

THE GIFT OF AGING

Award-winning authors Marcy Cottrell Houle and Elizabeth Eckstrom have teamed up again following the success of their critically acclaimed book *The Gift of Caring*, winner of the 2016 National Christopher Award. This new book blends frontline science with inspirational stories and insights from wise elders for aging with health, joy, and purpose. The book explains how our bodies and brains age, defining what can be expected with aging and what is unusual. It demonstrates ways we can significantly increase our chances for a positive aging experience into our 80s, 90s, and 100s. It offers key strategies for meeting the challenges of aging, informs us of issues of inclusion and equity, and advises on handling legal and financial affairs. *The Gift of Aging* illustrates how we can make the third act of our lives meaningful and fulfilling, ensuring we as elders can make a difference in our world.

Marcy Cottrell Houle, MS, is a professional wildlife biologist and the author of eight award-winning books. Two of her books received the Christopher Award “for books that affirm the highest values of the human spirit.” Her work has been selected by the *New York Times* as a Best Book for Earth Day. She is a contributing opinion writer for the *New York Times*, *LA Times*, and *Globe and Mail*, and has written articles for the *Nature Conservancy Magazine*, *Cricket Magazine for Children*, *Reader’s Digest*, the *New York Times*, and *Smithsonian Magazine*. Marcy lives with her family on a small farm on Sauvies Island, Oregon.

Elizabeth Eckstrom is Chief of Geriatrics in the Division of General Internal Medicine & Geriatrics at Oregon Health & Science University. Her research focuses on healthy aging and has shown that tai chi reduces falls by at least 50% and improves memory test scores (she recommends tai chi for everyone!). She is grateful to care for and learn from her older patients, and has had the opportunity to teach conferences and workshops on fall prevention and healthy aging around the world. She is thrilled to call Oregon home and can frequently be found in her garden, wind-surfing on the Columbia River, and hiking and skiing on Mt. Hood.

“*The Gift of Aging* is itself a gift. It’s packed with research-based strategies and motivating stories of elders that can help make growing older the most meaningful ride of a lifetime!”

Daniel H. Pink, author of *When, Drive, and To Sell Is Human*

“This is a beautiful book. *The Gift of Aging* is filled with lots of practical advice – but none more practical than “have a purpose.’ The last decades of our lives can be the most important, productive, and fulfilling, but only if we take them with the seriousness (and the good humor) they deserve!’

Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature* and *The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon*

“*The Gift of Aging* is a remarkable book that challenges us to look at aging not as a hopeless condition of wrinkled skin, immobility, and failing memory, but as an important and potentially healthy stage of life.”

Daniel Gibbs, author of *A Tattoo on My Brain*

“I love how this inspiring and companionable book combines profound spiritual wisdom with utterly down-to-earth advice, marrying reflections on the deepest questions of life’s meaning with recipes and financial planning tactics. Marcy Houle and Elizabeth Eckstrom show that while getting older is necessarily a process of becoming more aware of our human limitations, it’s also an invitation to step more wholeheartedly *into* those limitations, becoming ever more fully the people we were meant to be. For the first time in a while, I find myself relishing the prospect of advancing age.”

Oliver Burkeman, author of *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*

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By The Same Authors

*The Gift of Caring: Saving Our Parents – and Ourselves – from the
Perils of Modern Healthcare*

Also By Marcy Houle

Wings for My Flight: The Peregrine Falcons of Chimney Rock

The Prairie Keepers: Keepers of the Zumwalt

A Generous Nature: Lives Transformed by Oregon

Forest Park: Exploring Portland's Natural Sanctuary

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The Gift of Aging

Growing Older with Purpose, Planning,
and Positivity

MARCY COTTRELL HOULE, MS

ELIZABETH ECKSTROM, MD, MPH, MACP



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This book is lovingly dedicated to
Lilly Cohen
who remains the wind in the sails of Team Caring.

“What is the gift of aging? Seeking and finding beauty, where many people think beauty isn’t. It is taking the time to stop, look, and listen.

“When you’re young, you’re so busy talking that you don’t spend much time listening. But as you mature, you can learn to stand on top of all that talking, and become a listener. You have a context now for all that talk; what you hear is being added to a structure that’s in place. You have developed inventory. And as you move through life that inventory piles up.

“When you hear talk, there is more reference for it now, more meaning and evaluation. And this is not merely talk in words. Rather, it is messages that are coming at you. Messages from people and from nature. You can look and see and listen to what the estuaries and trees are saying and the landscape of nature.

“The gift of aging is climbing higher and higher up this beautiful mountain that lets you see further and further each day in every way. The base gets wider and the pinnacle gets higher. And you get to stand on it at no charge, which is the beauty.

“Life experience has built the mountain you stand on. From here, you will find amazing discoveries because you can see far beneath you. The gift is not in answers, no. Instead, the gift is seeing a much bigger view of the questions, which is just as exciting.

“It becomes even more miraculous.”

Neal Maine,
age 85

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Wendy created fellowship programs at two New York universities designed to encourage social work students to enter the field of gerontology and promote collaboration between law and social work students. She gives back to the community and sponsors programs for individuals with cognitive impairment and their care partners. Wendy was honored for her contributions to several adult day programs in New York for individuals with cognitive impairment and was named as one of the Top 50 Women in Business by the Long Island Business News. For a decade, Wendy served on the Executive Board of Make-A-Wish, Suffolk County, NY.

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FOREWORD

What a pleasure to get to say a few words at the outset of this remarkable book. In its pages, you will meet people aging – not just gracefully but *gratefully*.

In a society – and world – as youth-focused as ours, it's easy for people as they get older to try and cling to how they've lived in the past. But it's important to realize that we have entirely new opportunities to embrace as we get older.

Above all, I think, we can figure out how to help shape our societies for those that come after us. We have several advantages in this regard. For one thing, in the United States, those of us in our older years now have a memory of a society that worked better. Take the environment, the issue that's absorbed most of my life. If you're in your 60s or 70s or 80s, you were around for the first Earth Day (maybe you marched in it – 10% of Americans did, the biggest demonstration in the country's history). And then you got to watch – within a year – as a bipartisan group of politicians enacted the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, and created the Environmental Protection Agency. That kind of response seems unimaginable to young people now, who have known only a deeply polarized and dysfunctional society. But we know that, if we did it once, we can do it again.

And we have the tools, as older people, to make all the difference. There are so many of us – 70 million people over the age of 60 in the US alone (a population larger than that of France!), and 10,000 more added each day. Americans vote in huge numbers, which magnifies our potential political impact – politicians have to listen to us. Though not all of us are well off, our generations did end up with most of the country's financial resources, which means that Wall Street needs to listen as well.

We have time. And we have kids and grandkids, as do communities around the globe, who take that abstract notion of ‘legacy’ and make it very concrete. Your legacy is the world you leave behind for the people you love the most.

So as I read this wonderful book, full of advice about how to stay sound in mind and body, I think mostly of the things we should try to stay sound *for*. What a privilege it is to get to make a difference!

Perhaps a way of thinking about it is: no one really wants to be “elderly,” with the frailty and incapacity that implies. But all of us should want to be *elders*, with the wisdom and engagement that the name conjures up. The people in this book testify that connection and relationship are keys to making these years the culmination of our lives. And when that connection and relationship can be in *service* – well, that’s a life well lived!

Bill McKibben, founder Third Act