

Passionate aging

A tender revolt

Guido Cuyvers

Thomas More University College, Belgium

Series in Sociology



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For Johan, Yvo and Stefan

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About the author

Guido Cuyvers is an accomplished academic and civil society leader with extensive expertise in criminology, sexology, and philosophy, which he studied at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium. He obtained his doctorate in criminology with a thesis on the secondary victimization experienced by victims of crime. During his career, Guido Cuyvers was a lecturer, researcher, and head of the social work department at Thomas More University, where he taught psychology, psychopathology, organizational science, and quality assurance. He also contributed to the teacher training program at the Faculty of Psychology and Education of the Catholic University of Leuven.

Dr. Cuyvers has been continually active in the field of higher education and has served on several occasions as a member, chairperson, or secretary of evaluation committees for universities and colleges. His professional work extends to consulting non-profit organizations on quality development processes, a topic on which he has published extensively.

He is currently active in civil society with a focus on policy and research on older adults. He is a board member and independent expert for the Vlaamse Ouderenraad (Flemish Council for Older Adults) and chairs its Participation and Inclusion Committee. He also represents Belgium on the board of Age Platform Europe.

A prolific author, Dr. Cuyvers writes extensively on a wide range of social issues, with a strong commitment to supporting vulnerable populations. His work highlights challenges such as human trafficking and slavery, health inequalities and the struggle of older adults to maintain autonomy. Driven by a passion for teaching and publishing, Dr. Cuyvers continues to advocate for social justice and the rights of marginalized groups.

Preface

Harvard professor Becca Levy¹ has conducted extensive research on how our beliefs about aging affect our behavior and health. She found that older people who have a positive attitude to aging do much better physically and mentally; they also recover better from illness and disability. Conversely, those with negative beliefs about aging have more problems in all these areas and live shorter lives. Many studies have confirmed this.

The good news is that it is possible to change these ingrained negative beliefs. Who sometimes thinks negatively about aging, must know that she or he too can, with the necessary effort, come to a different view of aging.

Santiago, from the novel 'The Old Man and the Sea' by Ernest Hemingway² is an old Cuban fisherman who has been fishing unsuccessfully for a long time. The story follows his epic battle with a giant marlin and his eventual confrontation with nature and his own destiny. Despite the hardships he faces - physical exhaustion, loneliness at sea and the cruel whims of nature - Santiago maintains a remarkably positive outlook on life. His determination, resilience and courage are inspiring and show how a positive outlook can make all the difference, even in the most difficult of times. He does not give up in the face of insurmountable odds. He continues to fight the marlin, despite pain and exhaustion, and refuses to give in to despair or hopelessness. Even after the marlin is defeated by the sharks, Santiago retains his dignity and pride as a fisherman. Santiago can find beauty and meaning in even the trickiest situations. Despite setbacks, he still appreciates the beauty of nature around him and finds solace in his memories of past triumphs. His love of life and passion for his craft remain intact, even in the face of adversity. Through Santiago's story, Hemingway shows that despite the hardships of aging and life itself, a cheerful outlook, determination and a deep sense of pride and dignity can continue to shine through.

This book is divided into three parts: in the first part, we take stock of growing older and begin by clarifying why we dare to call growing older a success, at least if we look at it from a helicopter view. However, we cannot escape the conclusion that growing older is a problem in the eyes of many in society. Many older people themselves have a tough time with it, and younger generations, through the lens of their prejudices, often see only the worries and burdens of a large group of older people. These prejudices need to be clarified. Of course,

¹ Levy, B. (2022). *Breaking the age code*. London: Vermilion.

² Hemingway, E. (1952). *The old man and the sea*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

we must also pay attention to what older people experience in their personal lives. In addition to pleasant experiences, no one can avoid having to deal with problems and serious setbacks. Think of life-threatening illnesses, degenerative diseases such as dementia or Parkinson's disease, or loss through divorce or death. Such experiences can also characterize the experience of growing older.

Whatever the positive or negative aspects of aging, we strongly believe that people are in control of how they experience aging. That is why we want to encourage the reader in the second part of the book that the best is yet to come, at least if we work on it ourselves. Our positive vision of aging is based on four pillars, which we explain in detail in the following chapters. Our starting point is meaning: people need to have a purpose in life. Then the (metaphorical) glasses they put on determine what and how they perceive themselves and the world around them. The challenge for everyone is to do this with a positive attitude. Inspired by their own goals, aging people need to remain active in many areas and, of course, according to each person's physical and mental capabilities and talents, because rest rusts! Since humans are social beings, social contact and connection with other people are the keystones of a meaningful life.

Of course, people do not establish how they live their lives using their own strength and insight alone. The social context, the media, the attitudes of other people, the way in which government organizes society - all these factors play a part in determining the opportunities people have in a community and how they themselves feel about growing older. Therefore, in part three, we discuss the role of fellow citizens and government in creating an age-friendly community where older people remain a valued part of society. The last chapter can be seen as a call to action for all involved: the older people themselves, others, and those in power, to work towards a society in which all ages can attain their rights.

The aim of this book is to inspire you and give you the tools to look at aging in a positive and, for some, new way. To do this, it is first necessary to take a critical look at both the entrenched, often negative views of aging and the ways in which people and governments shape their societies. Alongside this critical approach, we also want to suggest ways in which older people themselves, and others, can give a positive meaning to aging.

The short testimonies in the chapters are quotes from our interviews with 170 people over the age of sixty. The names are fictitious, of course. Another note on terminology: in this book, we talk about aging people. We are not fans of terms such as 'seniors' and 'middle-aged people,' because they again put a label on people. We find 'old people' completely inappropriate. By using the term aging people, we emphasize the dynamic process of growing old. It does not happen suddenly, and it continues throughout life. Overly static terms like seniors overshadow the dynamics of growing old. For me, it is essentially about adults, albeit older adults, who still have a very meaningful life to live.

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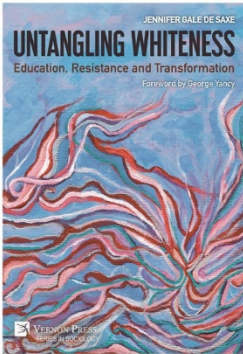
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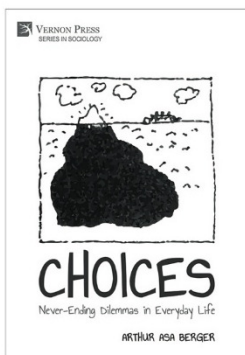
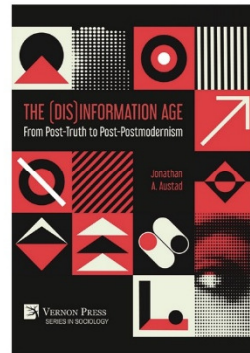
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