AGE WAVE

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How the Most Important Trend of Our Time Will Change Your Future

"*Age Wave* raises questions and consequences we never dreamed of. It will change your view of the future."—John Naisbitt, author of *Megatrends*

KEN DYCHTWALD, Ph.D.
and JOE FLOWER

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The Challenges and Opportunities of an Aging America

Ken Dychtwald, Ph.D.
and Joe Flower

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—J.F.

Introduction

This story begins in the winter of 1973. I was then 23 years old and living and teaching at the Esalen Institute, the heart of the human-potential movement, in Big Sur, California. I was completing my doctorate in psychology while simultaneously putting the final touches on my first book, *Bodymind.* At that point in my life I was researching strategies and techniques by which people could enhance their creativity, physical vigor, and mental capabilities. All my life I had heard that most of us use only 5 percent of our potential. I was hoping to find the key to raising that percentage.

My friend Dr. Jean Houston, president of the Foundation for Mind Research, had recently put me in contact with a most extraordinary woman, Dr. Gay Luce. Gay was planning a grand experiment, a kind of academy of holistic health and human development, and she was looking for someone to help her create the curriculum.

The challenge was intoxicating. I immediately took steps to wind up my work at Esalen, and I spent the next several

months developing what I thought would be an ideal program. My mind raced with the possibilities: I would include techniques for enhancing all aspects of physical functioning (for instance, yoga, martial arts, proper nutrition, and aerobic exercise), along with methods for improving mental skills and inner awareness (such as meditation, visualization, and biofeedback). Since we would be working in groups of between 15 and 20 people, I dreamed up an assortment of encounter and sensitivity-training processes that would help create a mood of trust and intimacy among the group members. And, of course, in the spirit of 1970s California there would be a great deal of interpersonal sharing and risk taking to help people break old and limiting patterns of behavior.

I then prepared to move to Berkeley, California, where the project would be headquartered. I had just finished making all of my moving arrangements when Gay called and said, "I've changed my mind."

I was stunned. "But you can't change your mind! I've already created a terrific program, and I'm all set to move!"

"Please," she said, "hear me out. I've become very concerned lately about my mother. She's in her seventies and hasn't been feeling well. In caring for her, I've realized that although there are a lot of programs to help young people feel and function better, no one's doing anything for old people. If you're game, I'd like you to consider rewriting the entire program for people over 65. Let's create a human-potential program for senior citizens!"

I was appalled by the idea. This definitely did not sound like fun. Like many other 23-year-olds, I thought of older people as unattractive, set in their ways, and difficult to relate to. Besides, since most of the human-development strategies I'd planned were geared toward younger people, I wondered if they could even have an effect on people who were, I knew, "over the hill."

I quickly rejected Gay's proposal, although I did agree to think it over for a few days. When I did, my imagination started to churn. What would it be like to practice yoga and share feelings with septuagenarians? Could you take a 70-

year-old body and help it to become more supple, flexible, and relaxed? Could you take an individual who had been alone and socially isolated for years and somehow bring back a feeling of intimacy and pleasure in dealing with other people? Would it be possible to create an environment in which the people I thought of as being the least changeable could, in fact, change? And if people could grow and improve themselves at 70 or 80, what would that say about people in their thirties and forties who claim that it's too late for them to change?

Before I knew what had hit me, I'd been bitten by the challenge.

That was my introduction to gerontology. Before that week, it had never occurred to me that I would wind up spending the core of my adult life searching for a new image of aging in America. But during the 15 years since then, the study of aging in America has drawn me in over and over again, each time in new and different ways.

The SAGE (Senior Actualization and Growth Exploration) Project, as our program was called, became extremely successful. We found that physically rigid people of 70 and 80 could become much more flexible. We found that many elders who had seemed distant, or even mentally dysfunctional, were simply bored and had turned inward. We found that people who were loners became open to the group experience, to making new friends, to romance. We found that many of the problems of these older people were problems of confidence and self-esteem, problems that were exacerbated by a gerontophobic culture. Once they started feeling better about themselves, some of them decided to go back to school or work, some became volunteers in the community, and some formed new relationships and even fell in love. Before we knew it we had a breeding ground for highly spirited, highly vigorous, turned-on humans who happened to be 60, 70, or 80 years old.

During the 1970s, this program (which was eventually funded by the National Institutes of Health) became the national model for several hundred other human-development

and wellness programs for the elderly throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe.

My five years as co-director of the SAGE Project brought me an unexpected result. I thought that what I was doing was teaching older people how to live well, a presumptuous thought for a person so many years younger than they. But in spending 40 to 50 hours a week with long-lived humans, people who were close to death but full of life, I learned the depth of experience and seasoning in the spirits of these people. I began to see not only what I could teach them but also what they could teach *me.* And, most profoundly, I became aware of the similarities between them and me, of how young grows into old. Participants told me that in me and my friends they could see themselves at earlier times, and I became increasingly able to catch glimpses in them of myself in later years. Over time, a haunting realization came to me: the elderly are not "them," they're "us."

Then came a second fascination with aging, one that has become somewhat of a professional obsession. I wondered if any of the social, economic, and physical difficulties and problems that older people suffer were preventable. I noticed that many of the older people who were lonely had never quite learned the skill of making new friends in their later years. Many of those who were bored had long before resigned from challenging social and intellectual involvement. Many who were struggling with the hardships of fixed incomes had not been poor earlier on but had simply not managed their finances well.

And I observed that a lifetime of disregard for personal health usually led, not to a death sentence, but to chronic disease, a kind of extended-life imprisonment. It was obvious that many of the painful, punishing illnesses of old age could have been prevented.

I began to see that aging was most definitely not something that begins on the 65th birthday. Rather, the way we care for ourselves, the way we engage our social relationships, and the kinds of activities we're involved in throughout our

lives lead us straight to the door of who we will be in our later years.

If so, I wondered why in the world we don't start thinking about the whole life process when we're younger, when there's still so much time to shape a healthy, productive future. I was convinced that if during youth and middle age we could instill in our lives a sense of how to create a meaningful, rich, and active old age, we would have a higher likelihood of actually achieving it.

By the early 1980s, as a result of the success of the SAGE Project and of several of my books, I found myself being invited to lecture at many conferences on aging, to serve on scientific and academic advisory panels, to appear on local and national television, and to consult with a wide variety of corporations interested in the challenges and opportunities of the aging of America.

At that time I began the research and study for this book. Until then, my primary orientation had been toward the way individuals relate to their own aging processes. The wider social focus required by this project made it clear to me that many age-related problems and challenges were so common that they might be part of some larger social phenomenon.

As I interacted with national policymakers, corporate leaders, and media personalities, I quickly learned something very interesting about how Americans want to think about aging: they don't. Aging, like other "taboo" issues, was not discussed at polite social gatherings, not written about in popular books, and not displayed in advertising. It seemed incredible to me that aging could be such a neglected issue when there were so many older people. The psychologist in me could recognize denial when he saw it. As I probed deeper, I was shocked by the degree to which gerontophobia had permeated our culture.

This gerontophobia was not only being expressed in our social values and popular media, it was ingrained in the texture of our man-made physical environment as well. I noticed that we had designed America, top to bottom, inside and out,

to glorify the size, shape, and style of youth—from the height of the steps and the intensity of lighting in public buildings, to the age and style of the models in advertisements, to our embarrassment about our birthdays, to the fact that only 3 percent of the characters on television are over 65, while in reality this age group represents 12 percent of the population. We live in a youth-oriented—perhaps even youth-obsessed—nation. In thousands of ways we have learned to like what's young and dislike what's old.

Against this background of avoidance and negativity, I became increasingly excited about what I saw as a really big story: the absolutely predictable arrival, in our culture and in our time, of a demographic revolution that has no precedent in history. The very thing that we had blanked out of our cultural life was about to overwhelm us. Our young country is growing old. But are we prepared? The answer is no—at least, not yet.

However, in recent years a handful of innovative leaders, associations, and companies have begun to take notice of the problems *and the opportunities* that the aging of America will bring. In response, in 1986 I formed Age Wave, Inc., which has become one of the country's fastest growing information and communications firms.

At Age Wave, Inc., we're convinced that increases in the number, power, and resourcefulness of older Americans will render obsolete many of our social and business assumptions about what it means to be an older adult and to serve older adults. By working in partnership with many of America's leading associations and corporations in various fields and industries, we are committed to fostering a factual and positive new image of aging in America.

Age Wave's team of demographers, researchers, educators, business consultants, and media and communications experts has collaborated with many progressive companies and groups to assist them in understanding and meeting the social, lifestyle, and consumer needs of America's growing older population. Our list of clients includes American Express, CBS, Coopers & Lybrand, Gillette, Time Inc.,

McGraw-Hill, Avon, Bank of America, Institutional Investor, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Marion Laboratories, the Young Presidents' Organization, and the Chief Executives Organization. But the work has just begun.

In the coming years, American culture will shift from being focused on youth to being increasingly concerned with the needs, problems, and dreams of a middle-aged and older population.

The coming "age wave" will challenge and shake every aspect of our personal, social, and political dynamics. How we will alter ourselves in response will be an issue of mounting concern; indeed, it may prove to be the single most controversial issue in the twilight of this century.

How strange that while we have spent the past 10,000 years trying to live long and grow old, now that we are having some success we don't know what to make of it. Our nation has yet to figure out a positive and hopeful way to think about itself growing up. America is having an identity crisis, one that can be resolved only through the adoption of a dramatically new image of aging.

In my capacity as an author, public speaker, and consultant on aging, I have had the opportunity in the last 15 years to study and interact with literally hundreds of thousands of men and women throughout America about their feelings, fears, and hopes for their later years. My great hope is that this book, which represents the culmination of these years of research, reflection, and writing, will begin to tell the story of what is to come: a hopeful, vigorous, and productive aging America.

KEN DYCHTWALD, PH.D.
Emeryville, California
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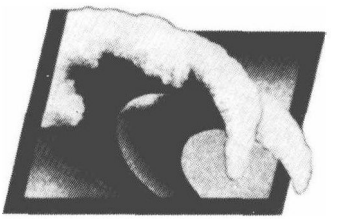

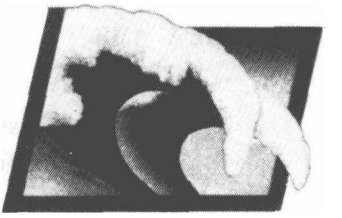

CHAPTER 1

The Rising Tide

A young country is growing old.

The nation that was founded on young backs, on the vigor, strength, impetuosity, and hope of youth, is growing more mature, steadier, deeper—even, one may hope, wiser. America is aging.

Most of the future remains unknown. But this much of the future is already written: more of us are growing older together than ever before, and the impact of that collective aging will change every facet of our society in the coming years.

The upheavals are not just going to happen to society, or to policymakers, or to social demographers. They will happen to you. They are probably already happening to your parents or older friends and family members. Whether you are 20, 55, or 70, the Age Wave will change your life in ways you might now find hard to imagine.

- **You will live longer than you might now expect—possibly much longer—as future science brings the**

aging process under control. It is likely that you will grow old more slowly than did members of previous generations, with greater health, energy, dynamism, and direction. You may even benefit from long-sought-after breakthroughs in life extension that will allow many people to live to 100, and some even to 120. And as science learns more about the aging process, you will be able to take advantage of the continual discovery of new drugs, foods, therapies, and health programs that will cause your body to age at a slower pace.

- **You will change the way you love, whom you love, and how long you will love them.** Marriage will change, as "till-death-do-us-part" unions give way to serial monogamy. In an era of longer life, some people will have marriages that last 75 years, while others will have different mates for each major stage of life. You may find yourself falling in love later in life, and in more unusual ways, than you now expect. Older women will deal with the shortage of older men by turning increasingly to unconventional relationships, such as dating younger men or sharing a man with other women.

- **You will change your conception of family life and the ways in which you relate to your parents and children.** The child-focused, nuclear family will become increasingly uncommon and will be replaced by the "matrix" family, an adult-centered, transgenerational family bound together by friendship and choice as well as by blood and obligation.

- **The physical environment you live in will change.** Because the man-made world we inhabit is now designed for youth, the form and fit of everything will be redesigned. To fit the pace, physiology, and style of a population predominantly in the middle and later years of life, the typeface in books will get larger, and traffic lights will change more slowly; steps will be lower, bathtubs less