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No one will want to read this column. Part II

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By Charles R. Church

That's because, once again, I will speak of old age and death. These existential twins have come to mind again since a dear friend — while still young in my book — recently was diagnosed with a serious illness, though I will not share the details. She's too dear, and it's all too personal. She simply must stick around for a long time, for the sakes of the many who know and love her, and because she makes the world a better place. (Note: Since I wrote this piece, my dear friend died in the noblest way imaginable.)

An entire literature teaches us how to deal with these twins. Cicero, the great orator and wily politician who, in 45 B.C., retired to his country estate far from Rome and the ascendant Julius Caesar, had become useless, in his mind. He turned to writing for solace, and produced the optimistic, "How to Grow Old," recently translated anew by Philip Freeman. Cicero's work takes the form of a dialogue among Marcus Cato, who speaks for Cicero, and two young companions. A bit of Cato's (Cicero's) wisdom follows:

"But old age has no fixed term. A man should live on as long as he is able to fulfill his duties and obligations, holding death of no account. In this way, old age is more spirited and full of courage than youth."

Some who are cut down before old age also have much to teach us. The bomb-throwing essayist and book writer Christopher Hitchens, whom his wife saw as "an impossible act to follow," wrote about his lethal encounter with esophageal cancer and its metastases — what he called his "year of living dyingly" — in his book of seven essays, "Mortality," that was published posthumously in 2012. Though at times grisly, the tale captivates the reader, due to Hitchens' complete lack of self-pity, his sympathy for the plight of nurses who — while doing their damndest not to — inflicted pain as they repeatedly sought to penetrate the scar tissue on his blood vessels while struggling to draw blood or insert an IV, and his determination to chronicle his death right through to his last moments.

All the while, Hitchens kept a firm grasp on both his mordant sense of humor and his enduring grudges. Early on, he observed:

"I sympathize afresh with the mighty Voltaire, who when badgered on his deathbed and urged to renounce the devil, murmured that this was no time to be making enemies."

Recall, after all, that Hitchens also wrote, “God is Not Great.” He bade us farewell with this zinger: “If I convert, it’s because it’s better, that a believer dies than that an atheist does.”

But even Hitchens, because he never became old, alas (he died at 62, after all), could not match Roger Angell when it came to writing about advanced age. In the article, “This Old Man,” published in *The New Yorker* two years ago, Angell described with wry humor his life in its 94th year, in which he was a walking advertisement for modern medicine: arterial stents, a clamp to close a congenital hole in his heart, a balloon angioplasty “and two or three false alarms;” the list goes on.

Angell cancelled his knee replacement surgery at the last minute, opting instead “for injections of synthetic frog hair or rooster combs, or something, which magically took away the pain.” (If I believed that, it would be a bit disconcerting, since every five years or so I receive the same injections, but in my case I need them for both knees). Angell relates this exchange with his longtime therapist, which occurred at a time when it seemed he’d lost almost everything: “I don’t know how I’m going to get through this,” he said.

A reply followed a silence: “Neither do I. But you will.”

(Here’s where I get kicked off this newspaper.) Angell describes being invited more than 50 years earlier, along with his first wife, to tea by a rather elegant couple, at least in their seventies, who recently had moved into town. The husband pressed his wife to tell an off-color joke, which at last she began shyly. Not knowing what kind of joke was to be told, Angell groaned inwardly, he wrote, preparing to force a smile. After the punchline, all four “fell over laughing together.”

That evening, Angell’s wife asked: “Do you think it’s possible that they’re still — you know, still doing it?”

“Yes, I did — yes, I do,” he replied. “I was thinking exactly the same thing. They’re amazing.”

“More love; more closeness; more sex and romance,” that’s what we need. Yet “these feelings in old folks are widely treated like a raunchy secret.”

“But I believe that everyone in the world wants to be with someone else tonight, together in the dark, with the sweet warmth of a hip or a foot or a bare expanse of shoulder within reach”

“Here’s to you, old dears,” Angell toasts. “For us and for anyone this unsettles, anyone who’s younger and still squirms at the vision of an old couple embracing,” he offers “sex or death: you take your pick,” a line he stole from John Updike’s “Playing with Dynamite,” then fiddled with a bit.

The quotes from Roger Angell’s “This Old Man” are reprinted here with his permission.

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