

A Realistic and Positive Book on Ageing: Also helpful for the 'young-old'

The warmth of the heart prevents your body from rusting: [Marie de Hennezel](#)

This is the best book on ageing I have read: well-informed, realistic, as well as warm-hearted and inspiring. Marie is one of the leading French experts on ageing: she has been studying this field for years, and draws on some excellent role models and teachers. Here are a few quotes from her to set the scene:

"Old age is neither a complete disaster nor a golden age".

"If you are not prepared for growing old...you risk going through hell".

"When I met some radiant elderly people...I realised that their radiance was very much the fruit of deliberate clear-headed hard work." This requires "bidding farewell to one's youth and meditating upon one's impending death".

From this book, I learned a valuable distinction between the 'young-old' and the 'old-old': the young-old are typically aged 50 – 75, and still in good health. The old-old are typically in their late 70s or 80s, and are facing health decline, infirmity, and often dependency. She quotes a brilliant comment from another French expert, Olivier de Ladoucette: *"people don't perceive growing old as a progressive process, but as something that 'attacks' you around the age of seventy-five or eighty. Between fifty and seventy-five, we don't know what is going on".* He also says *"people are afraid of growing old because they cannot bear the way other people will see them...an ugly, useless burden on society".*

These comments have finally helped me to understand why so many of the young-old are in vehement denial about ageing, and don't want to face the topic at all. As this book explains, the young-old feel frightened and vulnerable about becoming old-old, because they see that as an entirely negative stage of life, where they will be entirely powerless.



Marie de Hennezel

The second great gift of this book is a soundly-based case that late old age can be a positive completion of life, *even if* one is dependent and infirm. This is not naive

optimism, and doesn't deny the pain and loss of late old age: her positive view is well-supported by case histories, research and more. Marie says:

"The second half of life has a spiritual goal. It is characterised by the process of individuation." "...realising one's true nature..." "old age is not a shipwreck, but ... a form of growth ... The true meaning of old age is not performance, but maturity".

Much of the book offers specific support for this view. Here are some of the key points:

- *Dependency*: part of the gift of ageing can be "accepting our helplessness", embracing "the freedom of allowing things to happen...putting oneself in the hands of the universe".
- *Care provision*: Marie is passionate about improving general standards of care, and cites "inspiring examples of how good it is in places." She advocates training for carers which sustains the human connection with clients: for example by eye contact, conversation and touch.
- *Alzheimer's and Dementia*: These are two of the most terrifying conditions for the young-old: she quotes several experts who believe such conditions are a constructive response to unresolved difficulties in one's life. If we can "...face up to our regrets and our remorse", maybe in our fifties or sixties, this may change our risk of such ailments.
- *Solitude and the Inner Self*: Old age can be a lonely time, but this is a great chance to learn to enjoy solitude and deepen the inner life: she has a lovely quote from one friend: "I am discovering the great value of motionless journeys".
- *Positive relationships*: some old people are isolated because they have a negative, complaining view of life, and a demanding approach to those around them. "The idea is not to expect too much of others, but simply to be receptive".

The book quotes some inspiringly practical advice from another French expert, Robert Misrahi: "Elderly people risk living their death, not their life. But old age can be a time for "rebirth". This needs re-education: creativity, joy, and serenity in the face of death" ...He advocates helping the elderly to "travel mentally, to think through their lives, listen to music, read, write, contemplate, explore works of art, walk or meditate." And "rediscover...the ability to be enchanted and amazed... We should rejoice that we are still alive, and not lament the fact that we are approaching death". As he points out, by growing into old age like this, we are offering a real gift of wisdom to older generations.

I hope that this short piece gives you a sense of the wisdom, encouragement and practical clarity which this book offers. I urge you to read it in full!

