



Travels with Epicurus

MEDITATIONS FROM A GREEK ISLAND

ON THE PLEASURES OF OLD AGE

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ONEWORLD



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For Eliana



It is not the young man who should be considered fortunate but the old man who has lived well, because the young man in his prime wanders much by chance, vacillating in his beliefs, while the old man has docked in the harbor, having safeguarded his true happiness.

—EPICURUS





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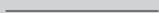
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Not what we have, but what we enjoy, constitutes
our abundance.



—EPICURUS





Prologue

The Table at Dimitri's Taverna

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ON SEEKING A PHILOSOPHY OF OLD AGE
.....

He is sitting at a wooden table at the far rim of the terrace of Dimitri's taverna in the village of Kamini on the Greek island Hydra. Tucked behind his right ear is a sprig of wild lavender that, with considerable effort, he stooped to pick on his way here. From time to time—usually during lulls in conversation with his tablemates—he removes the herb, takes a few sniffs of it, and then returns it to its nesting spot. Leaning against the table to his right is an olive-wood cane topped with a pewter caryatid—a maiden of Karyai, the ancient Peloponnesian village where the temple was dedicated to the goddess Artemis. He takes this cane with him everywhere he goes, although

he does not require it for walking; his gait is slow but steady. The cane is an emblem, a sign of his age. It is also a recognition of his life spent as a man; the ancient Greek word for “cane” refers to a rod that soldiers used for striking enemies. That his cane handle is a comely and shapely maiden may have some personal significance too; in his younger days he was known as a connoisseur of beautiful women.

I nod to him from my seat under the taverna’s awning, where I have been reading a book titled *The Art of Happiness, or The Teachings of Epicurus*. He nods back with a slight tilt of his white-haired head, a tilt of dignified congeniality, and then returns to conversation with his friends. His name is Tasso and he is seventy-two years old. I have known him for many years now.

Although Tasso looks every year his age—his face and neck are covered with a fine crosshatch of deep lines—here he is still considered a handsome man, a handsome *old* man. He is said to “wear his age on his face,” a compliment. When the French philosopher Albert Camus wrote in his novel *The Fall*, “Alas, after a certain age every man is responsible for his face,” he too was voicing approval: a man’s face tells the truth about him; the face a man acquires is the result of the choices he has made and the experiences that followed from those choices. The islanders say that on a man who has weathered challenging experiences, a finely seasoned face will emerge in old age.

It is the face he has earned, and its raw beauty is in the fully lived life it expresses.

I eavesdrop on Tasso and his companions. As is their habit, they sit side by side and speak loudly to one another, so I have no difficulty hearing them. Although my Greek is rudimentary, I can catch the drift of their talk, a conversation that began before I arrived and will continue until the sun begins to drop behind the Peloponnese, just across the sea. It is aimless, cheerful chat, for the most part mundane. They talk about the sunlight, which is unusually hazy today, the new owner of a cheese stall in the port market, their children and grandchildren, the state of political affairs in Athens. Occasionally one tells a story from his past—usually one his companions have heard before. The talk is punctuated by leisurely, comfortable silences as they gaze out at the Peloponnesian straits.



I have returned to this Greek island on a personal quest: I am an old man myself now—seventy-three—and I want to figure out the most satisfying way to live this stage of my life. Having spent, over the years, several extended periods in Greece, I believe I may find some clues in the way old people live here. The old folks of Hydra have always struck me as uncommonly content with their stage in life.

I have also toted across the Atlantic a lean library of

philosophy books—most by ancient Greek thinkers, some by twentieth-century existentialists, plus an assortment of other favorites—because I think I may find some clues in these too. Since I was a student, over fifty years ago, I have had an enduring interest in what the great philosophers have to say about how to live a valuable and gratifying life. I remember that some of these thinkers had intriguing ideas about how to live a fulfilling old age, although it was not a subject that particularly attracted me when I still had youthful ambitions (not to mention boundless energy and hair). The prospect of reading the ancient Greek philosophers while surrounded by the rocky, sunlit landscape where their ideas first flourished feels just right to me.



It was not a birthday epiphany or a shocking glimpse in the mirror that set the wheels of this personal journey turning; it was something far more prosaic—a visit to my dentist. After poking around in my mouth, Dr. Nacht earnestly informed me that due to normal, age-appropriate atrophy of my jawbone, a row of my lower teeth needed to be removed and replaced with implants. The only alternative, he said, would be a denture plate without any stable teeth to anchor it. With the denture, I would be sentenced to a diet devoid of steaks and pork chops, to frequent embarrassing incidents when my false teeth would pop loose and come out of my mouth attached to, say, a piece of toffee, and, worse yet, I would have the

unmistakable clunky smile of an old man. I immediately signed up for the implants.

Back at home, I looked over my schedule for this procedure: a minimum of seven visits to the nearest oral surgeon, a good hour's drive away. These were spaced out over the course of almost a year. A quick look on the Web revealed that I could expect a few days of pain after each visit, not to mention an aggregate of several weeks during which I would basically subsist on baby food. And, of course, I would be out several thousand dollars. For what, again?

Pork chops? No embarrassing denture pop-outs? A more youthful smile?

I then realized just how much those potential denture pops and that old-mannish smile had figured in my instant decision to get the implants. But now those reasons did not make good sense to me. They did not seem to reflect my genuine values at this point in my life. In my early seventies did I really care if I presented to the world an old man's goofy smile? And even more to the point, with my years of clear thinking and reasonable mobility dwindling as quickly as my jawbone, did I honestly want to dedicate an entire year to regular visits to an oral surgeon?

I did not. And that was when I realized that, without thinking about it, I had been swept up in the current trend of trying to extend the prime of life well into the years that used to be called "old age." My unwitting participation in this trend went far beyond mere cosmetic

issues to include the very way I perceived the amount of gratifying life left to me. I had been doing some fuzzy sums. I had been caught up in an epidemic of denial. Without realizing it, I had routinely been opting for what I have come to think of as “youth implants.”

This new old-age credo was everywhere I looked. If someone even casually mentioned that she was getting on in years, she was immediately chastened: “You’re not old. You’re still in your prime!” She was informed that “Seventy is the new fifty.” She was admonished not to “give in” to old age.

This creed urges people my age to keep setting new goals, to charge ahead into new ventures, to design new programs for self-improvement. We are advised that medicine and its promise of an extended life span have given us an unprecedented opportunity: we can spin out the prime of our lives indefinitely. And if we surrender to old age, we are fools or, worse, cowards.

All around me, I saw many of my contemporaries remaining in their prime-of-life vocations, often working harder than ever. Others were setting off on expeditions to exotic destinations, copies of *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* tucked in their backpacks. Some were enrolling in classes in conversational French, taking up jogging, and even signing up for cosmetic surgery and youth-enhancing hormone treatments. A friend of mine in her late sixties had not only undergone a face-lift but also elected to have breast implants. And one man my age told me

that between his testosterone patch and seventy-two-hour Cialis, he felt like a young buck again. “Forever Young” was my generation’s theme song, and unreflectively I had been singing along with them.

It certainly is not hard to see the appeal of the “forever young” movement. The prime of my life has been, on balance, pretty satisfying, so why stop now? Why not more of a good thing? And more? And more?

But something about this new philosophy of old age does not sit right with me, and it took the prospect of those dental implants to prompt me to examine why. I suspect that if I were to take this popularly accepted route, I would miss out on something deeply significant: I would deny myself a unique and invaluable stage of life. I have deep-seated qualms about going directly from a protracted prime of life to *old* old age—the now-attenuated period of senility and extreme infirmity that precedes death. I am seriously concerned that on that route I would miss for eternity ever simply being authentically and contentedly old.

The problem is that I am not entirely sure what an authentic old age is or how it should be lived. But I do have some hunches, and it is with them that I need to begin. At the very least, I believe authentic old people would be honest with themselves about how much fully conscious and rational life they have left. They would want to use that time in the best and most appropriate way. I also suspect they might sense that this stage of life offers meaningful possibilities that were never before

available to them.

But beyond that, I only have questions. And that is why I have returned to this Greek island with a suitcase full of philosophy books.



One of Tasso's companions signals Dimitri to bring another bottle of retsina and a few plates of mezes—some olives, stuffed grape leaves, and a yogurt, cucumber, and garlic dip. They now arrange themselves around the table so all are in reach of the food. I have yet to see Dimitri present them with a bill, and I believe he never does; the men will simply place a few coins on the table when they leave—"old man" rates. Tasso pulls a deck of cards from his pocket, and they begin to play *prefa*, their preferred card game, with one of the four sitting out each hand and taking up any slack in the conversation.

And I turn back to my book about Epicurus.