

## READER'S GUIDE

### THE ART OF AGING: *Celebrating the Authentic Aging Self*

#### A Companion Guide to Facilitate Group Discussion and Personal Reflections

The authors have written a Study Guide consisting of questions and activities that help the reader to explore and reflect on their own response to the material. This can also serve as suggestions for classroom assignments.

The following are questions and activities based on the text, which promote self-examination and deepen understanding of a variety of issues around aging.

#### **Chapter 1 -Introduction**

##### Key Concepts:

- The attempt to come to terms with aging and death is a universal human quest.
- Elders who are living fruitful, creative lives can serve as inspiring models that help us envision a positive old age.
- While aging happens by itself, maturity takes hard work and attention.

##### Exploration:

- “The only constant is change”. Yet change (i.e. life transitions, relationship adjustments, illness, loss, aging etc.) is disquieting. What is it about change that makes you uncomfortable? Are there particular changes that cause you anxiety?
- The Matzkins write about looking into their future with “hope” and “fear”. Describe some hopes you have for your old age? What fears do you have?
- “Creating a good old age is work that takes a lifetime”. What are characteristics of a good old age? What kind of work would it take to achieve it?
- How does our culture try to “hide, delay or deny” aging? Do you find

yourself attempting to avoid the impact of aging? Describe how you do this.

## **Chapter 2 - Why Old People?**

Key Concepts:

- Old people are under-represented in the art of the past as well as in contemporary media.
- Both the creation and appreciation of art can be used as a healing tool to work through unresolved feelings about aging.
- History and character are written especially clearly on an old person's face.
- Aged beauty reveals itself when one looks more deeply.
- Elders, because of their years lived, have special things to teach us.

Exploration:

- Find several photos that appeal to you from magazines or newspapers. Choose an elder woman, an elder man, a young woman, a young man. Examine each picture. What feelings does each picture evoke in you? What stories can you make up about the person in each picture? Is it true that there is "history written more clearly on an older face"?
- When you were young, what thoughts and judgments did you have in general about old people?
- "Elders are the keepers of the values of previous generations. They are the living window into the past". Of what value is it for the present generation to look to past generation for guidance?
- What is the meaning and significance of the proverb, "when an old person dies, a library disappears"
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## **Chapter 3 -Women of Age**

Key Concepts:

- The physical signs of their aging provide many people the initial impetus to contemplate their life.
- A passionate sense of purpose, generosity of spirit, present focus and physical appeal are qualities the Matzkins found in the vital women they interviewed.
- The quality of a “fresh” attitude is unrelated to the number of years an elder has lived.

#### Exploration:

- Society’s definition of beauty is usually limited to “only the outer few millimeters” of body surface. Do you accept this as true? In what ways could this belief affect those who accept that definition?
- Other than physical appearance, describe qualities that an enlarged definition of beauty would include (example: strength of character, humor).
- Alice chose age 70 as “entering the doorway of old age”. What age do you consider old? Why? Is the number of years a person has lived the best and only indication of age, or are there other indices that could be used, such as physical condition or emotional maturity?
- Do you have a “passion” that would provide you with a sense of purpose that you can carry through old age?
- How can “generosity of spirit” play a role in living a full life?
- Contrast the concept of “freshness” with “youthfulness”.
- What does it mean to have regret for “unlived life”? Do you harbor those kinds of regrets?
- When Alice writes that she does not have to be a victim of her age, what does that mean?
- How important are “genes and luck” (i.e. health and circumstance) in

leading a happy life? For example, can one be challenged by poor health and poverty, and still be happy? What other personal qualities and material qualities might contribute your happiness?

- Which of the women that Alice painted did you admire the most? Why?
- What elder or elders that you know personally, or know through the media do you admire? What qualities they exhibit do you find admirable?

#### **Chapter 4 - Naked Old Men**

Key Concepts:

- Awareness of the impermanence of life can inspire us to savor and appreciate the richness of our life.
- Signs of impermanence are everywhere ... if we are open to experience them.

Exploration:

- Do you tend to avoid the impact of the fact that you will age, lose your health and die one day? In what ways do you do this?
- In the past what things have served as reminders of your mortality?
- For several days, read carefully the obituaries in the newspaper. Contemplate the life of each person you read about as if you knew them personally.
- Write a short obituary for yourself.
- What fraction of your life do you estimate is completed? How does this feel to you?
- Close your eyes and imagine yourself as very, very old. Have that “old you” engage in imaginary dialogue with the “present you”. What does he or she say? What advice is given? How do you feel afterward?
- Is there a sculpture or two in this section that has produced an impact on you? Describe your thoughts and feelings.

## **Chapter 5 -Naked Truth**

### Key Concepts:

- Judging an aged human body using the typical standards of feminine beauty eliminates the opportunity to see a deeper, more encompassing “inner beauty”.
- Acceptance and appreciation of your body as it is can lead to a sense of gratefulness for being alive.

### Exploration:

- Examine pictures of models in a fashion magazine. Can you pick out the rules of beauty (body type, facial structure, hair styles, racial characteristics, posture, “attitude”, etc. that the editors and advertisers have used to select the models they chose for the photo shoot?
- Remove your clothes and stand in front of a full length mirror. Examine yourself slowly from head to toe. As you are going through this process, listen closely to the voices that are going on in your mind. What are they saying?
- Is beauty in the eye of the beholder? Think of a person who others might not consider beautiful or handsome, yet because you know, love and respect them, seems beautiful to you.
- Alice writes about being thankful for her body. Write a “thank you” note to your body, telling it all the things you appreciate.

## **Chapter 6 - Lovers**

### Key Concepts:

- We tend to mistakenly think of elders as asexual, as not having the desire to touch and be touched.
- The desire to be loved and accepted throughout the whole of our life span is an almost universal yearning.
- “Love is blind” could actually mean that mature lovers are able to see their

partner more clearly because they see with eyes of love.

- Aged love is made sweeter by the fact of the limited time available.

Exploration:

- Would you be put off by an image of an older couple in sensual embrace? Why or why not?
- Richard writes about the ability take on diverse roles in a couple relationship. (lover-lover, friend-friend, sibling-sibling, parent-child, teacher-student). Are there roles in intimate relationship you tend to gravitate toward? Shy away from? Has this changed from the way you were in the past? Have the roles you avoided affected your relationships?
- Do you know couples in their later years who have an enduring love for each other? What do you think is their secret.

## **Chapter 7 - Declining Years – Aunt Kitty from Age 89 to 97**

Key Concepts:

- Physical and mental decline and the specter of death are the two major fears people have about old age.
- The often times rapid deterioration that can take place in the years from old age to late old age can be compared to rapid growth in the period from infant to toddler... except in reverse.
- At the end of a life, when pains and disabilities multiply and there is little left to accomplish and experience, death can be welcomed rather than feared.

Exploration:

- Aunt Kitty lived from the time of the horse and buggy to the era of space travel. What are some of the major society altering changes that you have seen in your lifetime?
- In describing Aunt Kitty's serene acceptance of her disabilities and losses,

Alice uses the word “surrender” in a positive way. Can surrender in this context be seen as negative, as in giving up prematurely or without a fight? Explain.

- Alice writes of the actions she is taking now in order to “deal with those difficult truths of the declining years”. What, if anything, are you doing to physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually to prepare for your old age?
- Do you believe there is some eternal essence, some part of you which will continue after your death, or will the personal “you” be “totally and eternally extinguished”? Does your belief affect how you live your life?

## **Chapter 8 – Reflections On Being With Our Parents In Their Old Age and Death**

Key Concepts:

- We can gain insight into how we can age well by thoughtfully observing how the elders in our life deal with their old age.
- The process of handling the details and dealing with “stuff” after the death of a loved one can help bring meaning and perspective about their life ... and your own.
- Everything in the universe is subject to the threefold process of creation, maintenance and dissolution (in living beings – birth, maturity, old age and death).
- Our human life is only one brief moment in the infinite progression of time.

Exploration:

- Describe some useful things about aging that you have learned by observing important elders in your life as they age.
- Imagine being in the prime of life, vital, in control, able to provide for self and others. Now imagine yourself in late old age. Visualize yourself

physically and mentally compromised, needing assistance with even simple tasks of daily living, like bathing, walking, eating. What feelings emerge from becoming helpless, making that transition from being helper to being helped?

- What if several of the significant people in your life were to die tomorrow. Make a list of “unfinished business” – unresolved issues between you and them that would remain unfinished. What could you say or do to help come to completion? What keeps you from doing this now?
- The Matzkins write that the death of their parents was transformational in many ways. Have you lost someone close to you? What were some of the ways that this has changed you?
- Who will remember you in 100 years? Does it matter?

## **Chapter 9 – On Becoming Elders**

### Key Concepts:

- In our society, paradoxically, elders seem to be both marginalized and honored.
- There is no substitute for the benefit that accrues from the accumulation of life experiences and the perspective of years lived.
- The losses and hardship of aging can turn into blessings. They are the raw materials that produce strength of character and depth of personality.
- There is the tendency as we age to move from the realm of actively “doing”, to the realm of “being”— taking time to experience life in a more passive, receptive way.



- As we age, progressive physical disabilities put us in touch with our vulnerability and our diminishing time remaining.
- Acts of kindness toward others makes our life more satisfying and meaningful.
- The most valuable commodity in human life is time.
- The whole of life is your work of art. The point is to utilize your gifts and transform your disabilities to make it the most beautiful artwork you possibly can.

Exploration:

- The beginning of the chapter lists some negative and positive connotations to the words “old” and “young”. What negative judgments do you presently hold in general about old people? What positive judgments? What positive judgments do you hold about young people?  
Negative judgments?
- Disregarding your actual age, how old in years do you feel?
- It is almost a universal experience – as you get older time seems to be passing more quickly. Is this true for you? Why do you think this might be so?
- A dominant feature of old age is loss – loss of beauty, memory, sensory acuity, physical strength and agility, health, independence, finances, possessions, social status, your loved ones, etc. What losses connected with aging do you fear the most? List them in order from most feared to least.
- “If not now, when?” is a powerful statement about the necessity of doing, or having or experiencing ... before time runs out. Describe some things to do, have or experience that you are feeling the pressure of time to include in your life.

- Elders often feel the need and desire to give back to the world in some way in gratitude for what they have received. What would you like your life's legacy to be?
- What are the things in your life you are thankful for?