONE

It is commonly said—but I believe it anyway—that old people are wise. I don't mean that anyone who hits the age of seventy or so suddenly starts speaking in haiku or engaging in the kind of hyperextended, meaning-drenched eye contact that makes you look nervously down at the floor in search of a dog to pet.

No. Rather, I think that the older we get, the more life experiences we are likely to have—and the more experiences we have, the greater the body of information we have to work from. I happen to think that there are some very wise thirty-year-olds out there in the world, too—but the chances of an eighty-year-old's knowing something important about life are much greater.

We humans are one of the few species with an average life span that extends beyond the age at which we can procreate.

Why is this?

Maybe it's because old folks have something else to offer.

EVERY YEAR OR SO, I have an epiphany about some aspect of life. Usually, these insights are small. Take, for instance, the one I had a few years back, after buying a lot of food for a breakfast I was making for some friends. Having carefully selected an assortment of bagels, which I then gingerly placed into a brown paper bag, I was struck, two hours later, by a very, very, very profound realization: a bag of assorted bagels with one garlic bagel in it is a bag of garlic bagels.

But sometimes my insights are larger. Sometimes they reveal to me truisms about life or people and compel me to sit up and take notice. (And “truisms about life or people” is, in this instance, what I'm talking about when I say “wisdom.” I'm not talking about quantum theory or knowledge comprehensible only by experts.) When this knowledge is of a universal nature, it almost unavoidably verges on being clichéd—take my realization, after a long and difficult friendship with a strikingly candid friend whose bald assertions often hurt my and others' feelings, that our greatest strengths (her candor) are usually our greatest liabilities (her candor).

When this knowledge is of a more personal nature, it can hit you with all the subtlety of a gong—like my discovery, once I'd determined that neither my crush-inducing cinema-studies professor nor my charismatic boss at my first job nor the attractive young intern I trained at that job reciprocated my affections, that most crushes are narcissistic. Their engine is flattery.

BUT THERE'S ANOTHER KIND OF WISDOM, too—the ability to predict the consequences of certain actions. This kind of knowledge is even more hard-won, forged as it is in the crucible of failure. And, unlike truisms about life and people, which are sometimes articulated by the young, the ability to predict consequences is almost necessarily a function of advanced years: to know that A, when followed by B leads to C, is to have seen A and B in some rather compromised situations, very possibly at 2:00 a.m. in their underpants, in front of the kitchen sink.

This ability to predict consequences does not operate without effort. Sherwin Nuland, the clinical

professor of surgery at Yale who wrote *How We Die*, writes in *The Art of Aging*, “Man is the only animal to have been granted the ability to continue developing during the later periods of life, and much of this depends on seeing oneself as the kind of person who can overcome the tendency to do otherwise.”

As songwriter Eubie Blake, who lived to ninety-six, said, “If I’d known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself.”

FOLLOWING MY LINE OF LOGIC about aging and insights, you might think that I believe that a typical ninety-year-old is twice as wise as a typical forty-five-year-old. I don’t. I don’t because we humans tend to forget things. We must account for attrition—valuable information is slipping through the cracks in the wall and seeping into the bed linens and evaporating into the current Boca Raton weather system.

But maybe I can catch and curate some of it before it slips off into the night.

WISDOM IS SLIPPERY. It comes in many forms and guises. Sometimes it is intermingled with a certain amount of *unwisdom*.

But however difficult wisdom can be to pin down, one thing is certain: the curtains don’t come crashing down when you hit seventy. In fact, the years after “threescore and ten”—the decade that Psalms 90 tells us is the span of our lives because anything after eighty “is only labor and sorrow”—are a ripe time for realizations and breakthroughs. The reasons for this are varied. For some people, retirement finally gives them the time to contemplate their navels. Some come to conclusions as a result of their or others’ increasing proximity to the end. Cicero wrote in 44 B.C., “Since [nature] has fitly planned the other acts of life’s drama, it is not likely that she has neglected the final act as if she were a careless playwright.”

We tend to think of life after seventy—outside of medical ailments, of course—as being soft and muzzy and fairly static: lots of cardigan sweaters and an increasingly housebound devotion to a small irritable pet. But for many people, it’s anything but. Grandma Moses started painting in her seventies. Michelangelo finished sculpting the Rondanini Pietà when he was nearly ninety. Benjamin Franklin helped frame the U.S. Constitution at eighty-one; Golda Meir assumed leadership of Israel at seventy and Nelson Mandela assumed leadership of South Africa at seventy-six.

Others aren’t starting new projects or professions or life situations but are altering their involvement with professions or life situations they’ve been in for years—rethinking their marriage, changing how they write or paint, deciding never ever again to tolerate anyone who calls them “Dollface.” In 2006, *Newsweek* ran a story about how eighty-seven-year-old preacher Billy Graham, who’d spent most of his adult working life in the spotlight, had in his old age shifted his animus from partisan politics to the purely heavenly. The former political gadabout now refused to offer either an opinion on stem-cell research or counsel to world leaders. He told the magazine, “The older I get, the more important the eternal becomes to me personally.”

Whatever the realizations are that these older folks make—and whether these realizations apply only to themselves or have a more universal nature—it’s safe to say that these mental breakthroughs are not always easily won and that the paths that lead to them are sometimes full of misdirection. As with any creative process, there is often a period of doubt and mental thrashing.

Over the years, I’ve seen my mother, now eighty, grapple with questions about her life in ways

that seem specific to her age. I remember lying on a Caribbean beach with her two years ago when she said, “Let me talk about Will. I want to know what you think my obligations to him are.”

I’d taken her along with me on a glamorous travel-writing assignment, which had necessitated her leaving behind Will, whom she’d lived with for thirty-one years, twenty-three of them as his wife.

My mother and stepfather, it seems, had taken different approaches to aging. Mom was increasingly out of the house, more eager than ever to create a whirlwind of travel and painting classes and rug hooking and fun, while Will had grown increasingly morose and sedentary. He was still a voracious reader—Will has been known to polish off three books in a week—but he was increasingly bedroom bound. As my brother once put it, “Will sleeps fourteen hours a day. He’s like a male lion.”

I asked Mom if she felt guilty coming on the trip with me; she said no, Will had always been very supportive of her travels. But she worried that his life had become so small—semiretired, he’d resigned from the local historical committee and from the town board in the small central Massachusetts town they lived in. She said, “His only activity besides napping and reading and watching TV is going to get the mail.”

“Well,” I said, trying to put a nice spin on it, “at least his situation is self-created. It’s not like you’re running off to the Caribbean while he has a fatal disease.”

“True,” she said, reaching into her bag for some suntan lotion.

“Do you miss him?” I asked.

“Not really. Isn’t that awful?”

“Did you use to miss him when you traveled?”

“Yes. But I have a thick shell now.”

I pointed out, “He’s sort of gotten harder to love as he’s gotten older.”

“Yes,” she said. “And maybe my thick shell is my fear of losing him.”

The heart wants what it wants, especially in later life. But what if the heart hasn’t yet made up its mind?

THE FACT—or should I say, cliché—that old people are wise is not merely rooted in anecdotal evidence. There’s medical evidence, too. Until the 1970s or so, the mind was considered merely to be part of the brain and not part of one’s biological being. Recent studies in neuroscience, however, show that the brain has a powerful ability to influence its own aging. Nuland explains in *The Art of Aging* that “it is no longer enough to conceive of the mind as a function only of the brain; it must be thought of as influenced by the very factors that it has long been recognized to influence, namely the body and our perception of the environment in which we find ourselves.” Although we experience a 5 percent or so decrease in brain weight and volume every decade after we reach forty, the actual number of brain cells in healthy older people decreases only marginally. From a neurological point of view, it takes us longer to learn things as we grow older and older, and our creative thinking, short-term memory, and problem-solving abilities dwindle, but, Nuland writes, “the ability to assimilate information and to learn from the experience does not change appreciably.”

And according to some, that ability actually improves. In his book *The Wisdom Paradox*, Elkhonon Goldberg, a clinical professor of neurology at the New York University School of Medicine, writes that, as we age, we get better and better at pattern recognition. According to Goldberg, “we accumulate an increasing number of cognitive templates,” so that “decision-making takes the form of pattern recognition rather than of problem-solving.”

The basis of this pattern recognition is so-called generic memories. Goldberg gives an example:

say you're unsuccessfully trying to come up with someone's name. But then, as soon as the person walks into the room, you suddenly remember it. In order for this to happen, your brain must have housed a network that contained both a visual component (the face) and an auditory component (the name). Goldberg writes, "Despite the fact that these two kinds of information inhabit very different cortical areas (the parietal lobe for facial information and the temporal lobe for name information) they are intertwined in a single attractor." He concludes, "This, in a nutshell, is the mechanism of generic memory."

Goldberg illustrates the importance and power of this decades-tested intuition in a very unusual way. He points to the various forms of brain disease evidenced in the leaders of the twentieth century—Reagan's Alzheimer's, Hitler's memory decline and Parkinson's, Stalin's and Lenin's multi-infarct diseases, Mao's ALS, Churchill's and Thatcher's series of strokes, Brezhnev's senility. "What allowed these remarkable personalities to prevail despite neurological decline," Goldberg writes, "was the rich, previously developed pattern-recognition facility, which enabled them to tackle a wide range of new situations, problems and challenges, as if they were familiar ones."

I'm no neurologist, but I can certainly attest to my own increased powers, even at the modest age of forty-five, of intuition. For instance, I've gotten much better over the years at immediately gauging which of the acquaintances I make will become longtime friends; and I now know that any movie trailer that features a lot of extreme close-ups of a fountain pen skritch along a piece of paper is an ad for a movie that is going to view *The Life of the Writer* with a kind of gauzy romanticism that will make me feel like I've crossed the Atlantic in a rowboat.

The paradox inherent in our increased ability to recognize patterns, of course, is that it occurs simultaneously with large amounts of memory loss. And it is this memory loss that I hope will give my quest a special urgency. If people are repositories of knowledge—the death of an old person, an African saying runs, is like the burning of a library—then I want a library card. I want borrowing privileges for the rest of my life.

As if this attitude weren't self-serving enough, there's an even more selfish element to my quest, too. Namely, I hope to get a preview of my own old age. Having three older siblings—the eldest, my sister Kendy, is thirteen years older than I—has been a boon to me because I have constantly been served examples of what lay, or did not lie, before me. Maybe my interactions with older folks will provide a similar forecast. If you know the advantages and disadvantages of a destination before you reach it, you can sometimes savor or extend the former and delay or thwart the latter. Leonardo da Vinci once wrote, "If you are mindful that old age has wisdom for its food, you will so exert yourself in youth, that your old age will not lack sustenance."

Like many people, I have a strange relationship with aging. When I started getting gray hairs at the age of forty-three, I spent two years carefully cutting them from my temples; but I'm also someone who would never choose to live in a new building and who will sometimes wash a new shirt ten or eleven times before wearing it for the first time. Why do I want everything around me to be old while laboring under the misconception that I myself am ever youthful? I see the changes that life visits upon me—I used to be svelte, but with age I have svelled—and wonder, Am I ready for what's ahead?

And so I have decided to interview and spend time with as many fascinating senior citizens as I can. I will ask them about their dawning realizations, and I will ask them what they've learned, and I will ask them, the next time I'm putting together a picnic, whether I should be putting the one garlic bagel in its own biocontainment bag.

A word about this book's title. I in no way mean to suggest by it that I myself am proposing a wa

for others to live. Rather, I am the listener here; it is my interviewees who I hope will be making all the recommendations.

Mark Twain once said, “Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you would rather have talked.”

And, oh, how some oldsters can *talk*.

"I'll sit here," she said, hunkering her tiny, slightly stooped body down onto her bed, which seemed to take up about a fourth of her bedroom. Pointing at a canister-style respirator on the floor, she explained, "I have this at night. It keeps your brain."

I could hear the emphysema in her voice.

I smiled awkwardly and sat in a chair near her desk.

"I'm so honored to meet you," I said, my genuine enthusiasm colored only by my surprise that a woman of her advanced years would, having only swapped three or four phone messages and e-mails with him, let a total stranger into her house and then bring him into her bedroom.

"Thank you, that's very kind," she said. "It's all age, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Anyone could have done what I did. But I was eighty-nine then . . ."

She directed her gaze somewhere in the mid-distance, momentarily lost in thought. When she reconnected her line of vision with mine, a look of Yankee defiance came across her face: "I'm ninety-seven now."

ON THE FIRST DAY of 1999, Doris Haddock, a.k.a. Granny D, set off on a fourteen-month, 3,200-mile walk across the country in support of campaign-finance reform. In addition to the emphysema she had contracted after fifty years of cigarette smoking, she had severe arthritis in her hands and knees. She wore hearing aids. She had dentures. She was not, in short, what you'd call Olympics-ready.

The passing of the McCain-Feingold bill and its limiting of lobby-based or "soft" campaign financing was her chief goal. In support of the cause, Granny D gave speeches and interviews as she traversed the nation, and she had people she met along the way sign a petition reading, "We, the people of the United States of America, beseech our leaders to enact, with all speed, campaign finance reform, eliminating 'soft money' from political campaigns."

But she had a more personal impetus for turning herself into a human stunt puppet, too. She hoped to console her grief over the death of her husband and her best friend, Elizabeth, who had died within a year of each other, six years earlier. She felt like she'd never properly grieved Elizabeth's death. Several times during her walk, she cried herself to sleep thinking about her friend.

GRANNY D dropped out of college during the Depression to support her family. She worked for twenty years at a factory in Manchester, New Hampshire, the town where many presidential campaigns bloom or wither. Then, in the early eighties, after she'd retired with her husband to a small town near Peterborough, Granny D nursed him through ten years of Alzheimer's. He passed away in 1993. They had been married for sixty-two years.

"Now that Elizabeth and my husband no longer needed me," Granny D writes in her eponymous book, published in 2001, "I had been worrying about how I might use what remained of my own time."

When the McCain-Feingold bill was first quashed in the Senate in 1995, Granny D got vocal. She

ranted to her Tuesday Morning Academy, a group of women who meet for conversation and activities. Telling them, “You can’t get elected unless you have a million dollars.” Granny D and some of the academy members put together a petition and sent it off to New Hampshire’s two senators; one replied with a form letter saying that spending money was a form of political speech, and the other didn’t respond at all.

“That wonderful feeling of belonging, of being a valued participant, was jerked away,” Granny D writes. “I fully understood: I was no longer a village elder at the council fire. I was a woman scorned.”

The sparks hit the tinder one February afternoon. Having just returned from her best friend’s funeral, Granny D told *Yankee* magazine, she was driving through the Florida Everglades with her son Jim, when they saw an old man walking on the side of the road, carrying only a paper bag. He was miles from any town or house. He leaned on his cane and blew his nose with his bare fingers. Granny D asked Jim, “What on earth do you suppose he’s doing?”

“Well, Ma, it looks like he is on the road,” Jim said.

“You mean, on the road like Willie Nelson?”

“Yes.”

“Or like Jack Kerouac?”

“Yes.”

Intrigued, Granny D asked Jim if he had ever wanted to walk across the country.

“Well, yes. But I have to earn a living,” he said. “And you’re too damn old.”

“Says who?”

Pity the man who underestimates the righteous.

TODAY, a brisk, sunshiny day in 2007, my first sighting of the activist-phenom took place in her driveway. When she’d heard my rental car crunching along the gravel, she came out and stood in front of her house. She was anxiously rubbing her thumb along the pad of her fingers.

Five feet tall and apple-cheeked, Granny D exudes a kind of New England–style wholesome fierceness; if you saw her standing behind the counter of a country store, you’d know that her shopkeeping ethics are scrupulous and that her chocolate-chip cookies have exactly the right amount of salt. She lives now with her son, Jim, in a dark, unfinished house on a heavily wooded road outside Peterborough, one of the towns Thornton Wilder made famous in *Our Town*. She lives on Social Security.

“I’ve been waiting five minutes!” she greeted me, not without irritation. I apologized. She gave me a flinty smile and said, “Never mind.” Taking my wrist in her hand, she led me into the house, to her bedroom. She was casually dressed in slacks but had a colorful silk scarf wrapped around her neck.

Once she’d sat on her bed, she pointed to the phone sitting on the desk to my right and said, “I’m waiting for an important call.” She was waiting for someone to sign his name to an op-ed piece about her new cause, voluntary public funding. Under voluntary public funding, or clean elections—now in operation in seven states and two cities—a politician must first collect a threshold sum of small contributions, to show community support (and dissuade carpetbaggers); then he gets a grant but forswears all private funding. New Hampshire was going to vote on instituting voluntary public funding four months hence. She told me, “My vision is that if a sufficient number of states accept it, critical mass will form. A great many of our laws are passed that way. If it passes and we’re federally funded”—here she switched to a theatrical stage whisper—“*we’ll change the world.*”

“Well, if your phone call comes in, please don’t not answer it on my account,” I said.

“Oh, I won’t,” she said, chuckling.

I’D GOTTEN IN TOUCH with Granny D after seeing a documentary about her called *Run Granny Run*, which is less about her walk than about one of her subsequent political efforts—her unsuccessful 2000 run for Senate against the popular New Hampshire senator Judd Gregg. The film captures the grueling rigors of campaigning, particularly for a candidate who refuses all PAC money. When two shots in the movie made my eyes well with tears—both are of the widow praying bedside; she is on her knees, wearing tube socks, and the high angle of the camera makes a banquet of her humility—I knew I wanted to try to talk to her. I got in touch with Ruth Meyers, one of Granny D’s squad of volunteers. Meyers explained that Granny D was currently extremely busy with her current mission: “A while back, Doris said, ‘There’s one more thing I’d like to see before I lay down my head. I’d like to see the public funding bill for campaign financing reform passed.’ ” And so began a whirlwind of personal appearances and activism.

Granny D’s bedroom was dark and filled with memorabilia; a three-legged German shepherd mix huddled comfortably on the floor next to Granny D’s respirator. I started, “You’ve said that the key to a happy life, especially in one’s later years, is to help other people until you don’t notice your own needs and pains anymore.”

“It’s true,” she told me, repositioning a pillow behind her back. “It’s something bigger than yourself.”

“And why does that help?”

“Well, do you realize what could happen? Do you realize that I’m saving the world?” She smiled here, seemingly amused at the brazenness of her statement, and continued, “Come on—it’s possible! It’s like a mouse with a big cheese. You start with a little bit, and then a little bit, and then a little bit and pretty soon the cheese is gone, and you’ve done it. It’s only little triumphs that keep you going.”

“And then you try to stack them up into one big one?” I surmised.

“Exactly.”

That’s certainly a philosophy that would get a walker all the way across the country. When Granny D first told her family about her plan, her sister cried, and her son-in-law suggested that Granny D was a candidate for institutionalization. But onward Granny D trod, walking through 208 towns in thirteen states; she outlasted four pairs of sneakers, four sun hats, three support vans, and three managers. Each day, after she’d walked ten miles, she would spray-paint onto the road a yellow line to denote where she should start the next day; then someone would drive her to her accommodations for the evening. She’d received few responses when she’d written letters to local police stations and houses of worship before the trip, asking if she could sleep in their jail cells or common areas, but she ended up staying mostly with friends of friends or at the homes of like-minded volunteers or in donated motel rooms.

Starting in Pasadena, she made it without incident until the Mojave Desert, where she came down with pneumonia and dehydration and was rushed to a hospital for four days. (After this, her son and an Arizona political activist named Dennis Burke arranged to have a number of vehicles trail Granny D for the rest of the trip, including a camper she slept in. Burke later cowrote her book.)

When she revived, she kept on going—from Dalhart, Texas, to Hooker, Oklahoma, to Kismet, Kansas, to Odin, Illinois, to Versailles, Indiana, to Chillicothe, Ohio, to Clarksburg, West Virginia. Along the way, she drew into her orbit random temporary tagalongs—kids on bikes, small-town mayors, and West Virginia’s octogenarian secretary of state. (Granny D writes, “I was not sure at first if his passion was for reform or for me.”) She was the object of much national media attention, a fact

she found flattering but somewhat baffling. “I don’t know why my opinion seemed to be worth more when I was walking than when I was sitting in my living room back in New Hampshire,” she wrote, “but maybe it is explained by that old saying that an expert is anyone from more than 50 miles away.”

When she met with heavy snows in the Smoky Mountains, she was forced to cross-country ski; she skied the last hundred miles into Washington, D.C. There, despite having never made a public speech prior to starting on her trek fourteen months earlier, she stood on the steps of the Capitol and announced, “These houses of Congress are being turned into houses of prostitution!”

GRANNY D’S EFFORTS drew praise and support from thousands of people, including John McCain, Bill Moyers, and Jimmy Carter. (“Very nice,” Granny D said, when I asked her what it felt like to draw praise from these three. “And they still remember me, too. I can get any one of them right on the phone.”) Pete Seeger said that her book “is one of half a dozen—including *Silent Spring* and *Walden*—which have turned my life around.” When the McCain-Feingold bill passed in 2002, Granny D was standing in the congressional gallery. “Ohhh, that was a good feeling,” she told me, her otherwise flinty expression giving way to a sly twinkle.

McCain asked Granny D to stand next to him when he announced his run for president, but she felt she had to turn him down.

“Was that a difficult decision to make?” I asked.

“It was. I felt I had walked across the country for him and that if I had faith in him I should support him. But I’m not a politician. I’m an activist. I couldn’t stand next to him—I’d be supporting him. If I supported anyone, it’d be Dennis Kucinich. When I heard Kucinich speak—the power of that man! He took the earth to the moon! He was wonderful. But they say he’s not electable.”

“Well, he’s very short,” I said. “That’s the shallow response. When you see him on a stage with other candidates . . .”

“He looks like a boy. A young boy.”

“It’s so silly that height would be a factor,” I said.

“You can’t be Napoléon anymore.”

TWO MONTHS AFTER HER WALK, Granny D returned to Washington to continue banging on her proverbial drum. This time, she read the Declaration of Independence aloud under the rotunda of the Capitol, whereupon police arrested her for demonstrating, handcuffed her, and took her to the police station. A month later, when she appeared before a judge to answer the charges, she told him, “Your honor, the old woman who stands before you was arrested for reading the Declaration of Independence in America’s Capitol building. I did not raise my voice to do so and I blocked no hall . . . Your honor, we would never seek to abolish our dear United States. But alter it? Yes. It is our constant intention that there should be a government of, by, and for the people, not the special interests . . . In my 90 years, this is the first time I have been arrested. I risk my good name, for I do indeed care what my neighbors think about me. But, your honor, some of us do not have much power, except to put our bodies in the way of justice—to picket, to walk, or to just stand in the way. It will not change the world overnight, but it is all we can do.” The judge charged her only an administrative fee of ten dollars rather than the five hundred he could have charged her, and he praised her efforts on behalf of the “silent masses.”

Granny D pointed out to me our national history of elitism, saying, “We started up with white men with property, that’s who could vote.” She added, “We don’t have a democracy, and we never have

had a democracy.”

I KNEW FROM READING HER BOOK what Granny D attributes the success of her sixty-two-year marriage to: “great sex” and never letting the sun go down on her anger. “Call a truce,” she writes. “See the humor in the situation. Make sure you think about how unimportant the issue really is in comparison to the troubles of the whole world.”

But I wasn’t sure what she thought the secret of her longevity and tenacity is, so I asked.

“Hmm. Well, it’s not good eating,” she said. “I eat what I like.”

“Yes, chocolate figures large in your book,” I pointed out.

A silence ensued, so I tried out a theory: “I would think that your curiosity might be your greatest life force.”

“Light horse?” she asked.

“Life force.”

“Oh. That I have determination.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m very stubborn. I’m very stubborn.”

My mind flashed back to the moment in the Mojave Desert when Granny D realized she’d contracted pneumonia. She was having a predawn bowl of cereal when she launched into a coughing fit and suddenly couldn’t breathe. Taken to a hospital, she got a call from Dennis Burke that night, who told her that it was remarkable that she’d walked from Pasadena to the Mojave, and that now she could hand over the baton to other people, who would finish the walk.

“My breath was still short,” Granny D writes, “but not so short that I couldn’t bark at him for such a thought. I told him that I was prepared to die as part of this journey, if need be. It would be preferable to sitting at home, wishing I had continued. We’re all dying, and we might as well be spending ourselves in a good cause.”

I told Granny D, “It’s interesting that your philosophy of life is so service based, and yet you’re not churchy in the book at all, so agnostics like me can join in the fun.”

She replied, “As you get older and older, you think, Come on, this is ridiculous—do you really think there’s going to be something after you go? Do you really think there’s something waiting for you, heaven or hell? Come on. Let’s face it. I’ve led a Christian life, don’t get me wrong, but now it’s getting to the end of time and I just know. I just know. I will go through the ceremonies but I would be very surprised if there’s something waiting for me.”

AFTER WE’D TALKED for almost two hours, both Granny D’s and my energy was starting to flag. I thanked her for talking with me, and we both stood and walked out to the hallway. About six feet before the front door, I noticed a gorgeous Oriental-looking hooked rug and admired it. Granny D told me that she’d made it while she was taking care of her dying husband.

I stared down at the rug. Suddenly, it was even more transfixing to me. That she could transform this period of hardship into something so beautiful deeply impressed me. I was reminded that Pablo Picasso, on the morning that he died at age ninety-one, asked if there was a canvas that was stretched and ready to be painted.

I’d like to tell you that when I started out on my quest I had a highly defined idea of what wisdom is. But it’s easier to say what wisdom *isn’t*. One of the more famous examples comes from a scene in

the 1967 movie *The Graduate*. Recent college graduate Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman) is buttonholed by Mr. McGuire, a friend of his father's, at a cocktail party.

McGuire: Come on with me for a minute. I want to talk to you. I just want to say one word to you just one word.

Benjamin: Yes, sir.

McGuire: Are you listening?

Benjamin: Yes, I am.

McGuire: *Plastics*.

(*A pause.*)

Benjamin: Exactly how do you mean?

What's unwise here—and I'm presuming by the laughter that the scene elicits in theaters that we agree on the lack of wisdom—is the lack of proportion and context that McGuire displays when he drops his bombshell. Plastics may indeed be a lucrative business to go into, but, as with all ventures, one should entertain some doubts and consider the possible downside—moral, environmental, aesthetic, as well as financial. But McGuire is without doubt. And, more important, who knows if Benjamin is even *interested* in polymers and resins?

The tricky part of wisdom is that it usually necessitates a bicameral mind-set: at its heart, wisdom is the knowledge of what is true or right or just. But it also needs a healthy sense of doubt, because without that, you're an ideologue.

Granny D has these qualities. Moreover, her rug, like her walk across the country, suggests that she's someone who can turn loss into gain. If you can turn out a beautiful rug while your husband is slipping away from you, and if you can let his subsequent death and the death of your best friend help fuel a cross-country hejira of personal and political gain, then maybe you also have a unique ability to apprehend the beauty of the tornado or the terror of the rose.

There's a passage in Granny D's book in which she talks about how her fascination with roadkill sometimes put her fellow walkers off. She saw a lot of carcasses on her trek; she came across foxes, rattlesnakes, and hummingbirds, not to mention "cracked-open armadillos and polecats." She liked to get up close and get a gander at these fatalities—"The color and texture of their innards and the expressions on their faces are worth looking at if you are not put off by death." Just outside of Phoenix, she was walking with a needy vegetarian who looks like "the Carradine boy from *Kung Fu*." The duo stumble upon a dead fox in the road. His body is still warm. The vegetarian drags the carcass under a tree. Granny D waxes philosophical, saying, "If you are afraid of death, you are afraid of life. For living your life leads to death. Until you face death and see its beauty, you will be afraid to really live—you will never properly burn the candle for fear of its end."

GRANNY D'S PHONE CALL finally came right then, while we were standing in her hallway, admiring her rug.

"There's my call! Say good-bye," she said excitedly, giving me a warm hug.

I drove about ten minutes to the Peterborough town library to check my e-mail before heading back to New York. Inside, I poked my head into a mostly empty office, on one of whose walls hung a poster that had caught my eye.

It read, "I was put on earth to accomplish a certain number of things and I am so far behind that I will never die."

How best to canvas the world of people over seventy?

I drew up lists of names of people whom I wanted to talk to. These lists begat other lists, which in turn begat other lists. There were hundreds of folks I wanted to try to get in touch with. I wanted to talk to someone who'd recently changed his mind about something important in his life, and I wanted to talk to someone who'd overcome, or was trying to overcome, a stumbling block or crisis. I wanted to talk to people I had admired for a long time—Jimmy Carter and Phyllis Diller and Ram Dass and Edward Albee and Sandra Day O'Connor; the list went on and on. I wanted to spend some time with my friend Sandra's father, an eccentric Chinese man who takes the art of recycling to a very, very high level, including using a battered cardboard cereal box for his briefcase and eating food that he finds in garbage cans and dumpsters.

It was great fun to brainstorm for names. Sometimes they would pop into my brain, unbidden. One morning, I was foggily bumping around the apartment doing my morning routine—looking for a pair of socks; having a brief cuddle with Hot Rod, our seventeen-year-old cat; trying, for the second time in ten minutes, to find my cup of coffee—while Greg was in the midst of his own ritualized set of preparations, when we happened to cross paths in the doorway between the living room and dining room, whereupon, as if receiving instructions from outer space, I robotically uttered, “Noam Chomsky.”

Once I'd assembled my lists of names, I did some weeding. I discarded the names of anyone whose own account of his or her wisdom I felt I could not improve upon or enhance (Elie Wiesel, Joan Didion, Calvin Trillin, memoirist Doris Grumbach). I removed the names of people who have been given ample opportunity to tug on their proverbial beard (the Dalai Lama) or whose affiliation to an institution might curb his or her individuality (most clergy, Senator Robert Byrd). I didn't want to talk to anyone who didn't want to talk to me, so I removed the names of the famously reclusive or press shy (J. D. Salinger, Cormac McCarthy, photographer Helen Levitt). And I stalled on, and ultimately did not contact, anyone who had committed a specific wise or inspiring act but whom I did not otherwise know enough about (Rose Morat, a 101-year-old mugging victim who fought back at her assailant; entrepreneur Lisa Gable, who launched the Strap-Mate to combat the problem of collapsing bra straps).

I sent out hundreds of e-mails, presenting myself as a journalist hot on the path of wisdom. Responses trickled back, some of them positive.

As I started to meet with people, it became immediately clear that the tenor of my encounters would often confound my expectations. For instance, I expected my interview with my teacher from second grade—Achsah Hinckley, who'd been a wonderfully inspiring and inventive teacher at the Bancroft School in Worcester, Massachusetts—to be sunny, but instead I learned what a hard life she's had. She'd been fired from the school after someone complained that she was offering voluntary prayer in her classroom; her alcoholic husband had, prior to his death in 1981, depleted her savings. As we sat in her living room and talked, I could see how intellectual rigor and a Puritan work ethic had kept the skinny, fastidious eighty-one-year-old afloat all these years, but I could also see that the float had sometimes necessarily wobbled. “I wish I'd gone to Europe for a year. I wish I'd been more

daring,” she told me. “But I was a Depression child, and security meant so much to me.”

Conversely, I expected that the trials and vagaries of forty-seven years of performing stand-up comedy on the road would have darkened the brow of my childhood idol, Phyllis Diller. After all, she’s written that her first husband was “cruel and brutal” and an “agoraphobic sex tyrant.” She thinks she’s so homely that she’s “never made Who’s Who but I’m featured in What’s That?” She’s so casual about getting plastic surgery—she was one of the first celebrities to cop to it—that she’s gone to parties with stitches sticking out of her face or with her glasses taped to her forehead so that they wouldn’t weigh heavily on her fragile new nose. (“I had to do something,” Diller has said. “I was so wrinkled, I could screw my hats on.”)

But when the ninety-year-old Diller granted me a phone interview, I could barely penetrate her force field of positive thinking. She told me, “When I got into the business, I gave myself the luxury of perfect focus. I looked straight ahead and did everything toward making it in the business. I never looked right, I never looked left. Never had a moment of doubt.”

“Truly?” I asked. “Never a moment of doubt?”

“Never, never. I learned that that’s the way to fail. My own secret was to protect myself from negativity. It can come from friends, it can come from your husband, it can come from anywhere. Mentally, I was wearing a white feather cape.”

I said, “But life throws obstacles at us all the time, right? I mean, what would you do if, say, someone heckled you or talked during your routine?”

“With my act, you would have had to *make an appointment* to talk or heckle. My timing is perfect. The thing that draws hecklers is silence. You would have had to *make an appointment*.”

“Huh. Well, you *do* hold the Guinness world record for delivering twelve punchlines in a minute ___”

“I do, I do, I do!” she trilled. “That’s the secret. You have to fill the air with fun!”

Cue loud, unhinged Diller-icious cackle.

NOT EVERYONE wanted to get on board the wisdom train.

The people who were uninterested or unable to participate in my project fell into three categories. The first—the largest—group was of those who responded with total silence. This, as it turns out, is standard procedure for many people, regardless of whether or not they are besieged by requests from the media. Many has been the time that I’ve reached out to someone to say that I’m writing a story for a one-million-or-more-circulation publication and wonder if they have anything to contribute, only to meet with no response whatsoever. I don’t take this personally. I take this to mean that the person doesn’t want to burden me with an e-mail or phone call that bears no treat. There is a certain politeness to the soft rejection.

The second group was made up of those people who were unable to participate for some reason. “While Mr. Cosby appreciated hearing from you,” ran an e-mail I received from Norman R. Brokaw, the chairman of the William Morris Agency, “I did want to let you know that he will not be participating in your project; he just does not have the available time. As I’m sure you can imagine, Mr. Cosby is continually besieged by countless hundreds of organizations, companies, schools, and individuals with requests similar to yours not only from this country but from abroad as well. As much as he’d like to say yes to so many, it’s just impossible for him to comply with everyone’s request. As a result, his numerous charitable and contractual obligations over the next several years, which includes writing his own books, preclude him from taking on any additional activity than that

which he is already committed. I trust you can understand.” After that disquisition, even someone as obtuse as I am can understand.

The only age-based refusal to my interview requests I received was from Don Rickles’s manager who told me, “Even though he’s eighty years old, he doesn’t like to talk in those terms.”

I wasn’t always sure how aggressive to be. Some of the folks I was interested in talking to were of an age or physical condition that demanded deference be paid them. Moreover, at times I wondered if it was worthwhile or even possible to prompt someone into being wise. There were times when I thought that maybe getting someone to be wise is like getting someone to be funny—both are, in their ideal forms, freely willed. That said, though, it’s possible to put someone up to being wise—to set the trap, as it were. But it is not fruitful to badger someone into it. Lest I be guilty of passivity, though—I am semi-haunted by two sentences from psychologist Mary Pipher’s book *Another Country: Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Our Elders* that runs, “Doing interviews for this book, I learned to let the phone ring fifteen times. I learned to wait at doors for five minutes after I rang the bell”—I tried to determine whether a nonresponse was the product of treatable modesty or whether it was the product of inability or disinterest. For instance, I’d called hundred-year-old cultural critic Jacques Barzun, who’s famous for making the statement “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball.” *The New Yorker* had just profiled him, and Barzun had said, “Old age is like learning a new profession. And not one of your own choosing,” which led me to think that he might prove a fertile interview. When Barzun did not return my call for two weeks, I called him again and pleaded my case; he told me, “I’m sorry, I have to turn down interviews. My mind is just as active, but I have difficulty speaking.”

The third category of people included those who flirted or waffled. I knew, for instance that James Hillman, the archetypal psychologist and author of *The Soul’s Code*, was uncomfortable with talking too much about himself. I tried to convey to him that our interview could be largely theory based. He wrote back an e-mail titled, “Possible Interview.” The Possible Interview came with a Possible Date. But when I called Hillman the day before the possible date, all was Impossible. He said he’d call back. He did, a month or so later, at which point he asked me to remind him what he’d agreed to. I said a possible interview. I added that I would meet him anywhere. He suggested we talk by phone three weeks hence. I said I’d rather meet in person, but that, sure, a phone interview was better than no interview. But when I e-mailed him the day before the newly possible interview, he called back and said he wouldn’t be available. He pleaded, “I have no time at all. It’s a hopeless life. And I have nothing else to say! It’s all in those books.”

“You’re very reluctant, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Well, I just have so little time,” he said.

He said that he’d try, sometime in the following three weeks, to “steal away” from his obligation and give me a phone call. I said I would be honored if he would do so. I still would be.

I ALSO BEGAN TELLING MY FRIENDS and colleagues about my quest. Most of the reactions fell between positive and dewy-eyed.

“Ooooh, I wish you could have talked to my aunt Bea,” my friend Suzi said. “One time she warned me, ‘Be careful of the fourth dimension.’”

I asked, “What’s the fourth dimension?”

“Orgasms.”

During moments like these, I knew there was much to be learned in this whole track-down-elder-

wisdom thing; after all, for years I've been laboring under the delusion that orgasms were a *good* thing.

THERE WAS ONE DEMOGRAPHIC SECTOR of my acquaintance who, when told that I was in search of the wisdom of older folks, sometimes became irritable or confused. These were men in their fifties. "Is that meant to be funny?" one of these gents asked me, with a slightly sour expression; another said, "didn't know you were so interested in sciatica."

An eleven-year-old whom I'm friends with also expressed her reservations about my targeted demographic. "They may not have much to say," she counseled before glibly adding, "But good luck with that!"

Burro-like, I trudged onward.

I hit the library. Given that I didn't have a strong idea of what wisdom is, I figured it behooved me to see what other people thought it was.

I quickly determined that the world is not lacking in theories on this front.

Muhammad Ali wrote, "Wisdom is knowing when you can't be wise."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, "Common sense in an uncommon degree is what the world calls wisdom."

Walter Benjamin wrote, "Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom."

Ecclesiastes tells us, "To fear the lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Theodore Roosevelt wrote, "Nine-tenths of wisdom consists of being wise in time."

Albert Einstein wrote, "A clever person solves a problem. A wise person avoids it."

Seneca wrote, "There is nothing the wise man does reluctantly. He escapes necessity because he wills what necessity is going to force on him."

Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, "The awakened sages call a person wise when all his undertakings are free from anxiety about results."

William Blake wrote, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

Patience Worth wrote, "A pot of wisdom would boil to nothing ere a doubter deemeth it worth tasting."

Nicolás Gómez Dávila wrote, "The stupidity of an old man imagines itself to be wisdom; that of an adult, experience; that of a youth, genius."

Benjamin Franklin wrote, "He's a fool that cannot conceal his wisdom."

Buddha wrote, "The fool who knows he is a fool is that much wiser."

Theories specific to the wisdom of older people were less abundant. The East's veneration of elders is rooted in history and tradition: in Taoism, attaining longevity has been seen as a sign of sainthood; Brahmanic canons record that a few elderly hermits became so wise that their bodies were transubstantiated into immortality. Confucianism promotes ancestor worship, which is certainly related to reverence for the elderly—just for the *deceased* elderly, thus making the reverence much easier to sustain.

My initial research suggested that the wisdom of elders is particularly venerated in Eastern and African cultures. And Middle Eastern. And Latin. And Native American and Australian Aboriginal. In other words, in all the cultures but the one I happened to be in.

In general, the more technological a culture, the less the wisdom of elders is valued; in a world in which megabytes and artificial intelligence are the coin of the realm, skills like passing on traditions and providing cultural context are perceived to have diminished worth.

If you want to be a sage, surround yourself with sagebrush.

I ALSO TRIED to read as many interviews with older people as possible. *80*, a book of interviews with eighty of the country's most famous eighty-year-olds, had just been published, so I bought it and read it.

To read eighty interviews given by primarily affluent white Americans is to have the prescription “Do something that you love” beaten into your head until you’re ready to maim a small animal; indeed, this sentiment, along with “Stay involved,” “Have a sense of humor,” and “The young have no interest in history” are this book’s breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

A few people in *80* individuated themselves, however. Don Hewitt said, “Was I devastated when they replaced me as executive producer of *60 Minutes*? I was, until a friend told me to think of *60 Minutes* as Yankee Stadium, the place that, even though Babe Ruth hadn’t swung a bat there in more than half a century, is still known as ‘The House That Ruth Built.’ That did it. Devastation all gone.”

Studs Terkel waxed plaintive: “Einstein never dreamed of Hiroshima when he approached Roosevelt and convinced him to build the atom bomb. When Einstein heard it was dropped on humans, he pulled out his hair and said, ‘I don’t know what the weapons of World War III will be. But I know the weapons of World War IV—sticks and stones.’ ”

Hollywood Squares host Peter Marshall encouraged young people not to take themselves too seriously—“as famous as you become, they won’t know who the hell you are in thirty years. Ask a youngster about Bing Crosby or Al Jolson or Maurice Chevalier. They won’t know. The guy who helped me and was my idol was Dick Haymes. Nobody remembers Dick Haymes.”

Betty Garrett, who played the taxi driver in *On the Town*, said, “I never think of myself as old. I think my mirror is wrinkled.”

Novelist and former Beat Herbert Gold said, “I have one bit of advice for young people. Don’t play golf. I mean it. It’s boring.”

TWO THINGS I READ during this early period made a particularly strong impression on me. The first was the story that a seventy-nine-year-old Shirley Chisholm told to the authors of *A Wealth of Wisdom: Legendary African American Elders Speak* in 2004. Talking about her experience as the first black woman elected to Congress, Chisholm mentioned a congressman who sat in an aisle seat on the House floor.

Each day, when Chisholm showed up for work, the gentleman—who sat in front of her—would start coughing as soon as he saw her. Chisholm, concerned about his health, asked a colleague if the congressman was tubercular, and the colleague delivered some startling information. It seemed that, as soon as Chisholm walked by the coughing congressman each day, the congressman had developed a habit of pulling out a handkerchief and then spitting in it, as if spitting in Chisholm’s face.

So Chisholm, fired up, decided to teach the man a lesson. She showed up at the House of Representatives the next day wearing a sweater with big pockets, in one of which she’d placed a man’s handkerchief. The congressman started coughing, and Chisholm said to herself, Uh-huh, baby, I’m going to fix you today. At the moment that he pulled out his handkerchief, Chisholm pulled out her own. Then she spit in it and threw it in the man’s face. “Beat you to it today,” she told him.

Chisholm’s fiery act did not go unnoticed by the onlookers and members of the press seated in the House’s balcony—they started yelling, “Shirley, give it to him, give it to him,” forcing the Speaker to beg for order.

Years later, taking a broader view on life, Chisholm summed up, “Whatever I do, even today, I look only to God and my conscience for approval, not man. That’s my motto. You go crazy if you look to man. Follow the dictates of your conscience.”

EQUALLY ARRESTING TO ME was an essay that Martin Marty wrote in a book called *The Life of Meaning* in which he espouses the theory that napping is a form of prayer. I called Marty one day, reaching him in his office in Chicago.

It's been said that if mainline Protestants could have elected a pope over the last few decades or so, that person would almost certainly have been Marty. A professor of religious history at the University of Chicago for thirty-five years, this Lutheran pastor is the author of more than fifty books including the National Book Award-winning *Righteous Empire* and *Cry of Absence*, a reflection on the Psalms that he wrote after his first wife's death.

"So if napping is a form of prayer," I said to him, "then I guess I have to ask you how you define prayer."

"It's a constant, sustained, not-often-spoken communication with God, or the transcendent, or whatever you call it," the seventy-nine-year-old responded in excitable, boyish tones.

He elaborated: "When I ask people why they can't fall asleep when they want to nap, it always comes down to one of two things. (1) 'I didn't finish what I was going to do,' or (2) 'I have so much to do when I get up.' One is guilt and the other is worry. The act of prayer is an abandonment of both."

I asked, "So am I also praying when I'm unconscious or dead?"

"Yes. Emphatically."

I told him I thought it was a fascinating idea. I said, "My only worry is that all my prayers will be unanswered, but I won't know it because I'll be asleep."

"You'll know it when you wake up in the morning."

I remembered looking at Marty's Web site. A page called "Hosting Martin Marty?" has various sections ("Receptions: Marty enjoys mixing with others at receptions," "Length of lecture: Unless otherwise specified, Marty speaks for exactly 50 minutes," "Meals: Marty prefers to breakfast alone"). The one called "Naps" stipulates, "After lunch and before an afternoon appearance or just before dinner, Marty typically takes a 7 to 10-minute refresher nap."

I asked him, "Did I read somewhere that when you nap you put your wristwatch on your forehead?"

"I used to. Now I time myself with my cellphone. I lay it down next to me."

"And that's simply to time yourself so that you won't take more than a fifteen- or twenty-minute nap?"

"No, no—not fifteen, that's way too long! I do seven to ten. If I fall into a deep sleep, then I get a knot in my stomach and I'm mopey. I started out at eighteen, then I was fifteen, then I was ten, now I'm eight."

"So you've been in prayer *training*."

"If the monks worked as hard at being monks as I do sleeping, we'd have a holy world."

sample content of How to Live: A Search for Wisdom from Old People (While They Are Still on This Earth)

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