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Being Great In Old Age

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Recently, a friend sent me a list of people who did great things when they were old. It was a friendly gesture, meant to support my belief that it is possible to age "successfully." The list included Bizet, Cervantes, Cezanne, Churchill, El Greco, Rembrandt and Tennyson. Quite a group! Might as well add Warren Buffet, whose personal wealth grew by \$30 billion last year.

No doubt some people are truly remarkable in old age.

But, as I told my friend, I did not find the list very comforting. Sure, it might have given me hope that I could still be in their class, but it mostly made me wonder where I went wrong.

In any event, great success like theirs is not what I mean by successful aging. Even continued ordinary success, being at the top of whatever field of endeavor you have chosen, is not what I mean by successful aging.

The vast majority of us will never achieve a very high level of success, and even those who do (like my friend) will mostly not continue to have that level of success into their 80s and 90s.

Does that mean that they are not aging successfully?

Not at all. The expression "successful aging" is used by gerontologists to mean having a good life in old age. I often use the expression "aging well" as a synonym for "successful aging." Whatever the words, and despite the ageist assumptions of our society, it is possible to have a good life in old age without being one of those people who continues to head a law firm into their 90s or continues to make lots of money or still has the voice to sing opera on stage, etc.

You don't have to be great to age well and -- to put it paradoxically -- you don't even have to be successful to age successfully.

For me, the list of great old people also brought to mind another question, a question with which I struggle all the time I'm sorry to say. Should those of us who -- like me -- have wanted to be among the very best, even to be among the greats, hold onto these ambitions in old age, or should we seek peaceful acceptance of who we have been, who we are and who we will be?

That question sounds a bit more moralistic than I mean it to be. Should we be ambitious or seek peaceful acceptance in old age? That really is a subjective matter, I think, despite the fact that most older people I know come down on one side of the matter or another all the time. Some say, for example, that we should make a contribution in old age, that we should do something significant, that we should (even that we need to) have meaning in our lives. Others say that we should give ourselves a break, that we deserve to retire and just do what we want, that being with our grandchildren is blessing enough and so on.

Personally, I would love to achieve more in my old age than I did when I was younger, when I had middling success. But there's little hope of that, and lingering ambition is mostly a source of pain for me, making it difficult to take pride in my past or to fully enjoy the present. So I would also love to leave ambition behind and find inner peace. But there's little hope for that as well.

Where does that leave me? In Florida, enjoying the warmth during the coldest winter ever in New York, where I live, and writing this small essay, which I hope a few people will read and enjoy. And with no important insight to share except that you don't have to be great to be successful and you don't have to be successful to age well.