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BOOK REVIEW

Aging Our Way: Lessons for Living From 85 and Beyond

Reviewed by Meghan R. Lehembre

Meika Loe. (2011). Aging Our Way: Lessons for Living From 85 and Beyond. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 344 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0199797905.

Why read a book about older adults? Growing old is often an issue that many Americans prefer not to face. As a 31-year-old woman who has lived in the United States and Europe, it is apparent to me that the process of getting older is often viewed as a negative and scary. We live in an ageist society. Although some efforts have recently been made to acknowledge older generations, the prevailing message communicated in our media is still evident: Life is for the young, and it is better to be, look, and feel young.

In today's society there is a treatment (if not a cure) for most of the physical signs of aging. All one has to do is take a trip down the cosmetics aisle at the grocery or drug store to view the myriad wrinkle reduction creams and hair dye that effectively covers gray. Even in the current economic climate, the beauty industry continues to grow and flourish, driven by a quest to locate products that aim to prolong youth. However, regardless of society's efforts to keep us all young, individuals who are 85 years and older are the fastest growing population in the United States.

People are living longer and healthier lives. Given the richness of history of individuals who have lived long lives, the knowledge that they can share through their life experiences, and the reality that we are all aging every day of our lives, it would behoove us to view older adults with respect, reverence, and compassion. Meika Loe's book *Aging Our Way* is an engaging piece that highlights the lives of 30 nonagerians living independently. All of the participants share generational membership and are part of the "Greatest Generation," which is generally agreed to be individuals born between 1901 and 1924. The chapters

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are organized as 13 life lessons: Continue to do what you did, (re)design your living space, live in moderation, take time for self, ask for help and mobilize resources, connect with peers, resort to tomfoolery, care for others, reach out to family, get intergenerational and redefine family, insist on hugs, be adaptable, and accept and prepare for death. Each of these life lessons is briefly discussed; this review ends with the conclusions of the book and overall reactions.

The first lesson identified by Loe is “Continue to Do What You Did.” This chapter speaks to the importance of the theme that people ascribe to life throughout their development. Loe says, “Overarching story that we tell about our lives matters enormously when it comes to how we construct our days, even in old age” (p. 33). Throughout the book, the reality that the later stages in life are a normal phase in a person’s development is underscored. Ageism prevents people from viewing old age as a normal progression from youth. Loe effectively presents the stories of participants and lessons as a continuous aspect of people who are continuing to live fully in the final stage of their lives. She does so in a manner that refuses to diminish the stage of development or the lives of the “oldest old.”

“(Re)Design Your Living Space” and “Live in Moderation” make up Lessons 2 and 3. Location, location, location—where a person lives matters is a truth that transcends age. A person’s location affects central aspects of her or his life. Matters of convenience, community, and weather are all determined by a person’s location. Loe focuses on the manner in which the oldest old have utilized creativity and ingenuity in adapting to the community around them and shaped their living spaces to support their autonomy through comfort, efficiency, and simplicity. The importance of living in moderation and the manner in which experiences of these older adults have influenced the lens in which they view life are highlighted. Having lived through the Great Depression and World War II, the participants in the book gained resiliency through hardships and learned to value what they had and shirk the belief that more is better.

The importance of balancing independence and connectivity is explored in the lessons “Take Time for Self,” “Ask for Help; Mobilize Resources,” and “Connect With Peers.” Loe writes, “The oldest old remind us that opportunities for personal satisfaction and liberation do not disappear in late life” (p. 105). Participants’ use of time alone as a means for self-growth and reflection is underscored. The adage “alone but not lonely” is apt in describing the benefits that people of all ages gain from time spent in the absence of others. However, people also have to foster their connections and relationships to appreciate time away from others as well as succeed in life. This is particularly true for the oldest old. To address physical disabilities and limitations that are common as one ages, one needs to ask for help and be able to depend on those around.

In one’s attempt to live a balanced, meaningful life, two invaluable lessons are “Resort to Tomfoolery” and “Care for Others.” Loe illuminates the manner in which nonagenarians use humor to “connect past and present, cement social bonds and make others happy, express needs, emotions, anxieties and identity,

enhance health and social participation, and respond to aging and ageism” (p. 149). The importance of laughter and humor at any age should never be minimized. The manner in which participants use humor in their lives, as well as an illustration of the manner in which they do so, was a part of the book that I particularly enjoyed. In addressing the importance of caring for others, Loe emphasizes the creative and nonmainstream ways in which older adults extend care work beyond biological and marital bonds.

The role of family in the oldest old was the focus of the lessons “Reach Out to Family” and “Get Intergenerational; Redefine Family.” Families are a valued and integral part of the lives of people in general, including the oldest old. The concept of family is extended beyond bloodlines, and the value of friendships and relationships formed outside of kinship is presented as equally or more valuable than kinship relationships. Contradictory to popular belief, as people age, their social support and network become increasingly diverse and rich.

“Insist on Hugs” and “Be Adaptable” are lessons that, again, people of any age could benefit from. In *Aging Our Way*, Loe highlights the importance of physical contact and affection. The discomfort of society and of many of the participants with exploring the role of physical contact for the oldest old was also presented. In discussing the importance of adaptability in later life, Loe speaks to the necessity of participants to become adaptive as a reaction to societal realities of their time. Questions about the adaptability of future generations are raised.

The final lesson of the book is “Accept and Prepare for Death.” Although acceptance of death and nonexistence is relevant throughout a person’s life span from an existential perspective, people must face the end of their existence in a much more tangible way in the later stage of life. Loe includes Peter Laslett’s (1994) conceptualization of the “fourth age”—considered to be the last stage of life—which varies in length and is characterized by dependency, frailty, and decreased quality of life. As throughout the book, Loe does an excellent job of addressing the realities of aging from a strength-based perspective. The opportunity for active participation that we as individuals each have in our death strikes me as empowering in that it emphasizes the freedom that we each have to be authors of our lives to the end. Examples given in the book range from wills made to instances in which a person dies after a milestone in her or his life, such as an anniversary. Death is scary to most people; however, the oldest old featured in the book incorporate death into the meaning of their lives in a significant way.

The conclusion to the book is titled “New Perspectives on the Oldest Old,” and the chapter capsulizes the strength-based lens with which the book was written. The control that older adults assert in their lives, the creativity they use to address their needs in new and adaptive ways, and the innovative manner in which they face challenges are the central themes communicated. It is a book that communicates hope and empowerment for all and conveys the message that getting older can be something to look forward to, not to fear.

Much of the literature regarding longevity focuses on the physiological and nutritional habits of people who live long lives. Often overlooked is the importance of a person's spirit, life schemas, and worldview. Loe's vivid description of the manner in which these nonagenarians have drawn upon enduring traits such as creativity, resilience, assertiveness, and love to continue living life fully throughout their life span, including their years after 85, is a refreshing and welcome change to the way in which aging is typically presented. I would recommend the book to anyone who is open to facing the journey of age and time passing and embracing it, for herself or himself and for those in their lives.

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