

# AGING BODY, Unchanging Spirit

An interview with Andrew Weil, M.D.

By Lisa Schneider

*You write that aging can be “a catalyst for spiritual growth.” Can you please explain?*

In the book, I used an example of the legend of the Buddha’s enlightenment. When he was the young prince Siddhartha, he was kept by his father in a fantasy palace where he was not supposed to see anything that suggested aging and death or anything unpleasant. Then he goes out of the palace and the first thing he sees is an old man. Subsequently, he sees a corpse, a sick man, and a monk—these four sights or visitations are what really stimulated him on the path of enlightenment. So I think there is a way in which awareness and mortality and aging are certainly the most powerful reminders that we are moving in that direction; it can be a profound spiritual awakening.

I also quoted Carl Jung, who said that he thought that the major focus of the second half of life should be mortality and that anything that took away from that was in the direction of not being

mentally healthy. I think in our society we see so much denial of aging and ways that people try to pretend to themselves that aging is not happening and I worry about that being a not-healthy direction. I think a common correlation we see as people become older is that they have greater interest in things spiritual or non-physical.

*What do you think is at the heart of our fear of aging?*

I think the root is the fear of death, which is the great mystery; it is what we do not understand and I think that is really why people turn to religion, turn to spiritual paths, to come to grips with mortality. Aging is a constant reminder that we are moving in that direction. So I think that is the root fear. Then on top of that, I think there are more specific fears: the fear of losing independence, losing pleasure in life, things of that sort.

*How can we overcome these fears?*

Well, I think by facing them squarely and being honest about them, that is the first

step. It is very helpful to seek out people who are examples of healthy aging and see what they have to teach us. Information is a very powerful antidote to fear, having truthful information.

*In terms of spirituality, are there particular things that people can do?*

Well, I think there are a lot of things that people can do to attend to their spiritual health and well-being. Some of the suggestions I have made over the years include bringing fresh flowers into your house, listening to music that elevates your spirits, reading spiritual literature—inspirational literature that has that effect, seeking out the company of people in whose presence you feel more elevated, spending more time in nature. I think there is an endless list of what people can do.

*On a personal level, what does aging mean to you? Is it something you look forward to?*

Well, I certainly am not going to deny the aging process. I really want to think about

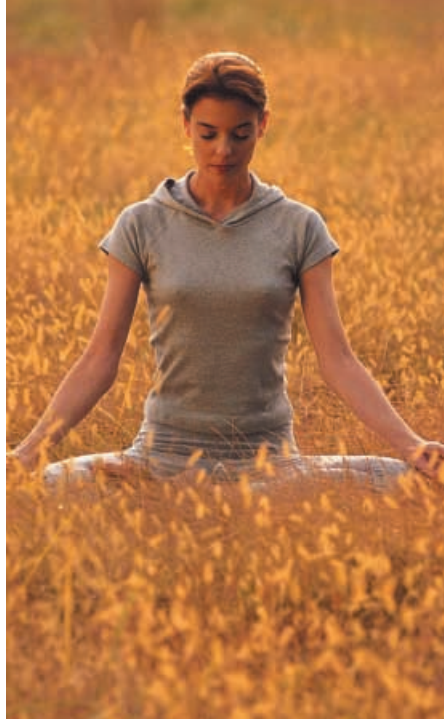
its challenges, particularly how I want to spend my last years, and I am in discussion with some contemporaries. We have had a lot of thoughts about trying to custom-design some kind of living facility for ourselves in which we all have our private spaces but will be able to do some things communally. That is one example of some ways I am thinking.

*Your beard is such an iconic part of your image, and you write that you have no interest in dyeing it. Do you think of it as a way to keep you mindful of the aging process?*

I think so. I started getting white in my beard long ago, I think maybe in my late 30s, the first gray hairs showed up in it so it is something I have lived with and watched for a long time. But I rather like the way it is now. It is a white beard-I think it gives me more authority, and I think a lot of people look at me as a Santa Claus figure. That is fine with me.

*You write about many things that become better with age. Can you share an example?*

**Aging is like whiskey.** I had a lot of fun writing about that since I had not seen it in print before. The examples I used were whiskey, wine, cheese, trees, violins, antiques. If you look at whiskey, aging of whiskey smooths out rawness and greenness, it adds depth and complexity and smoothness, it adds flavors, it concentrates what is desirable. At the same time, there is the evaporation of what is less consequential and I think it is fairly easy to see analogies in human life with



that process. Aging can increase value by concentrating what is most worthy and by allowing what is inconsequential to dissipate. It can smooth out roughness, add depth of character, so I just find it a useful exercise to think what aging brings out in these other areas of our experience that makes us willing to pay more money for old versions.

*So you would recommend that people concerned about aging should explore these positive aspects?*

Absolutely. I think in this culture especially, we are so programmed to see aging as a catastrophe and to look only at the negatives and I think it would be extremely helpful if we could look for the positive aspects as well. I think it is exactly these positive qualities for which elders are revered in other cultures, in many traditional cultures. I think we have just got way off the beam here.

A few weeks ago I had lunch with a scientist-a very hardcore scientist who surprised me by saying that he was 80. I would have guessed his age at 62, so he

was doing very well. He said that one of the qualities that he had observed in himself that had gotten better with age was pattern recognition. When something new came by, he was better able to recognize it and knew how to deal with it. The reason he said, was obviously that he had more stored in his memories, so when something happened, he had more experiences to compare it with. He knew how to maneuver through the world better than he did when he was younger. That is an example of something that gets better with age which we do not hear much about.

*You make a distinction between age-related diseases and the natural aging process.*

Absolutely. The main question that I tackled in writing “Healthy Aging” was, is age-related disease synonymous with aging? Does getting old necessarily mean getting sick? I think the answer clearly is ‘no’. It is possible to reduce the risk and delay the onset of age-related disease so the goal is to live long and well and then have a rapid drop-off at the end.



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