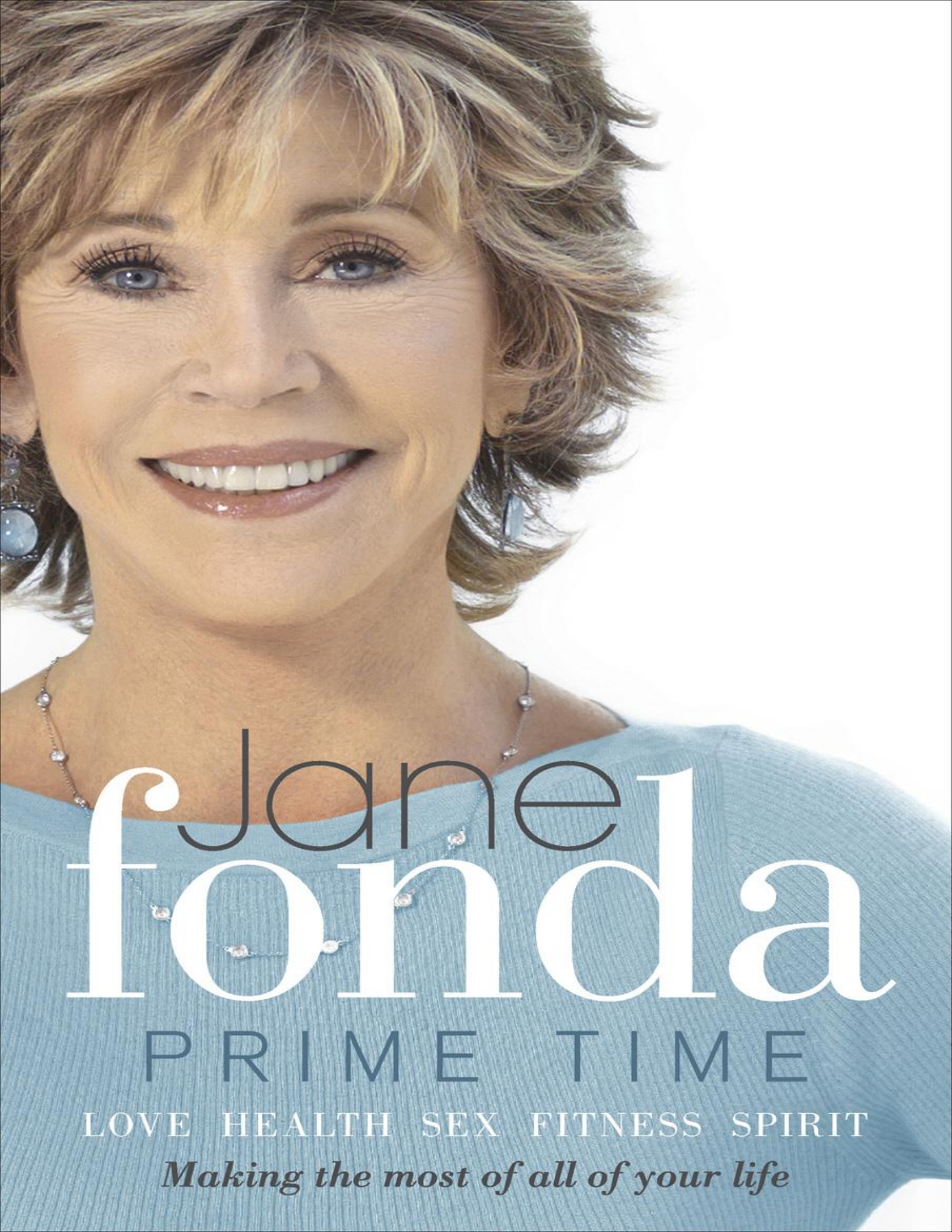


Jane fonda

PRIME TIME

LOVE HEALTH SEX FITNESS SPIRIT

Making the most of all of your life

Contents

About the Book

In this inspiring and candid book, Jane Fonda shares her wisdom on making the most of your life, especially the second half of it.

Combining stories from her own life and from the lives of others with new research, Jane Fonda explores how the critical years from 45 and 50, and especially from 60 and beyond, can be the time when you truly become the energetic, loving, fulfilled person you were meant to be. Covering the 11 key ingredients for vital living, Fonda shows you how to live a more insightful, healthy and fully integrated life – a life lived more profoundly in touch with yourself, your mind and body, and with your talents, friends and community.

Covering health, fitness, sex, love, social growth, and self-understanding, *Prime Time* offers a vision for successful living and maturing, so you too can ensure that your forties and beyond are your own prime time.

About the Author

Jane Fonda is an Oscar- and Emmy-winning actress and highly successful producer. She revolutionised the fitness industry with the *Jane Fonda Workout* in 1982 and has sold more than 17 million copies of her fitness-focused books, videos and recordings. Now in her 70s, she continues to wow women and men alike with her stunning figure and youthful looks. She is an active advocate on environmental issues, human rights and the empowerment of women, and is the founder of both the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and the Jane Fonda Center at Emory University. She is also the author of the bestselling *My Life So Far*.

Jane
Fonda

PRIME TIME

Vermilion
LONDON

PREFACE

The Arch and the Staircase

> **The past empowers the present, and the groping footsteps leading to this present mark the pathways to the future.**[1]
>
> —MARY CATHERINE BATESON

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was coming to the end of my sixties and facing my seventies, the second decade of what I thought of as the Third Act of my life—Act III, which, as I see it, begins at age sixty. I was worried. Being in my sixties was one thing. Given good health, we can fudge our sixties. But seventy—now, that's serious. In our grandparents' time, people in their seventies were considered part of the "old old" … on their way out.

However, a revolution has occurred within the last century—a longevity revolution. Studies show that, on average, thirty-four years have been added to human life expectancy, moving it from an average of forty-six years to eighty! This addition represents an entire second adult lifetime, and whether we choose to confront it or not, it changes everything, including what it means to be human.

Adding a Room

The social anthropologist (and a friend of mine) Mary Catherine Bateson has a metaphor for living with this longer life span in view. She writes in her recent book *Composing a Further Life: The Age of Active Wisdom*, "We have not added decades to life expectancy by simply

extending old age; instead, we have opened up a new space partway through the life course, a second and different kind of adulthood that precedes old age, and as a result every stage of life is undergoing change."[2] Bateson uses the identifiable metaphor of what happens when a new room is added to your home. It isn't just the new room that is different; every other part of the house and how it is used is altered a bit by the addition of this room.

In the house that is our life, things such as planning, marriage, love, finances, parenting, travel, education, physical fitness, work, retirement—our very identities, even!—all take on new meaning now that we can expect to be vital into our eighties and nineties … or longer.

But our culture has not come to grips with the ways the longevity revolution has altered our lives. Institutionally, so much of how we do things is the same as it was early in the twentieth century, with our lives segregated into age-specific silos: During the first third we learn, during the second third we produce, and the last third we presumably spend on leisure. Consider, instead, how it would look if we tore down the silos and integrated the activities. For example, let's begin to think of learning and working as a lifelong challenge instead of something that ends when you retire. What if the wonderfully empowering feeling of being productive can be experienced by children early in life, and if they know from first grade that education will be an expected part of their entire lives? What if the second, traditionally productive silo is braided with leisure and education? And seniors, with twenty or more productive years left, can enjoy leisure time while remaining in the workforce in some form and attending to education if for no other reason than to challenge their minds? Envisioned this way, longevity becomes like a symphony with echoes of different times recurring with slight modifications, as in music, across the life arc.

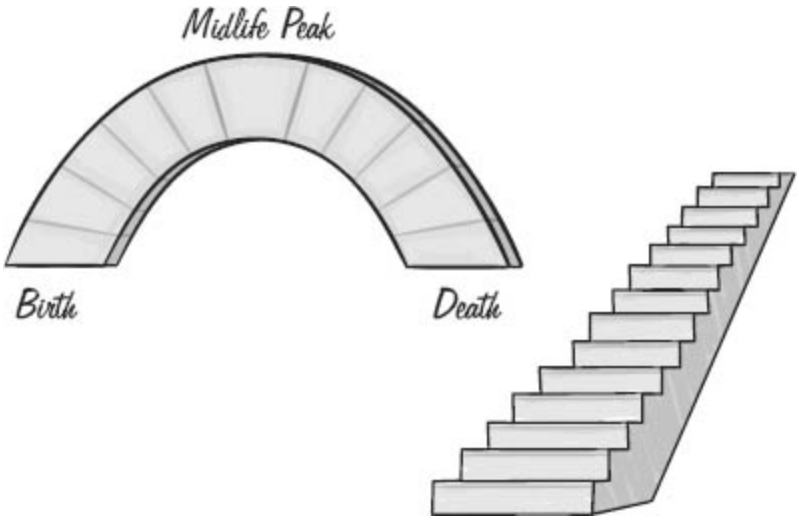
Except that we don’t have the sheet music to this new symphony. We—today’s boomers and seniors—are the pioneer generations, the ones who need to compose together a template for how to maximize the potential of this amazing gift of time, so as to become whole, fully realized people over the longer life arc.

In attempting to chart a course for myself into my sixties and beyond, I’ve found it helpful to view the symphony of my own life in three acts, or three major developmental stages: Act I, the first three decades; Act II, the middle three decades; and Act III, the final three decades (or however many more years one is granted).

As I searched for ways to understand the new realities of aging, I discovered the arch and the staircase.

The Arch and the Staircase

Here you see two diagrams that I have had drawn, because they make visualizable two conceptions of human life that have come to mean a lot to me.



One diagram, the arch, represents a biological concept, taking us from childhood to a middle peak of maturity, followed by a decline into infirmity.

The other, a staircase, shows our potential for upward progression toward wisdom, spiritual growth, learning—toward, in other words, consciousness and soul.

The vision behind these diagrams was developed by Rudolf Arnheim, the late professor emeritus of the psychology of art at Harvard University, and for me they are clear metaphors for ways we can choose to view aging. Our youth-obsessed culture encourages us to focus on the arch—age as physical decline—more than on the stairway—age as potential for continued development and ascent. But it is the stairway that points to late life's promise, even in the face of physical decline. Perhaps it should be a spiral staircase! Because the wisdom, balance, reflection, and compassion that this upward movement represents don't just come to us in one linear ascension; they circle around us, beckoning us to keep climbing, to keep looking both back and ahead.

Rehearsing the Future

Throughout my life, whenever I was confronted by something I feared, I tried to make it my best friend, stare it in the face, and get to know its ins and outs. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face." I have found this to be true. This is how I discovered that knowledge about what lies ahead can empower me, help me conquer my fears, take the wind out of the sails of my anxiety. Know thine enemy! Remember Rumpelstiltskin, the evil dwarf in the Grimms' fairy tale? He was destroyed once the miller's daughter learned his name and called it out. When we name our fears, bring them out into the open, and examine them in the light, they weaken and wither.

So, one of the ways I have tried to overcome my fears of aging involved rehearsing for it. In fact, I started doing this in Act II. I believe that this rehearsal for the future (along with doing a life review of the past) is part of why I have been able—so far—to live Act III with relative equanimity.

Being with my father when he was in his late seventies and in decline due to heart problems was what began to shatter any childhood illusions I'd had of immortality. I was in my mid-forties, and it hit me that with him gone, I would be the oldest one left in the family and, before too long, next at the turnstile. I realized then that it was not so much the idea of death itself that frightened me as it was being faced with regrets, the "what if"s and the "if only"s when there is no time left to do anything about them. I didn't want to arrive at the end of the Third Act and discover too late all that I had not done.

Kissing my father as I brought his Oscar for **On Golden Pond** *home to him, because he was too sick to attend the ceremony*

I began to feel the need to project myself into the future, to visualize who I wanted to be and what regrets I might have that I would need to address before I got too old. I wanted to understand as much as possible what cards age would deal me; what I could realistically expect of myself physically; how much of aging was negotiable; and what I needed to do to intervene on my own behalf with what appeared to be a downward slope.

The birth of my two children had taught me the importance of knowledge and preparation. The first birth had been a terrifying, lonely experience; I went through it unprepared and unrehearsed, swept along passively in a sea of pain. The second birth was quite the opposite. My husband and I worked with a birth educator in the months leading up to my due date, so that I was able to visualize what would happen and know what to do. The physical ordeal was no less grueling, the process no faster, but the experience itself was transformed. With knowledge and rehearsal, I found it easier to ride atop the sequence of events rather than be totally submerged by the pain.

I brought what I'd learned from childbirth to my experience facing late midlife. As I said, I was scared back then—it is hard to let go of children, of the success that came with youth, of old identities when new ones aren't yet clearly defined. I felt I could choose whether to be blindly propelled into later life, in denial with my eyes wide shut, or I could take charge and seek out what I needed to know in order to make informed decisions in the many changing areas of my life. That's why, in 1984, at age forty-six, before I'd even had my first hot flash, I wrote *Women Coming of Age*, with Mignon McCarthy, about what women can expect, physically, as they age, and what parts of aging are negotiable. It was a way to force myself to confront and rehearse the future. I was shocked to discover how little research had been devoted to women's health. Most

medical studies I found had been done on men. I'm happy to say this has started to change.

At forty-six, I began to envision the old woman I wished to be, and I described her in that book:

> I see an old woman walking briskly, out-of-doors, in every season. She's feisty. She's not afraid of being alone. Her face is lined and full of life. There's a ruddy flush to her cheeks and a bright curious look in her eye because she's still learning. Her husband often walks with her. They laugh a lot. She likes to be with young people and she's a good listener. Her grandchildren love to tell her stories and to hear hers because she's got some really good ones that contain sweet, hidden lessons about life. She has a conscious set of values and the knack to make them compelling to her young friends.

This is an example of rehearsing the future … good to do at any age! I'm glad I wrote it down, because it's fun for me to read my forty-six-year-old vision of my senior self, almost thirty years later, as a reality check to see how well I'm doing. Some days, I actually think I'm doing pretty well. I'm still feisty, and my solitude (which I cherish) doesn't feel like loneliness. Humor has definitely come to the fore. I'm no longer married, but I do walk together with my—what to call the man I am with when I'm seventy-two and unmarried? "Boyfriend" sounds too juvenile, don't you think? So then, what? "Lover?" That seems too in-your-face. I think I'll go with "honey." Anyway, my honey and I walk together, we laugh a lot, and we try to swing-dance for fifteen or twenty minutes every night—when we can. I feel I may have finally conquered my difficulties with intimacy. (Or maybe I just found a man who isn't scared of it!)

Richard and me in 2009
MARY VINETTE MARYVINETTE.COM

Gerontologists such as Bernice Neugarten have learned from their studies of the aged that traumatic events—widowhood, menopause, loss of a job, even imminent death—are not experienced as traumas "if they were anticipated and, in effect, *rehearsed* as part of the life cycle."[3]

Betty Friedan, in her book *The Fountain of Age*, wrote, "The finding emerges that the difference between knowing and planning, and not knowing what to expect (or denial of change because of false expectations) can be the crucial factor between moving on to new growth in the last third of life, or succumbing to stagnation, pathology, and despair."

With the help of many friends of all ages, as well as gerontologists, sexologists, urologists, biologists, psychologists, experts in cognitive research and health care, and a physicist or two, I have written this book. Even though I was already in my own Act III, doing this has been a form of rehearsal—for myself and for you, the reader. I wanted to be prepared and learn all I could. I wanted to be

able to say to myself and to you, “Let’s make the most of the years that take us from midlife to the end, and here’s how!”

I do not want to romanticize the process of aging. Obviously, there is no guarantee that this will be a time of growth and fruition. There are negatives to any stage of life, including potentially serious issues of mental and physical health. I cannot address all these things within the scope of this book. As we know, some of how life unfolds is a matter of luck. Some of it—about one-third, actually—is genetic and beyond our control. The good news is that this means that for a lot of it, maybe two-thirds of the life arc, we *can* do something about how well we do.

This book is for those of us who, like me, believe that luck is opportunity meeting preparation; that with preparation and knowledge, with information and reflection, we can try to raise the odds of being lucky, and of making our last three decades—our Third Acts—the most peaceful, generous, loving, sensual, transcendent time of all; and that planning for it, especially during one’s middle years, can help make this so.

Wholeness

Arnheim’s staircase made me realize how important it can be to see life as an interplay between one’s beginning, middle, and end. I found out that if we understand more deeply what Act I and Act II are (or were) about, who we are (or were becoming) during those foundational years, what dreams are still to be realized and which regrets addressed, then we can see Act III as a coming to fruition, rather than simply a period of marking time, or the absence of youth. We can understand it not as the far side of the arch—as the decline after the peak—but as *a stage of development* in its own terms. We can experience it as part

of the staircase—with its own challenges and joys, pitfalls and rewards, a stage as evolving and as satisfying and different from midlife or youth as adolescence is from childhood.

In 1996, Erik and Joan Erikson wrote, in *The Life Cycle Completed*, "Lacking a culturally viable ideal of old age, our civilization does not really harbor a concept of the whole of life."[4] The old ways of thinking about age, the fears of losing our youth and facing our own mortality, have kept us from seeing Act III as a vital, integrated part of our overall story, the potential-filled culmination of the first two acts. This old thinking is even more tragic now, in light of the extension of the life span. It can rob us of wholeness, and it can rob society of what we each, in our ripeness, have to offer.

With my dog Tulea in 2004
MAX COLIN/ELIOT PRESS

Those of us now entering our Third Acts are, on the whole, physically stronger and healthier than ever before. There is every likelihood that, if we work at it individually and collectively, we can develop a new "culturally viable ideal of old age" and see our lives as a series of stages that build one upon the other. Our doing so will not be just for us; it will represent a major cultural shift for the world around us and will help younger generations reconceive of their own life spans.

I have been inspired and encouraged by what I have learned while writing this book. I hope reading it will do the same for you.

In Part One, I set the stage by discussing the three acts of life, the challenges and gifts that each of them presents, and ways for you to begin to step back—now, at whatever act you are in—and become a witness to your own life, in all its stages, and thus see better how to live the rest of it with greater intention, freedom, and clarity. I also write about how doing a life review transformed how I am living my Third Act.

In Part Two, I write about the body, the brain, and our attitudes. There's some pretty good news there, as well as a new word: Positivity! I also, in Chapter 10, go into detail about how to write a life review.

Part Three goes into every dimension of love, friendship, and sex, including how to meet new people. You'll find a few good laughs in there, along with a lot of handy tips.

Part Four isn't what you'd expect in a book like this. But some of the most respected experts on aging believe—as do I—that to mount that staircase of late-life development as a fully realized person, we need to become advocates for the future. This can mean mentoring young children or protecting abused women; it can mean caring for the planet, feeling some responsibility for the big picture beyond ourselves. The psychiatrist Erik Erikson referred to this as "Generativity," and here's more good news: The

thirty-year-long Harvard Study of Adult Development shows that among the women in the sample, “mastering Generativity … was the best predictor of whether they reported attaining regular orgasm”![5]

Part Four is also about the importance of facing our mortality and planning for late life—emotionally, financially, legally, and in terms of what we can do, individually and together, to make our society more supportive of seniors and help create a happier environment for them.

Part Five shows us how learning to go inward—spiritually and metaphysically—allows us to look outward with new eyes.

And so let’s begin.

PART ONE

SETTING *the* STAGE *for* *the* REST *of* YOUR LIFE

CHAPTER 1

Act III: Becoming Whole

> **The greatest potential for growth and self-realization exists in the second half of life.**
>
> —CARL JUNG

"HOW OLD DO you feel?" someone asked me recently. I thought for a moment before answering. I wanted to really consider the question and not give a glib "I feel forty" sort of answer. "I feel seventy," I said, remembering a retort of Pablo Picasso's: "It takes a long time to become young."

Ageism

A while back, I spoke to a group of adolescent girls, and when I mentioned my age, some of them winced. They whispered to me that I should not let on how old I was, because I didn't look seventy. They meant this to be a compliment, but I found it sad and a little scary. Like a lot of us when we were their age, and like our culture in general, these young women viewed age as something to hide, as if youth were the pinnacle of life. Well, maybe it is the pinnacle in terms of body tautness or sperm and egg count or thickness of cartilage and bilateral activation of the parahippocampal gyrus! But I'm not the only one who wouldn't want to go back to adolescence—not for anything! It's too hard! There's too much anxiety about trying to fit in! I also wouldn't care to repeat my twenties and thirties, for that matter. For me, those years were too fraught with

trying to make my mark. And heaven forbid, let's not repeat the "in between" time of the late forties and early fifties.

Richard and me on the red carpet at the Vanity Fair *Oscar Party, 2011*
CRAIG BARRITT/GETTY IMAGES

For me, the "good old days" were really the "so-so old days." I spent far too much time worrying that I wasn't good enough, smart enough, thin enough, talented enough. I can honestly say that in terms of feelings of well-being, right now is the best time of my life. All those enoughnesses I worried about just don't matter as much anymore. I have come to believe that when you're actually *inside* oldness, as opposed to anticipating it from the outside, the fear subsides. You discover that you are still yourself, probably even more so.

For me, right now, this time in my life feels like I am beginning to become who I was meant to be all along. Act

III isn’t at all what I expected. I never envisioned myself as a happy, learning-to-be-wise older woman.

It didn’t just happen. I have worked at it. I have been fortunate in myriad ways, and I have (sometimes despite myself) done what I needed to do to make the most of what I was given.

In society’s terms I may be seen as “over the hill,” but I’ve discovered a new, different, challenging landscape on the other side—a landscape filled with new depths of love, new ways of interacting with friends and strangers, new ways of expressing myself and facing setbacks, and, by the way, more hills … literally.

Hiking Machu Picchu in 2000

Carl Jung pondered whether “the afternoon of human life [was] merely a pitiful appendage to life’s morning” or if it had a significance of its own.[1]

I believe that Rudolf Arnheim’s diagrams of the arch and the staircase (which I wrote about in the Preface) answer Jung’s question perfectly. Yes, Act III has its own significance! This is when we are meant to go deeper, to become whole. It is the time to move from ego to soul, as the spiritual teacher Ram Dass says.

Professor Arnheim further illustrated his point by showing his students slides of the early and late life works of some of the world's greatest artists. He felt that the paintings of the Impressionists, for example, were the "products of detached contemplation" that age can bring. The character and practical value of the material things they painted were no longer considered relevant; the specificity became blurred, so that, he says, what the Impressionists give us is "a world view that transcends outer appearance to search out the underlying essentials."[2]

Slowing Down, Going Deeper

Over breakfast at a restaurant in Ann Arbor, Michigan, I interviewed Dr. Marion Perlmutter, who is with the Center for Human Growth and Development and the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan. Expanding on Professor Arnheim's point, she told me, "It may be that it is only by suppression of certain things that we can actually get to higher levels. Was it that Monet had cataracts and couldn't see well or was it that because of the suppression of that detail of vision he was able to get to the deeper level of the Impressionist essence? Cézanne had macular degeneration when he did his later pastels. Beethoven was deaf when he composed his Ninth Symphony. In late life we talk about slowing down as this horrible thing, but we also know that cognition is time-bound; the longer you take, the deeper you get to conceptualization. I think physiology helps us get there. It may be that only by slowing down can we really get more of a global perspective."[3]

The poem "Monet Refuses the Operation," by Lisel Mueller, explains so artfully how age and infirmities can bring deeper insights. Here is an excerpt:

Doctor, you say there are no haloes

around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart are the same state of being. …
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three dimensional space.

33 VARIATIONS

Right after my seventy-first birthday, I was working on this book when I was asked to star on Broadway in *33 Variations*, a new play by Moisés Kaufman. My character was a contemporary music scholar trying to understand why Beethoven spent three of his later years, when he was deaf and very ill, writing thirty-three variations on what was generally considered to be a mediocre waltz composed by Anton Diabelli, a well-known music publisher of the time. Imagine my surprise and pleasure when I discovered that my character's final monologue touches upon this very theme: how the exigencies of late life that cause us to slow down also permit a different, deeper kind of seeing.

A scene in 33 Variations, *with my character leaning against Beethoven*
CRAIG SCHWARTZ

The character I play explains how at first she had assumed that Beethoven had written the thirty-three variations in order to show mid-eighteenth-century Vienna what a grand masterpiece he could make out of a mediocre waltz. What she learned, however, was very different: She realized that Beethoven knew that the waltz was a simple, popular waltz that people danced to in beer halls. In delving to its depths, Beethoven pierced and dissected it in his thirty-three variations, turning a fifty-second waltz into a brilliant fifty-minute composition. He was sick and deaf, but he was showing us how, when we allow ourselves (or are forced) to slow down and see, what may appear banal on the surface can flower into magnificence.

Ripening Consciousness

We're not all Monet, Cézanne, or Beethoven, but we all have the potential to achieve the flowering of consciousness—to learn to really *see*—and this can occur later in life, even in the presence of terrible physical infirmities.

The day of my final performance in *33 Variations*, I read an article in *The New York Times*[4] about Neil Selinger, a

fifty-seven-year-old lawyer who, following retirement, had begun tutoring at the local high school. He volunteered for Habitat for Humanity, and signed up for The Writing Institute at Sarah Lawrence College, where he discovered his “writer’s voice.” Two years later, he was diagnosed with fatal amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. The disease wastes your body, but your brain remains untouched by it. I know quite a bit about the disease because my character in *33 Variations* died of it every night. So, for me, the appearance of this article on that day felt like a little miracle.

In an unpublished essay, Mr. Selinger described what he felt happening to him. “As my muscles weakened, my writing became stronger. As I slowly lost my speech, I gained my voice. As I diminished, I grew. As I lost so much, I finally started to find myself.”

Selinger’s writing teacher, Steve Lewis, says that his student has had to lose his lawyer’s voice and that “he’s got sort of a Zen countenance now. And it’s reflected in what he writes. He doesn’t duck anger and despair, he doesn’t duck anything, but it’s all there without self-pity. His writing is richer because his experience of the moment is richer.” Neil Selinger is the embodiment of mounting the Third Act staircase!

Slowing Down

Unlike during childhood, Act III is a quiet ripening. It takes time and experience and, yes, perhaps the inevitable slowing down.

You have to learn to sort out what’s fundamentally important to you from what’s irrelevant. A life review, which we’ll take up in the next chapter, can help you do this.

Letting Go of What's No Longer Needed: Flexibility and the Shift from Ego to Soul

My brother, Peter, once pointed out to me that on the Fonda family crest is the word *perseverate*, Latin for "persevere." We have been proud, my brother and I, over the years, of our perseverance through some challenging times.

While I still appreciate the value of persistence, it occurs to me that in the Third Act, part of the shift from ego to soul requires flexibility more than perseverance—the flexibility, for instance, to take stock of who and what surround us and to see if maybe we should let some of it go.

Think about gardening. My daughter taught me that if I want to maximize the spring and summer blooms on the English lavender that fills my garden, I have to cut back the dead blooms of fall. Deadheading, it's called (not the Jerry Garcia variety!). The Third Act is the time for deadheading. Like plants in the winter, we have less energy to spare trying to resurrect old, dead growth, trying to blow life into the escapades and behaviors of youth in order to prove we're still young. I don't want to become a hollow old fool, squandering my precious remaining life force on stuff that doesn't serve this stage of life. It takes flexibility and a dose of courage to slough off the clutter, the gadgets, the obsessions, the pursuits, the whatever or whoever doesn't resonate with who we are now or want to become. I understand now what it is that I really need to know and so am freer to discard the rest.

Sure, I forget things, but I also remember a whole lot of things with more vividness because I know *why* I want to remember them and what significance they have for my life. With age, as Stephen Levine says, we "lose memory but gain insight."[5] My time now is dependent on no one but myself, so I, myself, must be sure that the various tasks I choose to occupy my time are the right ones. I have no time

to waste as I once did, going down wrong paths. If I want to make ripples, I better be sure I am throwing my pebbles into the right pond.

Getting to Essences

Like the Impressionists, by rendering life down to its concentrated essences, we can begin to live more lightly and to put our energies into activities and people who enrich what may be the only thing that still retains the capacity for growth—our spirit.

SPIRIT

It has been explained to me that soul is the substance of who a person is, while spirit—or consciousness—is a way for a person to communicate with God … which, as I see it, means becoming whole. Spirit is the uncapturable essence that makes us unique among animals.

Every other single thing in the world operates on the principle of entropy; in fact, the second law of thermodynamics says that everything is in a continual state of decline and decay (think of Arnheim's arch). The one thing that defies this universal law is the human spirit (Arnheim's stairway). This alone continues to evolve upward. And, like energy—which it is—spirit can be changed from one form to another, but it cannot be created or destroyed (the first law of thermodynamics!).

The philosopher, poet, and novelist George Santayana wrote, "Never have I enjoyed youth so thoroughly as I have in my old age. … Nothing is inherently and invincibly young except spirit. And spirit can enter a human being perhaps better in the quiet of old age and dwell there more undisturbed than in the turmoil of adventure."

We're all born with spirit, but for some of us it is buried deep beneath the detritus of life—violence, abuse, neglect,

disease, chronic depression. That's when addictions can happen. We become "empty chalices," in the words of the psychologist Marion Woodman, and so we try to fill ourselves with clutter, including addictions. Psychiatrists call this "self-medicating." For example, alcoholics try to replace spirit with spirits … alcohol. There are many other ways in which people in whom spirit is damped down seek to fill themselves: compulsive shopping, gambling, violence, workaholism, sex, drugs, food, drama. One of the great ideas of Alcoholics Anonymous's twelve-step program is that we can't be fully healed until we've opened ourselves to our spirit or "Higher Power."

It took me a long time to get this. The whole "Higher Power" business used to feel so touchy-feely to me. Now that I have experienced it myself—overcoming a long-standing food addiction—I understand that it has more to do with love than it does with God (unless you understand these two as one). The humility needed to take the step of acceptance and love softens the hard, empty place at our center, permitting spirit to flood in and fill the emptiness.

A wise person—I don't remember who—once said, "Change is inevitable. Growth is optional." It takes work and intentionality to continue to grow, to ascend that staircase. In *Beowulf*, this is described as having "wintered into wisdom." Wisdom is there in all of us; we just have to bring it out and fluff it up. But if we don't address our addictions, our stagnation, or our old attitudes, or if our life goal is centered on continuing the past, remaining powerful or good-looking in the mechanistic sense, then age is a downward and very slippery slope. Eventually someone smarter and quicker supplants us at the top, the golf swing gets iffy, the old rituals become empty. While surgery can tighten the face, there's still the giveaway neck and arms, the tendency toward postmenopausal thickening around the middle.