

ESSENTIAL BOOKS FOR “AGING SPECIALISTS”¹

Prepared for November 18 and 19, 2014

Over a year ago I drew up, for the Life Planning Network, a list of books that professionals should read to help them advise clients who prudentially decide to plan for their 60s, 70s, or 80s. This week -- while preparing for my elder law class at Suffolk Law School on the 18th and for two sessions the next day (a morning meeting of the West Suburban Alzheimer's Group meeting at Waltham Crossings and the monthly meeting of the Newton at Home book group that I have coordinated for about 18 months) -- I decided to tweak the list for all three audiences as well as to post a blog to those who consult our website.

My idea was to highlight a few books that have had, or should have, profound impacts on those who attend to “aging” people as well as those who are, in fact, “aging.” The books should be enjoyable enough to be read avidly and sufficiently insightful to answer real questions. I've annotated below six books which I find helpful explicitly, or more often implicitly, in meeting with clients or in professional presentations. My list is biased, of course, towards the concerns that bring people to an elder law attorney. But, frankly, all the books are worth reading by the three audiences to which this is addressed.

Ken Dychtwald and Joe Flower, *AGE WAVE: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF AN AGING AMERICA*. First published in 1988, this book's subtitle says it all. The authors not only describe the demographic facts that 25 years later have been confirmed but delve into their social, economic, and even political consequences.² Dychtwald has become a master presenter of the social and personal consequences of an aging society. Chapters 7 (Reworking Work), 9 (Reinventing the Family, and 11 (Redesigning America) have particular relevance to the LPN, but re-reading the book in its entirety, from time to time, should reinvigorate all of us.

Thomas R. Cole, *THE JOURNEY OF LIFE: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF AGING IN AMERICA*. What began as a doctoral dissertation in the late 1970s has evolved into

¹ The double meaning is intentional.

² Dychtwald became president last year of the American Society on Aging, an organization to which he had already devoted considerable time. As plenary speaker at an ASA meeting I attended in Chicago he began by showing, side by side, two portraits, one of Whistler's mother in grey sitting passively in a rocking chair, the other of Sophia Loren dressed in bright colors, vibrant, glowing, indeed “sexy.” He challenged the audience to explain what the two depictions had in common. After we struggled to find any commonality other than they were both women, he explained that the portraits, posed about a century apart were both of women in their late 60s. Aging in the 21st Century is quite different than what it was for our great-great grandmothers and their spouses.

a compelling analysis of changing social and intellectual views of “aging.” Cambridge University Press published this book in 1992. A paperback followed the next year. An elegant and accurate synopsis appears on the first page of my edition of the book: “*The Journey of Life* is both a cultural history of aging and a contribution to public dialogue about the meaning and significance of later life. The book shows how Northern middle-class culture, first in Europe and then in America, created and sustained specifically modern images of the life course between the Reformation and World War I. During this period, old age was removed from its ambiguous place in life’s journey, rationalized, and redefined as a scientific problem. In the late twentieth century, however, postmodern culture [had] begun to recover the spiritual dimensions of later life and to envision new opportunities for growth in an aging society.” Among blurbs, that’s exciting, but this undeniably “academic” book offers lots of rewards for those of us who do what we do.

Juergen Bludau, *AGING BUT NEVER OLD: THE REALITIES, MYTHS, AND MISREPRESENTATION OF THE ANTI-AGING MOVEMENT*. Published in 2010, Dr. Bludau explains, in a calm but convincing manner, why Harvard Medical School, where he teaches, generally ignores geriatric science to favor studying organs and their specific diseases rather than the syndromes of aging. The book is reasonable and intelligently argued, especially when it deflates claims of the “anti-aging movement” (which he rightly labels as commercial rather than scientific). The book ends with a particular invocation: “[I]f you can approach the changes of aging with a positive attitude by understanding, accepting, and making peace with the process, I guarantee that people will notice and respond. You will be happier and more satisfied with yourself – and with others, too. Undoubtedly, your days will be much more contented and fulfilling. Enjoy the passage of time!”

John Zeisel, *I’M STILL HERE: A BREAKTHROUGH APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SOMEONE LIVING WITH ALZHEIMER’S*. Published in 2010, the book has been labeled by Daniel Goleman as a “brilliant, soft-spoken and heart-warming manifesto [and] a must read.” He draws on brain science (and the extraordinary role of the amygdala which is shielded from the devastation of Alzheimer’s-causing plaque) and creative ways to unlock that part of the brain’s ability to function in place of other more vulnerable areas of the brain. The result, in some extraordinarily documented examples, is a way of treating and living purposefully with people stricken with Alzheimer’s. This should be read by every physician who thinks that prescribing Aricept met his or her duty to an aging patient!

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, *THE THIRD CHAPTER: PASSION, RISK, AND ADVENTURE IN THE 25 YEARS AFTER 50*. Published in 2009 by the distinguished Harvard Graduate School of Education professor, this book attempts to “develop a compelling vision of later life, one that does not assume a trajectory of decline after fifty but recognizes this as a time when our ‘courage gives us hope.’” The author interviewed

a variety of men and women in their 50s, 60s, 70s, many of whom related profound vocational and even spiritual change. Although her selection of subjects might be faulted as not covering the spectrum of experiences, she builds the case that for many Americans, their “later years” can be “the most transformative and generative time in [their] lives.”

Life Planning Network, *LIVE SMART AFTER 50! THE EXPERTS’ GUIDE TO LIFE PLANNING FOR UNCERTAIN TIMES*. Edited by Natalie Eldridge, Doug Dickson, Bruce Frankel, Andrew Gallagher, Meg Newhouse and Mary Radu, this book, which was published in 2012, consists of eleven essays written by specialists on financing, caregiving, career changes, creativity, spirituality, and even elder law (guess who wrote that chapter which the editors wisely retitled “Your wishes matter: Making sure your voice is heard.”

Atul Gawande, *BEING MORTAL: MEDICINE AND WHAT MATTERS IN THE END*, published last month, has already garnered some superb reviews. If you’re not familiar with his *New Yorker* articles or his three previous books (*COMPLICATIONS: A SURGEON’S NOTE ON AN IMPERFECT SCIENCE*, *BETTER: A SURGEON’S NOTES ON PERFORMANCE*, and the book I have each new member of our team read, *THE CHECKLIST MANIFESTO: HOW TO GET THINGS RIGHT*) you’ll find his writing accessible, instructive, enlightening, and addictive despite (or is it because) he’s a world class surgeon. I’m just reading it now, but I’m already struck by his distinction between “treatment” and “care,” the former being the traditional physician’s response to disease while the latter may, in fact, be the more humane approach in many cases. “For most of human history, for those few people who actually survived to old age, [Atul’s grandfather’s] experience was the norm. Elders were cared for in homes, often with three generations living under one roof. Even when the nuclear family replaced the extended family (as it did in northern Europe several centuries ago), the elderly were not left to cope with the infirmities of age on their own.” Initially, this meant providing for elders in their own home or in the home of a relative. During the 20th Century, nursing homes replaced multi-generational homes for the convenience of all parties. As that system is breaking down, what’s next?

I’m particularly proud that Drs. Bludau and Zeisel appeared, separately, at Roundtables our office presents bimonthly. Please share your comments on these or, better, on other books that you think should be among “essential books for those who help others through the aging process” as well as those who are charting their own course.

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