

INTRODUCTION

This book began two years ago, during a period of anxiety. After four decades of work, I found myself about to retire, unable to imagine the next phase of my life. I was faced with many questions: *Would my days be meaningful? How should I spend my time? How did others approach this experience? Would the challenges of growing old prove too great?*

The roots of this anxiety, I later realized, reached all the way back to my childhood. I've always been practical and somewhat impatient, and never inclined to spend much time pondering the larger mysteries. Philosophy, in the ancient sense—the study of how to live, the search for transcendent truths, the love of wisdom for its own sake—always seemed like an indulgence. The unexamined life, I decided early on, was the only one worth living.

For decades, I retained essentially the same outlook and motivations I had as a boy. In college and graduate school, I chose a practical field of study, economics. Later, I chose a practical profession, the law. And after falling in love and having children, I lived as practically as I could, focusing all my efforts on providing my family with a comfortable, well-ordered life.

Then one day, to my amazement, I was about to turn sixty-five. Instead of celebrating my birthday, I tried to ignore it. If I could somehow forget about time, I thought, it might somehow forget about me. So I put my head down and worked harder than ever, as if, simply by working, I could force all the world's clocks to grind to a permanent halt.

Months passed. I stuck to the plan. It was everyone else who refused to cooperate. First, my peers let me down. Each morning, I searched the train for someone my own age or older, usually with little luck. At my favorite lunch spots, I endured awkward meals with colleagues of long-standing. We talked about old times, old cases, old victories, and then, instead of discussing new business, they informed me that they were hanging it up. Strangers were also little help. I remember how affronted I felt when a young clerk at the local hardware store offered to help carry my purchases. He was only being nice, I knew, but something in his tone irked me: the natural condescension of youth.

After I turned sixty-six, I began to wind down my law firm. While I continued to work on a number of projects, I wasn't nearly as busy as I had been in previous years. People began to refer to me as "retired" or "semiretired." It became impossible to ignore. I was in unknown territory. The well-marked paths had all vanished. One weekday afternoon—an afternoon that, only weeks before, I would have spent at the office—I found myself at the local bookstore, grabbing any title that looked halfway helpful: books about retirement and about aging; literature concerned with older characters; even surveys of philosophical and religious traditions. At home I spent hours searching the newly bought pages for some measure of guidance, wisdom, or comfort.

The books about retirement and aging proved least helpful. In general, they fell into two categories. The first might be called the "how-to-retire" books. These were full of clichés, platitudes, and one-size-fits-all tips, as if there were instructions for growing old. The second category might be called the "I-have-a-theory-about-aging" books. These were written by academics, were full of statistical data, and, as far as I could tell, existed principally to demonstrate the author's mastery of the subject and the correctness of his or her conclusions. None managed to ease my anxiety. None taught me anything vital that I could apply to my own life.

"Ripeness is all," said King Lear. I couldn't argue with Shakespeare, of course. Nor with Keats, who wrote that the autumn of a man's life

has a music all its own. Nor with Camus, who called this autumn another spring, in which all the leaves become flowers. These were beautiful, exalted thoughts. Reading them, I felt ennobled, though not entirely reassured. For me, poetic and fictional creations, no matter how masterful, lacked the force and sting of real life. Next, I turned to a subject I'd always avoided, philosophy. First, I looked to the Greeks. "Happiness," according to Aristotle, "is the meaning and purpose of life." Fine, I thought, but I need details. After Athens, I headed to the East, which, given my temperament, may have been a mistake. "For certain is death to the born," the *Bhagavad Gita* informed me, "and certain is birth for the dead; therefore over the inevitable, do not grieve." I wasn't grieving. I was just looking for some tangible sense of what the next years might hold. "When your work is done, retire," said the *Daodejing*. "Focus on the empty space." This was inscrutable. I needed to know that the coming years would be more than mere empty space.

After several weeks of study, I decided to give up. I would, I thought, have to figure out this next phase of life on my own. I began adding my new collection to the shelves. As I did, I came across a book I'd bought when I was preparing to graduate from law school: *Working*, by Studs Terkel.

The subtitle of *Working* is long but direct: *People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. This neatly summarizes what the book is about. Terkel interviewed people and asked them to discuss their jobs and lives, then used the edited transcripts of those discussions as the basis of his book. Decades ago, as I prepared to enter the workforce, *Working* supplied me with a much-needed sense of perspective and a rich store of insight. It occurred to me that I could attempt a similar project, one that would address the concerns that I and others felt as we prepared to retire.

Now I had a project. More than that, I had Terkel as my guide. The strength of his approach, I knew, was his great interest in people. He spoke with a diverse group: geographically, ethnically, and economically. He didn't ask them to recite "how-to" lessons, abstractions,

or clichés. Instead, he invited them to tell stories, to share their thoughts, and, at times, to confess their fears, misgivings, and dreams. Throughout, Terkel tried to convey a sense that the people he met were speaking directly to the reader. In this way, he produced a series of oral histories that transcended the details of individual lives and offered insights into the universal experience of searching for “daily meaning as well as daily bread.”

Following Terkel’s example, my project was transformed. Although it began with personal concerns, it’s not a memoir. It’s also not a book-length essay. It doesn’t present a unified theory on the experience of aging in contemporary society, nor a series of abstract lessons on how best to approach one’s golden years. Instead, like *Working*, it’s a collection of life stories, all told in a compressed, conversational style and in the first person. Throughout these pages, I’ve tried to make myself invisible. My goal has been to present each interviewee’s story directly, to convey a sense that each is addressing the reader personally, in a spirit of absolute frankness and sincerity.

My methodology has been straightforward. Starting in the summer of 2011 and continuing through the summer of 2013, I set out to find a diverse group of older Americans. Some I knew or knew of. Others I approached cold, with nothing more than a letter or a phone call. Like Terkel, I wanted to find a true cross-section, one that was geographically, ethnically, and economically varied. I was not interested in speaking with only the very accomplished or the very wealthy. (During the interviews, I declined to speak about money, investments, or income, thinking that these subjects would distract from my central purpose.) Many months later, after I’d completed all the interviews, a friend I’d asked to review an early manuscript remarked that it was “impossible to find any losers” among those profiled. I agree. To some extent, the absence of any “losers” may be due to a self-selecting bias. Those who were unhappy with their lives were unlikely to agree to be interviewed. However, only three of the many I approached declined to participate. More than any self-selecting bias, I think that

the absence of any “losers” in these pages suggests the richness of every person’s life, each of which, according to the old chestnut, can supply the basis for at least one good novel. I also believe that the absence of any “losers” in this book points to the positive results of reflection and storytelling, of forcing oneself to shape experience into a coherent, sustained narrative.

As I drove or flew to the first meetings, I had a general sense of the initial subjects of discussion, and sometimes a few questions, but seldom anything more. In each case, I used these prepared ideas only to start conversations, never to direct them. I wanted natural, free-flowing talk, with room enough for genuinely surprising and revealing moments. Usually, these discussions were conducted over lunch, dinner, or coffee. Sometimes, they lasted ninety minutes. Sometimes, they lasted much longer, and included subsequent meetings and follow-up phone calls.

I captured all the interview sessions on tape and then transcribed the conversations in full. This created a record of several hundred thousand words. Like much natural discussion, these transcriptions were often disjointed and discursive. In editing, my goal was twofold. First, I wanted the text to be accurate, and to remain true to the language used by each interviewee. Second, I wanted the text to be intelligible and engaging for the reader. As such, I tried to find the most interesting sections of each transcribed conversation, to eliminate any unnecessary words, and to organize the material to create a sense of cohesion and progression. After I’d finished my edits, I sent each interview subject a draft to ensure that the language was accurate and that all facts were true as of the time of the interview. My final step was to organize the completed profiles. I did so by grouping each interview based on a prominent theme discussed therein (e.g., Adventure, Community, etc.). I believe that such a categorization was necessary, although I acknowledge that it was also somewhat arbitrary. Each profile addresses a variety of topics. The scope of each cannot be limited to the section in which it is grouped.

I'm credited as the book's author, but this is true only in a nominal sense. Its real authors are the remarkable people I was fortunate enough to meet and interview over the past two years. I found them fascinating, charming, generous, vibrant, and inspiring. The opportunity to know them and to learn from them has been the chief pleasure of this experience. In many cases, they became friends and role models. During the two years I spent working on this book, some of the interviewees grew ill or passed away. I knew this was a possibility when I began, but I was not prepared for how deeply it would affect me. I owe each of the interviewees a debt of gratitude and always will. They helped me, not only to make this book, but also to grow, to change, and to feel prepared to enter the next phase of my life.

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, really live, as much and as best as you possibly can right now? They tell us that it's never too late and it's never too early.