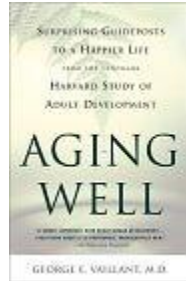


Book Reviews

Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life by George Vaillant



reviewed by Judith Helburn

Vaillant, George, MD. *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life, from the Landmark Harvard Study of Adult Development*. Little, Brown, NY, 2002. ISBN 0316090077. Reviewed by Judith Helburn.

*Old age is like a minefield.
If you see footsteps leading to the other side,
step in them.*
—G. Vaillant

If you want to know what you are getting into, *Aging Well* is not to be missed. Not only has Vaillant given the reader new information gleaned from three longitudinal studies of over 500 men and 90 women covering over 64 years, but the writing is fresh and conversational.

Some of Vaillant's significant findings:

- It is not the bad things that happen to us that doom us; it is the good people who happen to us at any age that facilitate enjoyable old age.
- Healing relationships are facilitated by a capacity for gratitude, for forgiveness.
- Learning to play and create after retirement and learning to gain younger friends add more to life's enjoyment than retirement income.
- Objective good physical health was less important to successful aging than subjective good health.

In the study, those who age well seem to be constantly reinventing their lives. One of the modules at the Spiritual Eldering Institute for which I teach is life review and life repair. Dr. Vaillant calls it, "...excavating and recovering all of those whom we loved in the first half." At the Spiritual Eldering Institute, we look at the shadowy past as well. Vaillant's definition of mature coping has much in common with how we, connected with SEI, define wisdom. Our "Wisdom Keepers" cultivate an expansive approach to others and the planet, as does Vaillant's "Keepers of the Meaning", one of two stages he adds to Eric Erikson's late stages.

Vaillant about spirituality:

"In theory, spirituality should deepen in old age for all of us. For if growing older does not inevitably lead toward spiritual development, growing older does alter the conditions of life in ways that are conducive to spirituality...Aging focuses us toward becoming one with the ultimate ground of all being. Aging allows us to feel part of the ocean." (p. 278)"

Aging Well is the best scholarly but not dry academic book in the field of aging since Betty Friedan's *Fountain of Age*. It complements Eugene Bianchi's *Aging as a Spiritual Journey*, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (©1995, Warner Books), and Drew Leder's *Spiritual Passages*.