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## Chapter 1

# LIGHTEN UP!



Though the subject of aging is seldom presented with excitement, let alone joy, I have chosen for the sake of encouragement to begin on the lighter side. Humor combats stress and helps us to creatively cope with life. The last years of life can be enjoyable and fulfilling; though I know for some, aging is a challenge.

The simple truth is that aging brings changes including aches and pains; decreased energy; loss of beauty, friends, and family; and greater dependence on doctors and prescriptions. Each of us moves toward physical decline and death. However, our responsibility is to accept aging and seek to maintain the best health we can at any age.

The good news is that we can age productively and successfully and this begins with acceptance.

An aging wife inquired of her husband, “Will you love me when I’m old, gray, and wrinkled?”

To which he answered, “I do.”

The newspaper carried this article titled,

## HOW TO TELL YOU'RE GETTING OLDER.

You know you're getting older . . .

1. When your knees buckle . . . and your belt won't.
2. When you get into a rocking chair . . . and can't get it rocking.
3. When everything hurts and what doesn't hurt . . . doesn't work.
4. When you bend over to tie your shoelaces and you think . . . Is there anything else I ought to do while I'm down here?
5. When the little old lady you help cross the street . . . is your wife.
6. When year by year your feet seem farther from your hands.
7. When a handsome man or a pretty girl passes . . . and you don't even notice.
8. When, if you're a man, more hair grows out of your ears than on your head.
9. When you stand on one leg . . . and can't get your pants on.
10. When it costs more for your birthday candles . . . than for the cake.
11. When you have so many liver spots on your hand . . . that it looks like speckled sausage.
12. And when you pray for a good prune juice harvest . . . whatever that means.<sup>1</sup>

I was born on October 1, 1924, the same day and year as former President Jimmy Carter. I share the year of my birth so you will know that I too am a senior and have experienced the ups and downs of life. Besides being a senior, twice I have survived cancer. At age twenty, I was told I had testicular cancer and probably wouldn't see the year out. I was told that if I lived,

it would be unlikely that I would ever father children. The year was 1944. My doctor was Titus Johnson of Chicago's Swedish Covenant Hospital. Following two surgeries and thirty radiation treatments, I slowly regained my health. During the first two years, I received a thorough physical examination every six months and since then, a yearly checkup. My annual checkup has turned out to be a blessing in disguise, enabling me to catch physical problems in their early stages. And despite Dr. Johnson's predictions, my wife and I were blessed with four sons.

As a teenager, I was naive concerning my health. Sickness taught me to listen to my body. This has been a lifesaver for me. They say if you want to live long, you need to be sick early. Though I'm not sure that's true, my cancer made me aware of my human frailty and also some essentials of good health. I'm sincerely thankful for the life-threatening experience of testicular cancer because of the lessons I learned.

Once again, at age fifty-nine, after a routine transurethral resection of the prostate, cancer cells were discovered. Again, I chose to have thirty radiation treatments. That was over twenty-five years ago, and my present PSA is an amazing .01.

I share this with you first of all because I have learned that cancer . . . does not necessarily mean death. Second, even though I have faced the ravages of disease and pain, through it all I have known a measure of usefulness and much joy. So think of me as an old friend who, having weathered some of the storms of life . . . wants to share some solid encouragement.

### USE IT . . . OR LOSE IT

Continual involvement with life is a major requirement for successful aging. It has been said that getting older is like waterskiing: When you slow down, you go down. So . . . keep on going!

The theme of this book is illustrated in the life of Caleb

(Numbers 13–14; Joshua 14). Early in life, he cast his lot with the famous tribe of Judah and was chosen to represent them. He also identified with the minority when ten of the twelve spies brought back a negative report of the Promised Land. Caleb courageously urged the people to “go up at once and take possession” (Numbers 13:30). He told the people not to fear but to move forward. He was *fully involved* at age forty (Joshua 14:7) and fully involved at age eighty-five (Joshua 14:10). In fact, at age eighty-five he displayed the optimism of a twenty-year-old. He professed to be “as strong this day as on the day that Moses sent me” (Joshua 14:11). He was *involved* with life in his youth, during the middle years, and in old age. His *involvement* and *optimism* are two essentials for successful aging.

When the children of Israel conquered the land, Caleb, at age eighty-five, made a megarequest concerning the future: “Now . . . *give me this mountain*. . . . It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall be able to drive them out as the Lord said” (Joshua 14:12, italics added). At age eighty-five, Caleb overcame the inhabitants and received Hebron as an inheritance for his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. His last years were his best. Caleb was involved in a cause bigger than himself. Caleb finished with grace.

Until his recent death at age ninety-nine, Dr. Michael De-Bakey offered a spectacular example of successful aging. This pioneering heart surgeon had been a leader in his field for more than sixty years. When he was eighty-nine, he supervised open-heart surgery on Boris Yeltsin, then president of Russia.

At an age when many of his contemporaries have given up, he still walked briskly, stood erect, and offered a firm handshake. He maintained a simple lifestyle. He would rise at 5 a.m., eat a light breakfast of fruit, skim the newspaper, and go off to work consulting, reading, evaluating, and offering postoperative care.

He felt the most important steps to successful aging are:

1. **Control hypertension**, which can be done in most cases through medication.
2. **Refrain from smoking**, which is responsible for 20 percent of all deaths from heart disease and 50 percent of all cancer deaths.
3. **Eat a diet low in fat** to reduce the chances of arteriosclerosis and heart disease. (My doctor is fond of reminding me that “In experiments, fat rats die before skinny rats.”)

When Dr. DeBakey was asked how he kept active, he answered, “We say of muscles, ‘Use it or lose it.’ The same thing applies to the mind; the more you use it, the better it functions. It is better to be mentally active than to be a couch potato.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. DeBakey didn’t see his passion as the mere extending of life. “The important thing isn’t the actual number of years but to function well, both mentally and physically. That’s what constitutes life. These people who linger for years, unable to enjoy life—I call that the prolongations of death.”<sup>3</sup>

When Dr. DeBakey was twenty-two, as a medical student at Tulane, he invented a roller pump for the propulsion of blood through flexible tubing.

In 1948, while involved in an expanding research career, he was invited to become chairman of surgery at Baylor University, where he built a world-famous hospital as the leading cardiovascular surgeon in the world.

The *American Journal of Cardiology* has recognized him as “the twentieth century’s most influential and national medical statesman.”

When asked a few years ago what motivates him, his wife Katrina simply answered, “It’s love. We live with love.” She

continued, “Dr. DeBakey is surrounded by the gratitude and love of his patients. This love nourishes and renews him as he continues to serve.”

Sherwin Nuland in his book *The Art of Aging* stated, “At ninety-six, DeBakey looked no older than seventy. Though he has not done a whit of fitness exercise since his youth, his five feet ten inches are lean and wiry at 150 pounds.”<sup>4</sup>

In an interview for *Esquire* magazine, DeBakey displayed the excitement and vision of a young man. When asked about the future, he answered, “This new century that we’re in is going to be one of the most exciting in all history. The medical advances that have taken place since World War II are amazing. I would say this is the best time in the history of the world to be a six-year-old, oh yes. By far, by far.”<sup>5</sup>

## PEACE AND LOSS

My Scottish mother experienced a lifetime of negatives. Her mother, Annie McKerrow Irving, died giving birth to her third child, leaving her husband, George Irving, to care for my mother, her brother, Isaac, and the newborn, Annie.

Life was hard in their Carstairs Junction home in Scotland. Her father found it impossible to work and handle his three young children as a single parent. At first, he hired a live-in housekeeper who, along with her children, moved in. Eventually, George Irving married a widow with three children and brought them into the household. However, daily living was so stressful that my mother’s brother, Isaac, at fourteen, left home and joined the British navy, while her sister, Annie, ran away, never to be heard from again.

Though my mother’s childhood included great sorrow, she experienced a marvelous change in her teens. An acquaintance, Jesse Kay, whom I met decades later, began a girls club in Carstairs Junction. After several visits to the club, my mother,

Mary Rodger Irving, experienced a spiritual awakening. As a teenager, she blossomed into a bright, winsome, and committed Christian. Her faith made her home situation tolerable.

My father, William Sweeting, after returning from fighting three years in Belgium in World War I with the Royal British Engineers, picked up his trade as a stonemason. His work brought him to Carstairs Junction, where he helped build a large stone bridge over the town's railroad station. There my parents met. My mother quickly shared her faith, telling of her life's transformation. She also urged my father to visit two centers in Glasgow, called Bethany Hall and Tent Hall, where he could hear more about the new life she had discovered.

Because of my father's war experience and dissatisfaction with life in general, he was eager to visit Bethany Hall, where he also experienced a spiritual transformation. The change in his life was so dramatic that his father feared he would become a fanatic. His conversion led to eventual courtship and marriage to my mother, Mary Rodger Irving of Carstairs Junction, in 1920.

Tired of Europe's wars and eager to better themselves, they immigrated to the United States in 1923.

Though my father was the unquestioned head of the home, my mother was "the heart of the home." Along with a sincere faith, she possessed a loving, cheerful disposition. She gave birth to six children: William, Anne, George, Norman, Mary, and Martha.

In the 1940s, she was afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis. At times, her condition was so severe that she was bedfast for months and even years. Her hands were deformed and her joints gnarled, yet even in suffering she was attractive. With the advent of cortisone, she managed with great difficulty to get about the home.

Her faith was obvious to all who came to visit. Amid constant pain and meager assets, she displayed a joyful spirit and

a gentle sense of humor during forty years of suffering. Her winsomeness in suffering was not due to her personality but the result of trust. She believed that if God allowed suffering, He would give equal grace. I saw firsthand that it is possible . . . amid suffering . . . to age with joy and finish with grace.

Psalm 92:12–15 (NIV) offers an upbeat picture of aging.

The righteous will *flourish* like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will *flourish* in the courts of our God. They will *still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming*, “The Lord is upright.” (emphasis added)

To *flourish* means to thrive . . . to blossom . . . to abound! The word *abound* comes from the Latin, meaning to overflow, like a cresting, incoming sea wave, splashing in every direction. Seniors are also compared to attractive palm trees and towering cedars. The psalmist declares, “They will still bear fruit in old age.” That speaks of continued usefulness. I find joy in the statement, “They will stay fresh and green.” This suggests zest, optimism, vitality, and participation in all of life.

Comedian Woody Allen once quipped, “Eighty percent of success in life is in showing up.” Well, showing up *is* very important, but CONTINUED INVOLVEMENT with life, amid pain and loss, is all-important to successful aging.

So keep on keeping on. Use it . . . or lose it! Keep involved even amid your tears, and don’t take yourself too seriously. Lighten up . . . and keep climbing!