

The book blends memoir with a discussion of aging that embraces elderhood in a realistic and supportive way. Many topics of interest are addressed, including generations, health & self-care, technology, ancestral roots, grief, and more.

Until It's Time: Embracing Life In Our Later Years

By Myra Wexler Darwish

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MYRA WEXLER DARWISH

Until It's Time



*Embracing Life
In Our Later Years*

A MEMOIR



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**CHAPTER I:
ANOTHER SEASON**

(Experiences with Aging)

“The New Moon and Its Symbolism”

(A blank page, new beginnings, unlimited possibility, planting seeds,
intention)

“Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old.”

...Franz Kafka

“Getting old is like climbing a mountain; you get a little out of breath,
but the view is much better!”

...Ingrid Bergman

“No one tells the oceans
or the trees
or the mountains that they're too old.

They talk of how powerful,
how grounded,
how awesome they are.

Imagine if we thought the same way about ourselves as we got older.
Maybe we'd realize how spectacular we are.”

...Becky Hemsley

The chimes rang out eighty times, and another era had arrived; I had reached my eighth decade of life, and it was with joy!

My sister passed at fifty-nine, and my maternal and paternal grandmothers passed at sixty-four and sixty-five, respectively. My mother lived until seventy-eight years old; reaching eighty was to be celebrated!

The New Moon with its quiet and wise energy is the perfect platform to share with the reader what my experience with aging has been. This moon phase, after all, was about “planting seeds” and “intention.” Aging for me speaks to harvesting the joy one has accumulated throughout one’s lifetime, and to discovering ways of sharing that joy with others.

Early Years, Early Experiences

The experience of being with the elderly was a natural part of my growing up; I had the great fortune of knowing all my grandparents and was in loving relationships with all of them. I was born the oldest grandchild on my mother’s side, and the fourth of eight on my father’s.

I received love from my grandmother Edna’s wonderful chicken soup; the amazing pungent fragrance that filled their apartment will always be in my memory. My grandfather Louis’s treats were from the deli, where, when we walked there together, I would hear the magic words, “Pick whatever you want.” My grandmother Sarah’s pickle barrels in her backyard were filled with gorgeous green and slightly pink-tinged tomatoes. The smell of her fragrant knishes and the tailored dresses that she made for me and my sister were wonderful. My grandfather Morris and I loved to watch the “Westerns” together; he sat on a chair and I on the rug near him, taking in every word. My

grandparents gave me strength and a high comfort level for being with the elderly.

From an early age, I recognized that being older was synonymous with strength and endurance. I remember the family stories that I heard, such as: “Running away from the Cossacks;” “Hiding in piles of snow;” “Earning enough money to bring the rest of the family over;” “Bringing the heavy brass samovar over;” “Not being able to afford a regular cabin on the ship and needing to go in steerage;” and “Being called a ‘Greenie’ when first arriving from Ellis Island, due to looking different from other people.”

I have always understood the value of listening and how much an older adult needs to be listened to. My earliest such experience with listening was with my paternal grandmother, Edna, who was in the latter stages of kidney failure. Our family lived in West Philadelphia at the time, only six blocks away from my paternal grandparents. I remember, as a young girl of twelve, happily walking north on Sixtieth Street to reach their apartment.

What could I offer her better than my love?

I’d pull up a chair, sit by her bed, hold her hand, and just listen. Her beautiful, sky-blue eyes looked directly at mine, as she struggled to find a comfortable position in her bed. I recall that her abdomen was enlarged from her condition; unbeknownst to me, she was only a few weeks from transitioning. I have wished many times over that I could go back and re-create my time with her. I would have had so many more compelling questions to ask her about life in Ukraine, the little village in Buki, and her travels across Europe to reach America back in 1920-1921. I know from our quality time together that my Bubbe loved my father with all her heart, and that very love found its way to the younger generations in our family.

Until It's Time

The afternoon I returned from that visit with my grandmother, I remember my mother saying to me, "I think it was special that you went over to see Bubbe Edna. Not many kids your age would have had the interest to do that." My mother's statement resonated with me; in fact, she was prescient in predicting my career choices in later life. She had, indeed, planted a seed!

Other thoughts about my early childhood relationships with my grandparents were the loving words they frequently said to me: "*Mama Shana*," "*Sheyn Pnim*," "*Klugala Meydl*," and "*Klugala Velt*." The expressions meant: my pretty mother, pretty face, smart/clever girl, and smart/clever world. It seems that the nurturing we receive from our grandparents is special; it's neither complicated by the rigors of child-rearing, nor by the stresses and strains of everyday living in a family. The relationship is similar to being in snow that is newly fallen...so beautiful and enjoyed for its purity; it's a cloak of white, loving energy!

I can say that, early in my life, I realized that being a grandparent was an honor, and I looked forward to being in that role when I grew older. Happily, I have had the opportunity of being a Bubbe. There are no words for the joy that this relationship has brought me...being able to experience the beauty of a newly fallen snow again and again with my three amazing grandchildren: Zak, Jo, and Mateo.

Experiences in My Professional Life

I was never eighty before, but I've had a lot of experience with this population, caring for and appreciating their needs and strengths. Sometimes I hear myself saying, "I remember teaching about the physiological and psychological changes in the elderly, both normal and abnormal, and here I am experiencing what I had taught!"

I had chosen to work with the elderly in one form or another in my career path: as a staff nurse on medical and gero-psych units; a clinical specialist in gerontology; a holistic nurse; an associate professor of nursing; a vice-president in a community organization, caring for Alzheimer's patients; a care manager in home health; a hospice volunteer; and, currently, authoring a book about the long-view of one's life.

The choices I've made in my career and personal life are born out of my deep connection to those who are older; I have known about this connection since I was young, and the roots are deep.

In astrology, the fourth house is considered the "root" of the chart, or the ancestral realm. I was blessed with having my Sun (life force) there, and, by nature, with being born a genographer! As a child, I tried to see the patterns and connections in my family, an endeavor that was completely natural for me. Thus, my attraction to working with the elderly was an outcome of my native interest. When I worked with patients, I worked with the "entire" person: with their culture, family, psycho-social-spiritual needs, resources, education, and all that was unique to them.

I was unable, it seems, to see a patient through a black-and-white lens; it was always through a multifaceted lens! Being a holistic nurse was congruent with who I was, and I remained whole because of my commitment to its practice.

One special nurse-patient relationship I remember well was with "R," the kindest and most loving patient I had ever worked with. "R," an eighty-three-year-old woman, lay in her bed while a deep, life-threatening infection raged in her leg. The year was 1980, and I had temporarily left psychiatry to gain experience in the medical-surgical field and round out my overall skills.

“R’s” treatment was with IV antibiotics and complex dressing changes. The nursing staff on this special infectious disease unit were some of the most empathic I’ve ever worked with. Many of the patients were suffering from serious post-op infections and surgical failures, others with infectious diseases. The patients were isolated; when we came into their rooms, our time with them was special. Many patients needed to stay in the unit for long periods, so some relationships became longer-term; “R” was one of those patients. The staff knew her family well and were very much in tune with their worries and concerns.

What made “R” so memorable was her appreciation for the care provided by staff. There we were, changing dressings in our full garb of gowns, masks, and gloves, yet it was easy to connect with her. She greeted us with a big smile, and when our dressing changes were completed, we always received a big, “Thank you, I love you.”

I always spoke to “R” while I was providing care, and she shared about her family, and about how she was worried that they were worried about her. I saw her as a very loving mother and grandmother, who had lived her life caring for others. Now, at the most life-threatening time of her life, she stayed true to who she was.

A week after one such visit, I arrived at the unit for a report and could feel the sadness in the air. “R” had passed. There wasn’t a dry eye on the unit, a testament to the love she had given to all of us.

When “R’s” family came to the unit that morning, we surrounded them with our expressions of sympathy; they were heartbroken but had been aware of how serious her condition was.

How is it that some forty-plus years later I have never forgotten her?

The reason I remember so clearly is that she exemplified for me how important an elder can be in handing down loving strength to others, thereby modeling for the younger generation what to strive for in our own lives. She touched my heart and my soul.

Over the years I have cared for many elder patients, always appreciating that I was in a privileged place to understand how life unfolded for them. As a holistic nurse, I never placed older people in a box labeled “old!” Why would I not care for their needs and their potential as well?

I have chosen to live my later years out of the “old” box as well. Yes, I respect that my body has gone through change and challenges, but I know that “I” remain that same happy and inquisitive person who grew up always being on a quest for knowledge; she’ll be with me until the end, and beyond!

Of all my nursing experiences, being a member of a nursing faculty was by far the most challenging. As such, I was essentially responsible for the curriculum and clinical modeling that turns students into passing their NCLEX-RN (National Council License Examination for Registered Nurses).

It was a very creative process!

While in the clinical arena, which for me was typically long-term care, my students immersed themselves in the daily lives of the residents. There is a distinction between long-term care and acute care in the hospital; a clinical assignment was with a resident, rather than with a patient. In long-term care, the student is in the “home” of the individual they are assigned to, which changes the dynamic. The potential to get to know the person is enhanced, and interactional patterns can be observed.

Students had a wonderful opportunity to be a part of the resident's daily life: go for a walk together, sit outside in the garden, take part in the activities, and generally develop a relationship for several days' worth of assignments. Part of my responsibility was to make the students feel comfortable in the environment, by modeling how to engage with residents who might be hard-of-hearing or have a visual impairment, or with those who isolated themselves or were depressed.

I rotated each student through the memory care unit, which was an excellent opportunity for them to develop their skill sets in working with residents who had Alzheimer's, vascular, or another type of dementia. Communication between the residents and the students required a different set of strategies and a keen observation of behavior.

An important lesson that I strived for all students to learn was: "*All behavior has meaning.*" Agitation or restlessness can sometimes mean *I have to go to the bathroom*. A resident repeating, "*I want to go home*" can mean that they are afraid or lonely. An empathic response such as "*I'll stay with you*" (spoken with a kind and caring voice) can go a long way toward helping a resident feel calmer.

It is important for residents with dementia to be heard and to keep their environment peaceful and nurturing. The core of a person never goes away; they need the same love and care that everyone needs! The students were part of the residents' environment and thus needed to maintain an inner calm. Though immediate and recent memory was lost, the residents were sensitive to living in a calm, caring, and well-structured setting.

Modeling caring for an elderly patient takes a broad knowledge base and regarding the "whole" patient that, ideally, students will incorporate into their practices. The approach to care is to never see patients as a number or a diagnosis but to have an active inquiry into

their patients' very lives. For example, what did they do in their younger years?

I remember a resident who would walk down the hallway holding onto the railing and counting "58, 59, 60, 58, 59, 60" as she pointed out into space. The students wondered what that meant, so we asked the staff, "What did this resident do in her earlier years?" We discovered she had been a farmer; in her dementia, she was back in her early years, counting the herd of cows. Of course, her behavior now made sense! Again, all behavior has meaning.

As a member of a nursing faculty, I also had lecture responsibilities, where I would open to the students the world of *Aging*. Before every class, I would read up on current research, to ensure I was giving students the most recent data possible. I taught them about the physiological changes, the psychological challenges, society's sometimes negative appreciation for the elderly (which is termed *Ageism*), and the impacts of culture on the lives of the elderly. All this content was critical for my students to have a well-rounded gerontological education.

I was in my fifties and sixties during those years; the truth is that I could do a much better job of it now! "Why?" one may ask. The answer is that I've now lived through all the above personally and have thus gathered a deeper experiential understanding.

I like the analogy of the seasoned artist who knows exactly what color blue to create to make their work just right. It takes a lot of years to get to that right shade of blue!

The amount of work and dedication required to become a seasoned faculty member couldn't possibly fit into a job description. The outcome of seeing students blossom and eventually walk to receive

their diplomas is beyond rewarding. I've never counted the actual number of students I've taught, either in the classroom or in clinical; suffice it to say, I had a chance to make a difference, and I dearly hope I did.

I believe that nurses see the world through different lenses than the general public does; we are exposed to the human condition throughout our professional lives. We're there at birth, at death, and in between. We are educated to look at society members with an inquiring mind: *What is the chronological age and the actual developmental age? What was their family of origin like? What did they see as their strengths? What are their resources and support systems? What are their coping strategies? What do they see as their most pressing needs? How do they handle stress? What was a typical day like for them? What are their current concerns?*

Suffice it to say, that the lenses I cultivated throughout my career are now a natural part of my everyday thinking. I truly honor that I had such important experiences.

I recall a conversation with some older family members about ten years ago, in which the proverbial discussion of their aches and pains was being shared and compared: *my arthritis is mostly in the morning; my knees are making it hard to get in and out of my car; my shoulders bother me if I sleep in the wrong position*" were common topics, as well as: *my kids don't understand!*

I was younger then but could certainly empathize with their discomfort; at seventy, I was no spring chicken myself! I chimed in, "Do you think we can expect our children to understand if they haven't had the experience of what being older was like?" They looked up at me, and said, "I never thought of that!"

I firmly believe any discussion of aging needs to recognize and honor that no one knows what it is like until they get there!

So, What Is It Really Like? Aging, That Is

When did I first identify myself as old? Was it the experience of a cancer diagnosis? Or, perhaps, the morning stiffness that accompanied my getting out of bed? Sixty didn't do it. Seventy didn't either. It was eighty that finally got my attention.

The long view was lengthening, and the passage of time itself was the persuader-in-chief. It seemed there was pressure to accomplish, given that the number of years before me was growing smaller.

Time was limiting my choices, and action was needed. The pressure of time itself is interesting; an example would be someone in a fifty-minute therapy session, who "opens up" at the forty-fifth minute. Time is a potent force, and aging has an intensity of its own. Unexpectedly, I found that, along with my reaching the chronological age of eighty, came a sense of empowerment. I felt strong; in fact, the writing of this book was a "Must" for me.

I started feeling the pressure of getting things together for the younger generation-- handing down a legacy, if you would. There was also an intense desire to appreciate my essence: *Who was I? How could I make a difference in the remaining years I had? How do I transition from being in a human body to eventually being in spirit? How can I best model a loving and conscious life for my children and grandchildren? And, most importantly, how do I remain in a loving space where I care for myself, so I can be there mentally, physically, and spiritually, for others?*

I had work to do, and I approached it with a zest reminiscent of how I always lived my life...by following my "Must!"

There are many ways to describe the experience of becoming old. Commonly, it is thought of as wrinkles, getting stiff, losing friends and family, becoming forgetful, thinning skin, hearing loss, and on and on. Getting older is not typically celebrated in our society; it may be viewed negatively as a decline or a loss of who we were.

Fear surely undergirds all the stereotypes of aging that promote ageism!

Yes, there are those of us in our aging processes who are experiencing debilitating physical, mental, and emotional issues; I profoundly hope they are getting the love and support they deserve. Aging can require assistance from others--that is just how it is! As in our younger years, we all age differently; we make different choices and have different levels of socio-economic resources. There need not be any judgment as to how we are aging; society must be there to support those who, unfortunately, are not in a strong position.

It takes intention and focus to integrate one's life experiences; the process itself can be important work for an older adult, ultimately leading to peace and understanding of how one's life has evolved.

I'd like to reframe becoming old as:

"The time in our lives when we have the potential to do significant work toward integrating all that we have been, with all that we want to leave behind."

In addition: *"To connect our souls' longing with the life that we have lived and understand our true purpose!"*

I realize that, for some, this reframe of the aging process may be out of reach, while, for others, it would need to be a conscious choice.

Wherever we are in the process, I honor that we are all doing our best, given the uniqueness of the lives we have led.

I can say that, for myself, the experience of aging is like being an explorer in a jungle, never knowing what lies ahead, but feeling joy because I'm finally making the trip. Here, amidst the trees, sounds, and smells of the jungle, I'm finally able to learn more about what my strengths truly are, and about how my past challenges have influenced the paths I now take. I go through the jungle buoyed with love, not diminished by fear!

The Best Tool in Our Toolkit Is Us!

The older adult is after all not a one-dimensional human being; we're complex! We come from unique families, places, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultures. We have native talents, different physical capacities, and varying cognitive abilities. We have diverse hopes, dreams, and life experiences. Many of us are builders, creators, and thrivers, and some of us have greater needs to be taken care of; we are as diverse as when we were younger.

We bring to the world many gifts, and our diversity carries within us many stories and life experiences that can be helpful to mankind. The physical, emotional, environmental, geopolitical, health, and mental stresses of life, day-in and day-out, can take their toll. The world is gathering a huge amount of experience in its collective, making this a profound time to learn and to share.

Very few of us wouldn't agree with the following statement: We are going through an intense time of change on the planet! I believe that elders who choose to do so, and those who are capable, can make a great contribution to their families and society at this critical time of change. Looking to those among us who have weathered the storms in

their lives can be models of coping and endurance and bring hope to many.

What Helps Along the Way? Of all the factors that may help us in our aging processes, I'd have to say that experience in and of itself ultimately makes the most difference. We can look back at significant challenges and realize we were able to move past them and, even more, learn from them. Integration of our life experiences is what our task is all about!

We've been able to learn, discern, and make effective choices that have empowered us; in fact, we are now seeing life from the long view, a very strong position to be in!

Questions to Think About from the Long View

- 1) Looking back at your life, what was the best decision you ever made?
- 2) What worked well for you in the past when you had a challenging situation?
- 3) Of all your qualities, which one are you most proud of?
- 4) Thinking about your twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, and seventies-plus, what stands out most regarding what you brought with you into the next decade?
- 5) How do you see yourself as different now from when you were younger?
- 6) What do you like most about your mature self?
- 7) Have you remained true to yourself?
- 8) What do you offer the younger generation?

When we answer reflective questions such as those mentioned above, we empower ourselves by getting in touch with our "Life's"

work. Integration is the natural outcome of self-reflection, and it is a healthy activity. How wonderful to age in joy, not in disappointment!

Consider being able to say to yourself, “*It’s hard to believe I did all that!*” and receiving the answer, “*Yes, I did!*”

Becoming Collectors

What if we lived our lives in such a way that we consciously became collectors of everything wise and beautiful that came into our days and years? What if we knew that all we saved would become the most precious things we’d possess in our later years? Wouldn’t they then be worth collecting? Wouldn’t this be a wonderful way to attract positive energy into our lives?

As we live our lives, let us consider collecting the little things that someday will become a source of great strength: pictures, loving memories, songs that evoke happy memories, collections of seashells, children’s art, memories of smiles and special hugs that touch our hearts, the times we reach a goal we thought impossible or stay strong when it was hard to do so, mementos from loving relationships, experiencing a good outcome even when doubting there could be one, not judging anyone even when it took great strength of character to do so, and doing whatever it took to make our hearts smile.

Imagine placing all these gifts in a little basket kept somewhere nearby and always visible. Many gifts might be symbolic and, even though the little basket might be getting full...there will always be space for more. Creating space for more joy to enter our life is self-empowerment.

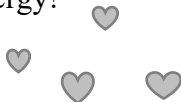
We must choose not to limit ourselves. Collectors never truly know what might be going into their baskets next. Be open to new possibilities...

Until It's Time

The items we collect will change as the years go on; early on, they might be memories of our family, or a fun trip we may have had, or a special friend, pet, or memento. Later on, our children's and grandchildren's gifts or the kind gifts from friends may add to the collection.

Some people who have filled our basket with gifts might have already passed; what a joy to know that their essence is still with us.

When we finally leave this earthly realm, whatever our basket has been filled with comes with us. I can think of nothing more important than filling it with loving energy!



I Believe...

- That one of the most untapped resources of wisdom in our society is the elderly.
- That we need to reach out and “be” with the elderly...let us listen to each other, let us hold their hands and look into their eyes, let us “see” their beauty.
- That aging is not a disease; it is the grand finale of our earthly potential.
- That we need to develop new ways of getting the old and the young together.
- That stereotyping of the elderly is born out of disrespect...if we are fortunate, we will all get older!
- That being older doesn't mean that we are all now alike. It is quite the opposite; we are ourselves, only older!
- That joy is no stranger to older people, even though there are challenges and issues we didn't have when we were younger.

- That love can be with us until the very end of our lives; we can give and receive love until our very last breath.
- That love is the glue that holds the Universe together.
- That being in the field of love's vibration helps us move toward a higher level of human consciousness.

I Celebrate That...

- I am making my best choices, and I honor every one of them.
- Whatever anger, fear, and grief I hold within me is processed and released.
- I am conscious of my aging process and embrace fully who I am.
- I had the great fortune of having parents who valued me.
- I have something to offer others...a place where they can go to seek counsel.
- Marrying my life companion of sixty-two years was the best decision I ever made.
- Our children, their spouses, and our grandchildren are such a great source of joy and friendship.
- When I look out the window, there is always something beautiful to see.
- I can give and receive hugs every morning.
- I can learn something new every day.
- I can think about the world from the long view.
- Love never dies; it can ripple through generations. It goes on and on!
- Aging begins from the time we are born; we are ourselves, only older!

Astrological Perspectives

In astrology, the chart represents the movement of life, from the early beginnings in the first house, which is Aries, to the twelfth house of Pisces. We learn and grow through gaining mastery of the issues that each house focuses on, in an ever-evolving cycle. This cyclical experience moves us upward and outward, encompassing all that we have learned before; it grows as we age.

The first is the self, the second is resources; the third is communications; the fourth is our ancestral roots; the fifth is creativity/children; the sixth is health and service; the seventh is 1:1 relationships/partnerships; the eighth is ancestral legacy; the ninth is the higher mind; the tenth is public image; the eleventh is societal/tribal issues; and finally, the twelfth is the spiritual connection and closing of the grand circle. Aging is completion!

The Planets travel through the houses every day. Some are more active, such as the Lights (the Sun and Moon). The personal planets of Mercury, Venus, and Mars have more activity than others and typically hold great meaning for us. Some are a little slower, such as the Transitional Planets of Jupiter and Saturn, and some have very long transits, such as Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. We are touched by the energies of each planet and have great potential to learn lessons from them all. (See Appendix III for details.)

Final Thought

“In the peace of the Moon’s quiet time, I have consciously planted a seed for you, so that new perspectives on aging may sprout.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

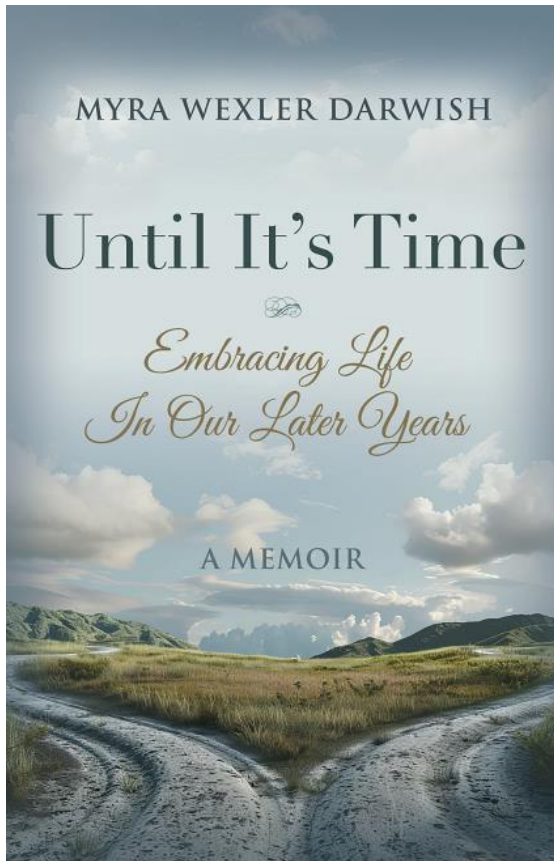
Myra Wexler Darwish, completed her first book, *Jupiter Remembered*, at seventy years old, and at eighty-one has written its sequel, *Until It's Time*.

She lives in Florida with her husband of sixty-three years, is a Mom to three wonderful children and their spouses, and is blessed to be a grandmother to three precious "Grands."

She started on her college path when she was thirty-two years old, graduating with a BSN in Nursing from LaSalle University in Philadelphia, later she earned an MSN in Family Nursing from UAH, in Huntsville, Alabama. She eventually became an associate professor of nursing. Her clinical practice was that of an advanced practitioner in gerontology (focus on gero-psych) and holistic nursing; later she studied and consulted in astrology.

In 2002, she received a non-traditional PhD in Natural Health; her dissertation focused on: "The Emergence of Flower-Derived Complementary/Alternative Therapies for Healing the Body, Mind, Emotions, and Spirit." In 2012, she successfully completed the "Interpretive and Applied Astrology Training Program" at Southwest Contemporary Astrology in Santa Fe New Mexico with world class astrologer, Erin Sullivan.

Myra's time now is dedicated to her favorite passions: writing, reading, being with family and friends, travel, astrological research, practice of peace & wellness strategies for the body/mind and spirit, and learning to love well and embrace the beauty of each day.



The book blends memoir with a discussion of aging that embraces elderhood in a realistic and supportive way. Many topics of interest are addressed, including generations, health & self-care, technology, ancestral roots, grief, and more.

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