



In *The Value of Wrinkles* Isabel Tom draws from over a decade of experience serving older adults to identify all that the elderly community has to offer the young. She provides practical insight on how to care for those older than you and how to integrate elders into your life.

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CONTENTS

Don't Miss Out	9
1. That Wasn't a White Hair, Was It?	19
2. I've Got Time for You	31
3. Your Invitation Speaks Volumes	47
4. Real-Life Encounters	61
5. An Untapped Resource	81
6. Step Up	95
7. When You've Got a "Lemon"	111
8. Old Is Healthy	131
9. Building a Village	149
10. Take Advantage of the Sweet Spot	169
11. Her Sitting Years	185
12. What an Honor	203
Epilogue: Only for a Limited Time	219
Note from the Author: Something You Should Know	223
Acknowledgments	225
Notes	229

THAT WASN'T A WHITE HAIR, WAS IT?

What do you do when a white hair appears? I have black hair, and when a white one sneaks in, it is *extremely* noticeable. A disadvantage of being short and Asian. A year ago, I posted the same question to Facebook friends. “What do you do when a white hair appears?” Oh, the responses.

The majority get rid of them. Some pluck. Some shave their heads bald. Others wait impatiently until the next round of dye. Finally, some refuse to pluck for fear of having two more grow in its place. Honestly, if I glance in the mirror and discover another white strand, I privately freak out. *What is this? Another one?!* Then I pluck that sucker out!

Tell me if you can relate. In my early twenties, I felt hopeful for life. By 25, I was still trucking along quite fine. But as I inched closer to that thirtieth birthday, I panicked. And proactively, I handled my fear by doing two things.

THE VALUE OF WRINKLES

First, I decided to deliver my first kid before my twenty-ninth birthday. With a breech baby, the doctor allowed me to choose the day of my C-section. I chose a Tuesday, three days *before* my twenty-ninth birthday. That way it'd go down in the books that I delivered my first baby at 28—it just sounded better.

Next, when the big 3-0 rolled around, I went for a new look. My hairstylist friend offered to give me highlights, so I drove two hours to her salon and invited a new color into my life. Doing something new seemed like the best way to ring in the next decade.

I'm fairly sure I'm not the only who has suffered an early midlife crisis. Every day, I overhear conversations or swipe through social media posts noticing that almost *all* of us are worrying or thinking about aging, to some degree. Have you ever cringed when someone asked how old you are? Or posted on social media how you're getting "up there" in age? Have you ever shied away from celebrating your own birthday?

Countless numbers of people are panicking over old age—to the point that businesses and entire industries, fully aware of our insecurity, are making money off of this. See for yourself: visit any beauty products website and type in the term "anti-aging." When I searched one popular site, over 1,700 anti-aging products appeared. All products trying to combat the terrifying process of aging. Deep down, we're afraid that the older we get, the less capable, less attractive, and less valuable we become.

*"I get my hair dyed—dark brown recently.
I have highlights and get so many compliments; it
makes me look younger."*

TERRY, 85

Subtly, this deep-seeded anxiety has seeped into the way we approach the older generation, which in this book I define as someone 65 years old and up (simply because this is how most well-developed countries have defined it).¹ Whatever your definition of age, have you ever considered how our fear of aging can have a destructive impact?

WHAT OUR ROAD RAGE REVEALS

I'm already ten minutes late for work, but the cool breeze rushes through the window, a wakeup call for a late morning. The radio blares my favorite song. All. Is. Well. But as I pull onto Main Street, about to accelerate, I jolt to a halt. I can't believe it. There I am, stuck trudging behind a slow-moving car. A second later, I peel out from behind the car and into the left lane. "Finally!" As I speed past and glance out my right window, I see two bony hands gripping the steering wheel. Clearly a white-haired citizen. "Should have figured," I mutter.

Over the years, I've discovered this type of road rage is no isolated case. If you were in the passenger seat, you'd probably think nothing of it.

Jump into my car for a minute. Here we are again behind another slow-moving car. Can you believe it? This time around,

rather than griping about a white-haired citizen, imagine I'm complaining about the color, gender, sexuality, or the immigration status of this driver turtling along.

Red flags are flying everywhere. You might have thrown out a few of your own. I said something wrong, didn't I? Were you offended by my rude behavior? Put off a bit? Perhaps I owe some apologies.

In a time when our society is increasingly sensitive toward racism, sexism, and other social injustices, isn't it odd we are so at ease with belittling the older generation? Our sensitivity is selective.

Crippled old man. Slow old driver. Grumpy old neighbor. Difficult elderly family members.

Let's admit it. We all know the nine o'clock news prefers a younger face. Once a sliver of white appears, that TV anchor may soon be on her way out. In the producer's mind, the anchor needs to be replaced by younger talent, half her age, unless the anchor dyes her hair and injects some doses of Botox. No surprise. You and I know how it works. And really, I completely understand. Young and new does sound better.

When I hear someone under 65 declare, "I'm getting old!" my nostrils start twitching. My

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jaw clenches. Deep breathing exercises automatically kick in. Look around—not a fiber in people's bones are ignited. Not even an eyebrow is raised. Life goes on. And on and on. No heated debate on social media erupts. Nothing goes viral. No polite “excuse me” is said. People even laugh.

Laughing happens when there's a good joke. But it also happens when someone wants to avoid further embarrassment. They laugh with others now, only to cry about it later.

Hang out with enough older people, and some will say, “You don't want to hang out with an old guy like me!” There he is, laughing it off. Not in the humorous, healing type of way. But in a shameful way.

“Old age? I didn't know there was any good left in it.”

BILL, 82

When diminished, ignored, misunderstood, and undervalued, our older citizens are laughing along. Shame has displaced the honor of old age.

Therefore, when we see hallways full of older faces looking as if life has been sucked out of them, why then are we surprised? Why are we surprised when older people feel guilty for asking for help or withhold health issues from us? Why are we surprised when we see a grandparent or older parent attempting unsafe tasks on their own? At the heart of it, society has led our older citizens to believe they are worthless. We have led them to believe they are in the way. Useless. Instead of acknowledging their age, people have become ashamed of it.

SERVING THE YOUNG SOUNDS BETTER

In my twenties, a good friend once commented how she was intrigued by my career choice. She wasn't fond of older people; she also genuinely didn't understand why people would choose to serve them.

Instead of serving older adults, my friend worked with children. After all, working with children seems like a more worthwhile endeavor because our future depends on the youth. Why serve "old people" when they will die within a matter of time?

Isn't it interesting how we begin to devalue people? When someone is young, we are eager to serve because they are the future. A toddler is precious at age two, and as he or she enters kindergarten, they bubble with promise. Fast forward decades later. Ironically, when that same child turns 82, we stick them in a recliner in the corner, overlook their achievements, tell them to play Bingo, and quietly transfer love and admiration to someone younger, someone "more worth our time." We love young faces, but when that young face develops wrinkles, we couldn't care less for them. It's so natural we don't even think about it.

The Issue Is Big

Our negative perceptions toward aging aren't confined to our minds or even to the walls of our home. Our negative views poison the individuals around us, and they can even endanger the entire older adult population. In 2018, older adults accounted for sixteen percent of the population, an estimated

52.3 million people.² By 2040, that number is projected to jump to 82.3 million older adults.³ In no time, not only will we be surrounded by older adults, you and I will be caring for them too (you may already be doing this). What we believe about aging has the potential to cripple millions of older souls. And that can impact our economy, our healthcare system, our neighborhoods, and even the minute-to-minute of our lives. That's why *this* is the time to address our views of the older generation. *This* is the time to learn how to treat them well. This is the time to learn how to honor them. Not simply because it impacts their lives, but because it impacts ours too.

Where the Mix-Up Occurs

The potential for decline and the changing of our bodies is a reality of aging. There can be wrinkles and walkers. Aches. Daily pains. Even hourly ones. A knee replacement, sometimes followed by another knee replacement. Weak eyes. Loss of hearing. The disabling fall. And then repeated ones. Infections. Hospital visits. In-home help. Then comes the trauma of being moved out of your home. And I hate to say it but, yes, sometimes diapers.

Here is where we have it all wrong. We associate decline in health with decline in value. As our minds naturally zero in on the harsh realities of aging, we need to remember that though our bodies are failing, our worth is not waning. Aging involves goodness too. Being older means we are living longer. And living longer means we have been blessed with more time with family and friends. Living longer means we are able to gain wisdom and experience. Living longer means we can gain

THE VALUE OF WRINKLES

maturity and depth. These are all valuable qualities in a person. Yet, often we don't see them. This is how we end up with an unbalanced view of aging.

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A year ago, I was visiting an elderly man at an assisted living facility; he was nearing the end of his life. A hospice nurse had come to check on him. As we sat beside him, the man mouthed words but couldn't speak.

"What do you want to tell us?" the nurse asked.

With chairs pulled up close and ears ready to listen, the nurse and I waited for him to speak. His voice was faint. His words were completely garbled. We couldn't understand.

At times, we literally can't hear the old. We simply can't decipher their words. If we're being honest, however, other times we have no ears to hear. We're not available. Maybe we're simply not willing. Therefore, we often lose sight of the needs of the older generation.

With vulnerable populations, there are often people who speak up and advocate for them. Survivors or caregivers tell their story and give voice to their needs.

When it comes to the older generation, sadly, few are speaking up and advocating for them. Few people are telling their story or giving voice to their needs. There's good reason for this: when it comes to aging, there are *no* survivors. A wife cares for her seriously ill husband aware that her time is soon to come. She has no energy to advocate.

This is why the older generation is often not on our radar.

WHAT IS TRUE?

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.
(Phil. 4:8)

Having attended church since childhood, I heard this verse about a million times. Yet I only remembered one phrase: Think about what is lovely.

This made good sense to me. I loved thinking about flowers, my future wedding, and marshmallow clouds. Loads of gummy candy. Beaches with warm sun and breezes. Yet it wasn't until I became an adult that I finally noticed the other “whatevers” in this verse, like: “whatever is true.” For the longest time, I didn't understand what this meant. Then one day I had an “aha” moment: I should rest my thoughts on flowers, but I also should rest my thoughts on reality.

*“You have to be realistic about life.
You know you come into the world as a baby,
you grow up as a child, as an adult, and then,
a seasoned adult.”*

MARY, 85

It's hard to believe thinking can solve anything. But I believe the Holy Word has merit in what it says. We can't send every plate of leftover dinner to children in poverty, but when

THE VALUE OF WRINKLES

we are aware of the current condition in any part of our world, it makes a difference.

To think about “whatever is true” is to face our own fears of aging. But it also means reaching out to understand someone’s reality. When we seek to know someone’s situation, we don’t offer solutions. We simply listen.

When we listen, we become more compassionate people. We learn what poverty feels like. We uncover the pain of depression. We experience a glimpse of abandonment. We shudder over the horror of abuse. When we listen, we look into someone else’s life and seek to understand a part of their reality.

And that’s the crux of it. As a society, we have a poor understanding of the older person. We have focused on the end of an older person’s story, rather than on their whole life. We have relied on media’s portrayals to depict what elders are like. We have depended on a few interactions, however meaningful, with older people. Maybe that’s why we go kicking and screaming as we’re dragged into the next decade. We haven’t seen the real deal of aging. To uncover the best qualities of older adults, we need real-life encounters.

So, the next time you cringe when you have to honestly fill out your age on a form or hit a birthday and feel that panic attack coming on, here’s a tip: look for an elder and figure out “whatever is true” in their life. Invite Grandpa, Grandma, Mom, Dad, or an older friend to coffee, take them to a baseball game, or simply visit them. Then ask how *they* survived their 30th or 40th birthday. Listen. Let them share their story. Hear them out, and gain a picture of what real old age is like.

That Wasn't a White Hair, Was It?

It will ease your fears; it will give both of you a good laugh.

To see the value of wrinkles, this is a good place to start.

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