

INTRODUCTION

Elizabeth Eckstrom, MD, MPH, MACP

When Marcy asked me to consider writing another book together, it took me by surprise. After writing *The Gift of Caring*, I was pretty certain I wouldn't write another book. It was a lot of work, and I thought I had shared just about everything I knew about growing older! But she had an experience that made her realize she needed to start thinking about aging *now*, not wait, as many of us do, believing it is still a long way off and we can confront it when it happens.

And then, I considered all the colleagues, patients, family members, and our amazing readers who have asked both of us questions – questions we didn't answer in our first book, but that are all pressing issues for older adults.

What about kidney disease in old age? I want to hear more about osteoporosis. What if I run out of money? Is assisted living the only option I have when I grow old – I'm not looking forward to assisted living! Should I be on more medication, or less? Most importantly, tell me how I can *prevent* disability and decline for as long as possible, and live a healthy, fulfilled, and joyous long life.

I realized we did need to write another book. So many of my patients ask "What is normal at 80, 90, 100?" I realized we need to describe the normal changes of aging and help our readers understand how they can successfully adapt to these changes. We need to explain how to reduce the risk of dementia, falls, fractures, frailty, and other problems common with aging. We need to illuminate how to best plan for our future. We need to frame aging to optimize health and well-being.

All of us face many challenges as we age. None of us has complete control of our aging process. But a positive attitude toward aging can actually increase our life expectancy by seven years. If we start now, we can harness the power of positivity and

planning to ensure we feel the way Neal Maine does (Chapter 33) as he experiences the pinnacle of his life's mountain.

Healthy aging has been a hot topic recently. Baby boomers are turning 65 at startling rates. In the United States (US), 100 people hit this landmark every 13 minutes, and this trend is being replicated around the world. As authors experiencing aging in the US, this book is inevitably slanted toward the opportunities and challenges that exist there, but the stories and healthy aging concepts, suggestions, and strategies will hopefully resonate around the world, as we are indeed a global community who has to respect, honor, support, and love each other to ensure all of us can thrive together. This large and diverse baby boomer generation (to which Marcy and I both belong) is changing the face of aging around the world. We all wish to age gracefully and with continued purpose, loving relationships, and, as I see in my patients' expressions each day, avoid the worst fears we all share: Alzheimer Disease and related dementias, loss of mobility, and loss of independence. Trust me: remaining free of these conditions is not just luck. It requires careful attention from a young age. Recent research supports the idea that Alzheimer Dementia is actually a disease that begins in early childhood (when poor educational attainment, poor exercise and diet habits, and low socioeconomic status create vulnerability that increases the risk of dementia later in life).

Many books have already been written on the topic of healthy aging. Products from skin care to medical devices promise magical reversal of the effects of aging. And these promises are not all false! Many of us are still participating in sports, traveling, and working well into our 70s and later – acting 20 years younger than our parents did at the same age, and having the bodies and brains to go with it.

As a geriatrician and researcher who has specialized in the care of older adults for over 25 years, I believe aging well and with joy is a mantra everyone can adopt – whether we are rich or poor, have chronic illnesses or are completely healthy, and whether we have a large and supportive family or a much smaller social network.

Further, we need to do it as a community, not reserving aging well for the affluent or smartest people. The baby boom generation will only succeed into old age if we support aging well for our entire generation. Poverty, low education level, discrimination, and other social determinants of health make aging well challenging for many of us, our friends and neighbors. We need to work together to ensure that everyone has every opportunity to age well.

And so I told Marcy “yes.” I would embark on this new expedition with her. This book is modeled after *The Gift of Caring* in that it shares some of Marcy’s and my personal stories, stories of my patients and other older adults who are doing amazing things as they age, and then offers practical advice and strategies to assist each of us in enhancing our potential to age well.

It is interesting to note that most of the elders in this book were surprised when we approached them to tell their stories. They said, “there is nothing special about me!” They felt they were just living life; learning, engaging, and finding joy every day. Yet these are the stories that inspired Marcy and me, and we hope will inspire you as well.

To be fair: it isn’t easy. We need to attend to physical, cognitive, psychological, and spiritual health every single day. We need to engage in purposeful activities – whether work, volunteering, or helping to care for others. We need to laugh, to be generous, to try new things at least once a week (how about French classes or Oaxacan food?), and make friends younger than we are (so they don’t die before us). We need to have a positive attitude, discover new passions and follow them, and find ways we can give back and make a difference. And, most of all, we need to spend time with family, friends, and those who value our support to age just a little better.

The results are entirely worth it. It is possible, if we begin planning now, to thrive in our later years, and to live with joy until life’s end. Marcy was shaken into awareness of what aging looks like. We hope this book will allow our readers to plan for their own futures without needing such a dramatic wake-up call!

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Marcy Cottrell Houle

Three months before starting this book I had a fall – a ridiculous fall, really, because I wasn't paying attention. That's the reason for many falls, I think. It happened in a Kroger parking lot when I was fiddling with the handles of my purse while hurrying toward the store entrance. I tripped on a drainage grate – and broke both my arms.

That's right, not just one, but what doctors call bilateral fractures, near the elbows. For a month I could not use either arm, which meant I could not do *anything*. I could not open a door, tie a shoelace, cut up my food, take a shower by myself, cut my nails, and, well, all the *other* things we take for granted we can do when we have hands and arms.

Thankfully, I have a spouse, John, who was able to take time off from work to care for me. Family members and friends were also there to help. I was lucky. In three months, I was back to normal. My arms had healed. I was independent again. I felt ready to move on with my life.

Wait. Not quite.

While I was grateful to think “nothing's changed,” in truth, something had. For the first time, I saw what it felt like to be helpless, unable to care for myself. Even more humbling and distressing, at times I felt like a burden to the ones I loved the most.

What I had experienced is the ghost that looms ahead of all of us. Aging. My crisis, albeit a temporary one, was a wake-up call, a chance to stop the time wheel and peer into myself. And, in a strange, upside-down way, it was also a gift.

Broken bones a gift? Yes. Because with my incapacity came a reckoning I had purposely avoided, having constructed a virtual wall around myself.

Until I was 40, I never gave a thought to aging – that is, until my parents started getting sick. Then it came to the forefront of my

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life. But even so, it was about *them*, and their generation. Now, having suffered two broken arms and the inability to do all the things I took for granted, I realized the specter of aging is no longer about parents or old people.

It's about me.

Or will be before I know it. Even though everything healed well and doctors said I could resume all my normal activities, my accident cast a shadow. There would come a time when I would not be able to spring back and do all the things I loved to do.

I had seen my parents and their friends go through this stage. Soon, my group – those 60-somethings who are starting down this path with tens of thousands of others – will be standing in that same spotlight none of us wants to talk about, as we race to build higher walls around ourselves, frantically keeping the aging demons at bay.

The tearing down of that invisible barricade was a good thing for it gave me an unobstructed view. It allowed me to see – ever so faintly – the lay of the land stretching out ahead in new and curious ways. It made me want to know everything I could, in traveling this frontier, to be able to do it more purposefully, stronger, and better. I had seen my wonderful parents go through a fragmented and broken medical system that I didn't want to experience myself or have anyone I cared about endure.

Was it possible if one approached the journey in an intentional way to be excited about aging, about this chapter in life some very old people say is their happiest?

Their *happiest*? How could that be?

Elizabeth Eckstrom, my friend, co-author, and a geriatrician who has treated hundreds of older patients for 25 years, said many of her patients feel that way about the third and fourth chapters of their lives. They are *happy*. She herself is enthusiastic about aging. She is so excited about it, in fact, that she recently took nearly a year's sabbatical to travel around the world to research where people are aging the best.

The photos she brought home of older people intrigued me. They were a far cry from pictures of aged, wizened hands that my mother, who lived to be 93, always hated. Those stock images

seemed to represent decline, frailty, a person inches from death, even when one might be years from the end. Whereas the photographs Elizabeth had with her were of 95-year-old Italians climbing ladders and pruning olive trees. All this after they had just walked 5 miles up and down cobblestone roads! Of course, she said that if we tried that in America, people would be falling from their ladders and breaking their hips. It took a lifetime of experience to learn how to stay steady on a ladder and prune trees.

Still, I liked those photographs. What they proffered was liveliness in old age. Now I wondered: Is liveliness really possible when we grow old? Here? In America? The answer seemed especially significant as, after my injury, I often felt fatigued. Moreover, most of us don't reside in a *Blue Zone* – those exceptional places that Elizabeth visited.

First studied by researcher Dan Buettner and his *National Geographic* team, Blue Zones are sites where a significant number of people live to be over 100 and are still in relatively good health. Buettner and his fellow researchers identified five Blue Zones in the world: Nuoro province in Sardinia, Italy; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Icaria, Greece; Okinawa, Japan; and the Seventh Day Adventist community of Loma Linda, California.

Centenarians in Blue Zone regions are not like other old people around the globe. They are largely free of the diseases that plague the rest of us; heart disease, depression, and diabetes are rare. Even more intriguing, Buettner found that the rate of dementia in these communities is extremely low. People in the Blue Zones develop dementia at a 75% lower rate than in the United States!

But what does this all mean for those of us who don't live in these extraordinary locations? Are there strategies that everyone – no matter what culture, population, region we live in – might engage in to enjoy some of the positive features of the Blue Zones closer to all our homes?

For nearly three decades, Elizabeth has sought to understand how people who are the happiest and healthiest live life through multiple lenses: medically, physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. Part of her drive is that she knows the answers for America can't come quickly enough. Because the statistics in the

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literature are grim. And they aren't, she explains, just about old people.

In the 2022 Bloomberg *Healthiest Country Index*, the United States ranked a depressing #34 in its Health Grade (and it continues to go down every year), scoring below Estonia, Chile, Cuba, and *just above* Bahrain and Qatar. In a recent article in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, researchers conclude that (a) the United States has the most expensive, technologically advanced, and sub-specialized healthcare system in the world, and yet (b) *a worse population health status than any other high-income country*.

This situation poses special problems for older adults, says Elizabeth. Added to that are "happiness indexes." The United States places low on those too. Other countries have much higher "happiness indexes" and older persons are healthier and more contented as they age.

According to the World Happiness Report, the annual survey by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network for the United Nations, of the 20 happiest countries in 2022, the US ranked number 16.

Why? I ask. Is there anything we can do about that?

Elizabeth thinks there is. But it starts long before one gets old. Our health and well-being at 80 are dependent on how we have lived our lives in the decades before. Yet, she adds, even at 80 there are still things we can do to make later years productive and joyous.

Happiness for individuals is dictated by several things, says Elizabeth: 40% of happiness is dictated by our genes; 15% by life circumstances; 40% is *under our own control*. Scientists aren't sure what accounts for the remainder of happiness.

But 40% is a powerful number.

Daniel Pink, the author of *Drive*, studies intrinsic motivation. The research he cites, while primarily directed toward business, also pertains to powerful ways to grow older. Grit, says Pink, is essential. Effort, too, is needed. Successful living is a three-legged stool. It requires a sense of purpose, of mastery, and of autonomy.

Interestingly, Elizabeth elucidates that all three are pivotal to keeping our brains healthy as we age. Understanding them,

planning for them, can bring joy in our older years – and, indeed, right up until the time we die.

With the aging wall now broken down after my accident, these insights suddenly seemed more important than ever. The journey is one I want to learn about and I'm eager to embark. All that's missing is a map. That I would have to make. And I would need compass headings. Elizabeth could supply those. I knew there would be fallen trees to climb over, roots on the path to trip over, difficult stream crossings. That was okay with me if I had an idea what lay ahead and a notion of what the mountain top looked like.

Elizabeth would be an excellent guide. She has led hundreds up this path, and is up to date on trail conditions, having long examined, explored, and discovered some of the best treks up the mountain, while always on the lookout for a safer, more beautiful route. While she faces forward much of the time, Elizabeth also turns around to inspect and mark where the pitfalls have been hidden along the way.

Why? Because that, as Elizabeth explains, is what aging truly is. It's not, as we normally think, a range of dates or something that happens as you get old. And it's not one straight line. Aging is a continuum, a process.

For me, thinking of it that way makes the whole trajectory seem less sinister. Aging is the same path I've been on since I was small. It doesn't mean young. It doesn't mean old. What's more, it doesn't mean those pictures of shriveled hands. It is a comprehensive, undulating, moving line, with dates and years merely acting as markers on the route. Much of it is friendly. The path has been my partner for a long time.

The difference, as Elizabeth says, is that some things *do* change along that line. Challenges arise. But we get to choose how we are going to face them. There are positive ways to care for our mind, our body, and our soul. And to cultivate the vitality of each.

I just had to figure them out and put them on my map.

Two broken arms did that. They brought to light a stark realization and changed the meaning of aging for me. The wisdom of elders to teach me how to live meaningfully and well, twined with

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the knowledge of experts, is no longer a vague and indeterminate quest or a journey to a land of passivity and devolution.

It is the most alive thing I can imagine.

“Come to my office next Tuesday,” Elizabeth says. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

PART I

Caring For Your Mind