

## Looking Forward With Hope Near the End of Life

In “The Death of The Hired Man,” a poem by Robert Frost, an old man returns to a farm where he once worked. He is near death, needs a place to lay his head, and has no other home. He has had an utterly failed life and is described as having “nothing to look backward to with pride or forward to with home.”

It is common to think about pride in the past as a key source of well-being in old age. Erik Erikson, the originator of the theory of psychological development over the life course, refers to it as “ego-integrity.” By this he means that you feel that the life you’ve had is true to who you are, fulfills the potential that you had, was worthwhile, and involves few regrets about the choices you made over the years.

It is far less common to think about old people nearing death as looking forward with hope. Mostly, old people have answered the question of who they want to be when they grow up. Mostly, they have led lives in which they have made decisions about their future, about work, about love, about belief, about values, about development of self, and about service to others.

### **What can you hope for when you have lived a full life and will die soon?**

The usual line of thought is that, as hope for your own future fades, it is not hope for yourself but hope for humanity, hope for the people who will survive you, hope for future generations, for your children and grandchildren, for your students and proteges, that matters.

Listen to John Stuart Mill writing about this in the 19th century: “[For some], the excitements of life... dwindle in value as the time approaches when all selfish interests must be terminated by death, while those who leave after them objects of personal affection and especially those who



have cultivated a fellow-feeling with the collective interest of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigor of youth and health” (Utilitarianism).

I certainly witnessed this as my wife was dying. Family and friends came to say their good-byes. They cried and my wife comforted them, assured them that they would carry her love and strength on. Her own death had become insignificant in comparison to her caring about the future of the people she loved. It was incredibly impressive to witness her caring and her strength. She had hope—not for her own survival but for those who would live after her.

Care for the future of people you love is a powerful source of hope. But I think there is also another sort of hope in old age.

## **Nearing the end of life is not the same as having reached the end.**

For example, given my chronic medical conditions, it’s likely that I will live only a few more years. But I think and hope I still have some time left. And I have asked myself what my hopes are for these last few years. My choice has been to build a life around jazz and writing—creative endeavors—around family, around friendship, and around making small contributions toward a better nation and a better world, even though I have tilted in late life toward, in the words of Candide, “cultivating my garden.”

I also have hopes of loving again. The death of my wife has left a terrible void, but there are times now when I am with someone who helps to fill the void. Perhaps eventually I will have a relationship built on the kind of caring and commitment that my wife and I had.

Love, family, friendship, contributions to the community, efforts to make the world a better place, creativity, and simple pleasurable and engaging activities—there are many, many opportunities for a good life even as you near the end of it.

# One <sup>very</sup> Old Man

Yes, my remaining life is probably short, but I and others of my age still have much to look forward to with hope—both for generations to come and for the final years of our lives.

