

Not Such A Grumpy Old Man After All: A Review of Donald Hall's *Essays After Eighty*

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Lately, my writing about old age has been on the cheerful side. Not surprising, since I've been writing about successful aging and not about unsuccessful aging. Still, some people I know who are in their 80s or 90s have been saying to me, "Just you wait." I've begun to worry that my sense of aging is drawn from the young side of old age -- I am 71 -- and that I don't get what it's like to be very old.

So, when I read a review of [Donald Hall's *Essays After Eighty*](#), which made him sound like a very grumpy and articulate old man bemoaning accumulating losses, I decided I should take a look and see what he had to say that would help me to get better insight into what it's like to be 10 or 20 or 30 years older than I am.

I loved the essays. And I got a bit more understanding of what it feels like to live with accumulating losses and to have more of a past than a future.

But Donald Hall does not seem to me to be an angry, bitter and unhappy old man. He may be a bit of a curmudgeon, and he sure doesn't sugarcoat things. But whatever his complaints, he clearly prefers being alive to being dead.

Hall is a very successful poet. Lots of books, lots of awards -- including a National Medal of The Arts presented by President Obama in 2010. He served briefly as the Poet Laureate of the United States.

His personal life has been complicated. He and his first wife divorced after nearly 20 years. His second wife, also a poet and a woman whom he clearly adored, died from leukemia at the age of 47. Between and after his marriages, there were many "brief romances." Now he is in a third long-term relationship with a woman whom he cares about and who takes very good care of him. He has two children and a number of grandchildren.

At one time in his life he was an academic with tenure, but he decided to give that up and to return to the family farm in New England to focus on writing and to enjoy the bucolic scenery he can watch from the porch in good weather and from a window in bad. He loves the birds that come to his feeder. He even enjoys the squirrels, though with

some ambivalence because they can be tough on the birds. He also loves to watch the flowers come and go -- each in its own season.

When he was younger, he traveled to make presentations to audiences far more often than he does now. But he still gets out from time-to-time and seems to enjoy the occasional limelight and visits to art museums, even though he has to be pushed in a wheelchair.

Is his life sad? He does document losses. He is particularly unhappy about the loss of poetry, which he says he can no longer write. Poetry, he tells us, is too sensual -- even sexual -- in its origins for an old man who needs to "rub testosterone" on his chest from time-to-time. But he also points out that he still writes prose and loves doing it. It may be more laborious now. His essays, he confesses, go through revision after revision, but he must be a hell of an editor, since the essays do not feel labored at all.

He is also unhappy about his diminished physical abilities. He has had many illnesses and injuries that have left him physically "malfit," as he puts it. He has fallen many times. He uses a walker to keep from falling again and needs a wheelchair to go any distance. He no longer drives. He says "it's a comfort not to obsess about my next orgasm." It would be interesting to know whether he misses youthful sex.

In one essay, in which he seems more distressed than in the others, he reports a dream in which he is in a house that does not have a door. He writes, "My problem isn't death, but old age." He notes his physical limitations and then adds, "Friends die, friends become demented, friends quarrel, friends drift with old age into silence."

I get it. Old age, when you've lost as much as Hall has, is not a piece of cake.

But his life is not without satisfactions: Essay writing, life on the ancestral family farm, four women who look after him in various ways, Red Sox games at night, visits from children and grandchildren, the accumulation of honors and a past of great achievement and significant friendships.

Hall is interestingly sardonic about the honors he has received. He clearly takes considerable pride in his achievements and in the recognition that he's gotten. His pride, however, is self-deprecating. What might otherwise seem to be bragging and name-dropping is all balanced by irony about the awards he has received and by confessions of self-doubt, which can, he says, be triggered by the excesses of honors. He seems to want fame, but to doubt its value. "I expect my immortality will last about six seconds after my funeral." But he also talks about the resurrection of poets, noting that it took Andrew Marvel 300 years to rise from the graveyard of forgotten poets.

Whatever the limits of his life, Hall is not yet either in the literal grave or in the metaphorical graveyard of forgotten poets. He not only was, but still is, a fabulous writer. He not only has had, but still has, a life well worth living. And he knows it.