

# Live Long and Prosper

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## AMERICA THE WISE The Longevity Revolution and the True Wealth of Nations

By Theodore Roszak  
Houghton Mifflin. 272 pp. \$25

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who teaches at George Washington  
University. His new book, "The Limits of  
Privacy," is forthcoming.

One should not yield to the temptation to dismiss *America the Wise*. True, it makes sweeping statements: "that every senior in the world" shares certain convictions; that a "worldwide moral transformation" is taking place; and that "the values we [older Americans] choose to live by cannot help but be a commanding influence in shaping the century to come." The book is overwritten, littered with capitalized words and phrases such as "New People," which refers to Baby Boomers about to turn 50-plus, whom Roszak throws in with the aging. And he sees dramatic "revolutions" in what are actually rather gradual changes in longevity, health and entitlement costs.

Rozsak's main thesis—that senior citizens will dominate our future in all matters (not merely those concerning Social Security and Medicare) and make us wiser—is not very compelling. Japan, for instance, which has proportionally many more seniors than we do and which reveres them much more, has not been in the past or recently particularly sage. The volume is trying to recapture the great success Roszak had a generation ago with his book *The Making of a Counter Culture*, in which he was among the first to characterize a new age and kind of people.

## SENIOR CITIZEN HAVEN



ILLUSTRATION BY LOU MYERS

This time, he follows a path already marked by Betty Friedan's *The Fountain of Age*, among others.

But if one is willing to look beyond the hyperbole, one finds a book that raises some very serious questions. The book makes us ponder whether we should squander a major and growing national resource—the growing number of healthy, vigorous older Americans—by allowing them to drop out of the labor force. Can the remaining work force be expected to cover the costs of the elders' entitlements? Roszak favors according all retirees a guaranteed income and encouraging those who are able to work in the Third Sector (defined as "all volunteer work outside the marketplace"), providing much-needed social services such as tutoring and mentoring. Like many social visionaries, Roszak has no calculator, and does not even roughly guesstimate the costs involved. Still, the question of what role the vigorous old should play in our future stands.

The book also makes us ask whether we have a moral duty to die rather than linger and impose heavy costs on our children. Should people older than a certain age (Daniel Callahan suggests 82) be given only ameliorative care (e.g., painkillers) rather than therapy? I fear that if we were to conclude that people beyond a certain age "cost too much," we might end up lowering the age of abandonment in the next recession. Would other societies that are harder-up set it still lower, say at 50? Would we soon curtail the health care of other "unproductive" people, from the disabled to those who are young but suffering the advanced stages of cancer or AIDS?

Rozsak argues that these questions become much easier "once we remove money from this most delicate and authentically tragic of human situations." He favors "humanistic alternatives," the main one being to provide "midwives" to counsel the dying. Such a service is already provided in hospices, but it has

hardly settled the debate over whether older folk should be made to feel guilty about burning up medical resources or whether they should feel fully entitled to them, having worked their whole lives.

Does age convey wisdom? Should we return to sit at the feet of our grandparents, say in college classrooms, and absorb their sage observations, as Roszak favors? He ignores the fact that the image of the wise elder is borrowed from ages in which technological and social changes were much slower. He draws on some medical claims, for instance that memory impairment of old people can be reversed with treatment and training, to transform senior Americans into a Wise Generation that should lead us all, shape our values, nourish our spirituality. One asks whether such a moral and cultural awakening can or even should be spearheaded by any one group, or should best arise out of profound dialogues among us all, the kind we currently are having about the proper conduct of our public leaders.

As I see it, the dialogue about the implications of the increasing number of old folks (whose ranks include myself) should start by making an assumption opposite to the one Roszak makes. Instead of treating all those who are 50-plus as old, we should view only those who are 85-plus as truly senior. Those who are between the ages of 65 and 85 are best considered as having entered their second middle age (maybe they should be called the Booming Seniors). Very gradually, we should raise the retirement age—and the one at which one is entitled to collect Social Security and Medicare. Seniority should cease to be a ground for automatic wage raises, to reduce the costs of employing the second middle agers. And if we make it easier for these Americans to hold part-time jobs, they will still have plenty of time on their hands to participate in their families and communities, as grandparents and volunteers. All these suggestions raise numerous complex issues I cannot deal with in this space any more than Roszak does in his whole book. Thanks, though, are due to Roszak for reminding us that these issues should command much more of our attention. ■