

ZENior
CitiZEN



Mastering the Art of Aging

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Introduction

Time goes by so quickly!

I first heard this line when I was 18-years-old. I was sitting on a couch next to a lady who was 72 years my senior with my forearm resting juxtaposed to hers while we chatted. Noticing the stark contrast between her flaccid and wrinkled skin in comparison to my taut, tanned, and toned arm, I remember saying to myself in the privacy of my thoughts: “Yeh, right! It’ll take an eternity till the day my skin gets to look like this.”

It didn’t take an eternity, but a mere thirty-two years later for me to realize what she meant. It was not until I turned 50-years-old that I grasped the reality and wisdom of her words. What seemed to have happened rather hastily and without my being aware of it, suddenly I’d become a middle-aged man who recognized that time, like a fast-moving vehicle in the highway of life, had been rapidly zooming by as I watched my youthful years fade away in the rear mirror of my life journey. After driving by the milepost 50, I began reflecting on the nature and function of time; not only the time that has already passed, but even more importantly, the time that is yet to come. Then, I became aware that in another couple of decades, granted that I’d still be alive, I’d be the one telling a young person the truth that can only be understood in the latter stages of life: time goes by so quickly!

Although it seems like a long time since the days of my first job working at my father’s nursing home, a place where I learned so much about aging at a very young age, my interest in the subject was reawakened in my middle-aged years when serendipity struck. After landing a job as the executive director of a nonprofit organization caring for the needs of older adults, I’d unexpectedly returned to the field of work of my very first job as though completing a full circle in my professional life. Having unwittingly reconnected with the challenging issues of the aging process, my interest in the critical latter decades of the individual human experience propelled me to commit my time to broadening my knowledge. The more I dedicated myself to expanding

my know-how, the more confident I became in the comprehensive theoretical knowledge that I was accumulating. Thus, I began offering my expertise to several organizations that promoted the welfare of elders in my community and founded an aging services consulting agency. However, as soon as I established myself as a bona fide expert in social gerontology, I had an epiphany that rattled the foundation of my learning and compelled me to reevaluate what I thought I knew so well.

Based on my interactions with my generation cohorts (Baby Boomers), many of whom were caring for their elder parents, as well as my own personal experience in the fiftieth decade of my life, I had this revelation that old age is not the most frightful aspect of the latter years of life—the aging process itself is! It became evident to me that the fear of being old is not the main culprit of people’s anxieties. Instead, it is the fretful fast-paced tour of terror of the aging process that escalates the apprehension of arriving at the undesired destination. It is the dreadful journey of a continuously disempowered self marching toward the end of life that paves the way to unbearable fear of a future that may steal our health, vitality, and heavens forbid, our minds. Hence, the unrelenting angst of a future we cannot control becomes the actual thief that robs us from the present experience of living.

Taking for granted the truism of the words of the nonagenarian woman who warned me when I was a teenager that “time goes by so quickly,” which after crossing the half-century mark I have validated as a veritable fact, I realized that allowing the burglar of fear to infiltrate the mind to steal the quality of life of whatever is left of this most precious and irreplaceable commodity is like committing a crime against the self. But on the other hand, what can we do to sublimate the natural anguish that seems to intensify as time speeds up toward the inevitable end while the physical vehicle breaks down piecemeal? Is it possible to extirpate the overwhelming fear of increasing deterioration, changes in social functions, a multitude of losses, and all the other setbacks intrinsic to the aging process? After spending an excessive amount of time and energy trying to ferret out the answers to these questions through intellectual

investigation and complex gerontological theories, I found what I was looking for in the simplicity of Zen. The following pages relate my journey searching for the possibility of mastering the art of aging from a ZENior CitiZEN's perspective.

Just as a teenager I was haphazardly introduced to the realities of the aging process, it was in my early adult life that I came across the fascinating world of Zen Buddhism. I had just moved to Maui, Hawaii, where my desire to learn about the philosophical and attitudinal approach of Zen was awakened by my long dormant interest in Eastern culture. Perhaps I was inspired by the many Asian-Americans I befriended in Hawaii; or maybe it was the influence of an Anglo friend who was an acupuncturist and herbalist who traveled to China often and introduced me to Taoism; or more likely it was the combination of all of it that spurred my interest in exploring the wisdom of the Eastern World. In any case, before I could even notice, I'd been captured by the extraordinary depth and simplicity of Zen.

Suddenly, I started seeing both the world and myself from a different perspective, while experiencing life immersed in a mindful state that abrogated my anxieties and fears. Intellectually, I was intrigued by this approach that I could not define. Neither a religion nor a philosophy in a scholastic sense, Zen is but a way of liberation from the shackles of the dread of uncertainty; a way in which to focus on the immediacy of the present moment without being disturbed by the unforeseeable consequences of the unknown. Like life itself, Zen's complexity lies in the simplicity of its very nature.

As soon as I began delving into the subject, the first question that came up was a natural response to what I was not able to rationalize: What exactly is Zen? I found the answer in the writings of the great Japanese scholar who introduced Zen to the Western world, D.T. Suzuki, who defined it this way: "Zen is that which makes you ask the question, because the answer is where the question arises. The answerer is no other than the questioner himself... when you ask what Zen is, you are asking who you are and what your self is...Now, you know what Zen is, for it is Zen that tells you what your self is and that self is Zen."¹

Thus, many years later when I applied a Zen approach to the challenges of the aging process, I concluded that with diligent inner work and discipline, it is possible to turn the tribulations of aging into self-empowerment. Through a method that I termed Power Aging², I realized that even though aging is inevitable, bleak old age is not—and neither is the anxiety about aging compulsory. The reality is that each individual going through the aging process has both the ability and the choice to experience an empowered life, or she can also choose to succumb to a Dantean purgatory of “*eldergeddon*.”³

As Charles Darwin concluded in his seminal study of the evolution of species, it is not the strongest or most intelligent that survives, but those who can best manage change. Since the aging process is the quintessential continuous change of a lifetime, learning how to overcome the complex transformations that take place after the half century milestone of life is imperative to Power Aging. Therefore, when it comes to growing older, the survival of the fittest depends on how well you can handle the challenges inherent to the aging process, and accept with uncompromising resilience the certainty that time will inevitably come to an end—as it does to everyone and everything that lives. It is an inescapable law of nature. And the only way to succeed in this daunting task is by mastering the art of aging, while turning the lessons that come with the passing of time into personal power. The adaptation to change is at the heart of a Darwinian evolution of aging.

But I’m not interested in the evolution of aging. I must learn about the survival of aging. And being a Zenist, I have but one path to follow. I invite you to come along, but only in accordance with *Hsin-Hsin Ming*, or the “verses of the perfect mind” by Seng-t’san, the third patriarch of Zen: “Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the man of old; seek what he sought.”⁴

Are you willing to relinquish the negative stereotypical label of “senior citizen” and replace it with the self-empowered denomination of ZENior CitiZEN? Do you want to explore the possibility of mastering the art of aging? Are you ready to embark on this adventurous journey? Then, let’s begin.

Chapter 1

The First Step of a Thousand-Mile Journey

The Starting Point

“**G**rowing old is not for sissies,” Bette Davis asserted with conviction—and she was right! It takes an inordinate amount of chutzpah to face an indomitable foe that cannot be defeated. After all, what’s a mere mortal to do in the face of the inevitable approaching death while the body gives in to the demands of nature? And to make matters worse, as the clock ticks inexorably toward the final hour, the anxiety of growing old increases with each passing year turning the present into a living nightmare of an encroaching doomed future. Alas, it seems that unless you build the inner strength necessary to cope with what’s arguably the most challenging stage in human life, you are not likely to have a positive experience in your latter years. But what’s a brave man or woman to do?

“I’ll tell you what, man, I’m well aware that I’m growing old, but I can also tell you for sure that I’m no sissy,” my burly sexagenarian workout buddy blurted out defensively when I mentioned Davis’ popular quote to him.

“I’m sorry Douglas, I didn’t mean to stir up your emotions,” I said backing off from his unexpected reaction. “You’re obviously irked about aging.”

“Damn right I’m irked!” He said with anger and frustration echoing through his words. “I’ve been losing my stamina, I’m not as strong as I used to be, and my stiff squeaky joints have turned me into an anti-inflammatory medication junkie. But you can trust me on this, bro: I’m going to fight aging to the end.” Then, he picked up a couple of 40-pound dumbbells and lifted them with abandon while growling like a menaced beast.

It was at that moment that the light bulb went on and illuminated my consciousness with a perspective that had eluded me hitherto. After hearing my friend’s testosterone-infused words

as he resumed his heavy weight lifting, I walked to the water fountain musing over the absurdity of what he just said. Drinking more water than I usually do, I kept thinking that fighting a natural progressive process that is impossible to evade is tantamount to attempting to halt a speeding locomotive by standing on its tracks with your hand raised with adamant determination to stop it. In both instances you will be mercilessly crushed. In fact, the surest way to self-defeat is to try to confront a juggernaut opponent that has the upper hand on you. In the case of the aging process, it certainly has my strong macho friend by the...well, throat. That's when I realized that's got to be a better way to deal with the unconquerable adversary of old age.

Learning was the first step of my thousand-mile journey to Power Aging. After that day, I became like an alchemist in the pursuit of the Philosopher Stone of aging. I was determined to find out whether it's feasible to move forward to the latter years of life with courage and confidence in the uncompromising future of old age. Thus, in the experiential laboratory of my own life, I began exploring the possibility of turning the lead of fear of aging into the gold of a new way of embracing elderhood. My ultimate goal was to learn how to master the art of aging while turning it into inner strength and personal power. I wasn't sure exactly where to begin, but I knew that I needed to collect some basic information so I could understand the complexity of the challenging issue I decided to tackle. In a methodical auto-didactic approach, I delved into the topic of aging from an intellectual perspective, which was quite different from the observation-empirical approach that I'd learned about it in my youth when I worked at my father's nursing home. I needed to understand exactly what aging was and how it affected both individual and society. However, after reading numerous books and countless hours of research, I ended up with a substantial amount of information that augmented my knowledge of the issues of aging but did not yield the practical results I was after. In spite of compiling so much valuable data, I remained clueless as to what strategy to employ in my quest to learning how to turn the shortcomings of the aging process into personal power.

Endnotes

Introduction

¹ D.T. Suzuki, *What is Zen?* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 1.

² *Power Aging* is one of the fundamental concepts of this book. It supersedes what is commonly known as “healthy aging” or “successful aging,” both of which relate to dealing with the natural changes that occur during the aging process. *Power Aging* distinguishes itself as the development of fortitude of the being to overcome the limitations of aging in mind, body, and spirit.

³ *Eldergeddon* is a term I coined to describe the silent apocalyptic fear of old age. Unlike thanatophobia, which is the psychological term to describe the fear of death, my concept of *eldergeddon* reflects the unspoken anxiety of older adults with future age-related calamities such as dementia or institutionalization.

⁴ Seng-t’san, *Hsin-Hsin Ming*, verses of the perfect mind, an interpretation by Eric Putkonen (Mound, MN: Awaken to Life, First Edition, e-book format (PDF)).

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