

'Do not go gentle into that good night'

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A foolish old man decides it's time to retire. He will give his three daughters all his property and come to live with each in turn on condition that each tells how much she loves him. The two older ones have no trouble lying about their "boundless" love, but the youngest says she loves her father as a daughter should love a parent, no more, no less and, in any case, she will owe an equal love to a future husband.

The old man is enraged and cuts this daughter out of his will while crying the eternal complaint of parents who think they are owed something by their offspring: "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!" Of course, everything turns out for the worst for "King Lear," in William Shakespeare's greatest and most unrelieved tragedy.

Fast-forward to Minnesota, the 20th century and Catherine ("Kay") Cram. Kay died a few years back at age 91. She was always surrounded by her "children" - women who had attended her Camp Hillaway in Cass County, others she sponsored through scholarships at the University of Minnesota; and by young artists she invited to perform for audiences in her Maple Plain home.

She asked nothing of her "children," yet they gave her their unconditional love. They kept coming back: with their spouses, and then with their own children. Unlike a garrulous old professor I knew who was "dissed" by his students, Kay never told old war stories ("in my day"), but brought her experience and wisdom to bear on the present: politics, social justice, women's rights.

Thus the two faces of aging, broadly drawn. Unquestionably, getting old is fraught with dangers and fears: from falls, scams by con-artists, memory loss, failing bodies; and, as King Lear discovered, dependency, abuse, loss of dignity, loss of meaning. As the bumper sticker says, "Old age is not for sissies."

But a prolonged and painful senescence isn't inevitable. Dr. George Vaillant, a professor of psychiatry, has described the concept of "healthy aging" in a decades-long study of men and women from all walks of life, from their student years into old age. Six factors predicted healthy aging: not smoking, no alcohol abuse, emotional maturity, good nutrition, regular exercise, a stable marriage. It didn't even matter if their parents lived long!

Many who had physical ailments still kept up a vital and satisfying life. In my own family my Duluth mother-in-law has written two novels and completed a master's degree at UMD, all in her 70s. My father-in-law volunteers at a soup kitchen, maintains several social networks and did his last engineering consultation at age 81. Both do have life-compromising illnesses, but neither feels sick. With the help of modern health care, they have outlived their parents.

"Perhaps," you may object, "those are the kind of people who were born to be happy and healthy." Dr. Gene Cohen, a practicing psychiatrist, has provided much evidence that an elderly person can learn how to age gracefully, that even old brains and old bodies can be strengthened by physical and mental exercise. The elder brain can expand its circuitry; dementia is not inevitable.

Obviously, one would like to establish good habits when young, but an older person can begin fresh, build social networks, hang out with younger people, take up creative activities, start to garden or reinvent a part-time volunteer or working life in retirement. Let's call this learning "wisdom."

Aging is here to stay. Within 20 or 30 years there will be more old people in the world than young, and that includes India and China. There are now more centenarians than ever, many quite healthy. While none of us can escape the final decree, we can hope our later years are full of grace, giving and an obstinate hunger for life. As the poet Dylan Thomas wrote,

"Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

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SUGGESTED READING

"Aging Well" by George E. Vaillant, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2002. "The Mature Mind. The Positive Power of the Aging Brain" by Gene D. Cohen, New York: Basic Books, 2005.

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