

Brendan Hare Q&A

Where did you get the idea for the book?

After about forty years of work, I was facing retirement. It was unknown territory; all the well-marked paths had vanished. At first, I tried to deny that it was an issue. I just keep on working. Soon, I realized that denial was not a good strategy. I had vague ideas about doing something “new,” and many questions: What do people actually do in retirement? How should I spend my time? Could I find meaning and fulfillment in this next phase of life?

How did you deal with these questions?

For most of my life, I had focused on my career and on providing for my family. I thought the unexamined life was the only one worth living—searching for transcendent truths or exploring life’s mysteries always seemed like an indulgence. But as I faced retirement, these issues suddenly seemed relevant and urgent.

Around this time, I came across a book that I had bought forty years before: *Working*, by Studs Terkel. In it, Terkel asked people to discuss their jobs and lives. Then he used the edited transcripts of those discussions as the basis for the book. *Working* helped me as I prepared to enter the workforce. It gave me a much-needed sense of perspective.

It occurred to me that, just as *Working* had helped my generation as it entered the working life, there was a need for a similar book, one that addressed the concerns of those about to retire.

Once you had an initial concept what did you do?

I refined it. I was going to collect life stories and perspectives on aging from a true cross-section—as geographically, ethnically, and economically diverse as I could achieve and present them in a compressed conversational style. The whole value of the project was in the perspectives of those interviewed. I decided to present each profile in the first person to convey the sense that the interview subject was talking to the reader directly, in a spirit of absolute frankness and sincerity. I tried to make myself invisible. I was not writing a personal memoir or a unified theory on aging.

So once you had the final concept, what was next?

Starting in late 2011, I set out to find a diverse group who would be willing to help me understand the experience of aging. They had to be candid and open about some of the

most private matters—their hopes and fears, as well as past successes and regrets. Some I knew, others I approached cold with a letter or a call. Remarkably, almost all approached agreed.

The book presents the stories of forty-six people, ranging in age from fifty-five to ninety-nine, from more than seventeen states all over the country, plus one expatriate. The group includes a Nobel Prize winning doctor, a missionary nun, a four star Marine Corps general, a ninety-four-year-old former sharecropper and a Methodist minister, National Geographic's Adventurer of the Year 2012, a former U.S. Ambassador, and a former Governor of New Jersey, as well as teachers, police officers, factory workers, industrialists, philanthropists, priests, professors, and world-class athletes. Some live in luxury, others on the margin.

How did you conduct the interviews?

I had some prepared ideas to start, but not much more. I did not want to direct the conversation. I wanted natural free-flowing talk with room for genuinely surprising and revealing moments. The conversations were usually conducted over lunch, or dinner or coffee. Sometimes they lasted ninety minutes, sometimes much longer. Often they included follow-up meetings and calls. I taped everything and spent a good deal of time trying to turn discursive and disjointed conversation into cohesive, engaging material that was true to the language of the profiled subject, all while recognizing that the subjects were complicated people with complex lives.

Any surprises?

The biggest surprise was the remarkable group I was fortunate enough to meet. They were fascinating, charming, generous, vibrant, and inspiring. The opportunity to learn from them has been the chief pleasure of this experience. Since the project concluded, some have become ill. Some have passed away. I knew this would happen, but I was not prepared for how deeply it would affect me. I owe each of them a debt of gratitude, and always will. They helped me to grow, to change, and to enter the next phase of my life.

What did you learn from this experience?

When I began, I thought I was assembling a book about retirement. Soon, I realized that, although this book was that, it was also much more. It was even more than a book about the experience of growing older. Fundamentally, this book is concerned with choice. Again and again, the people profiled in these pages remind us that if we expect to find any measure of happiness, meaning, or fulfillment, doing so is up to us, and a good life

will find us or elude us based on the decisions we make every day. The people in this book are elderly, but they speak to everyone, even to the very young. They ask: Why wait to examine your life? Why wait to change? Why not live as much and as well as you possibly can right now?