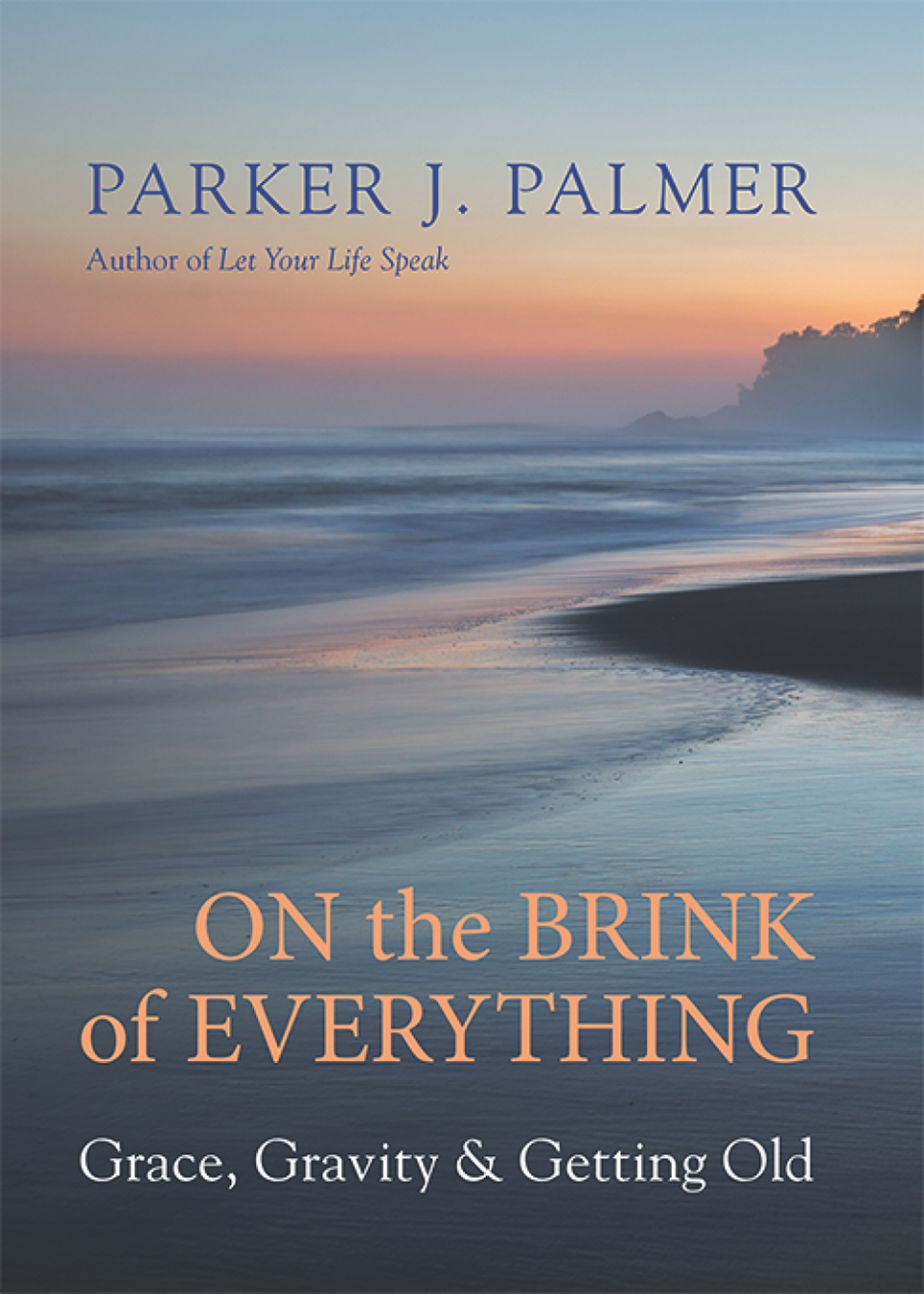
PARKER J. PALMER
Author of *Let Your Life Speak*
ON the BRINK of EVERYTHING
Grace, Gravity & Getting Old

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Parker Palmer is one of our wisest minds and lives and one of my greatest mentors. He has the spirit of a poet and the stature of a prophet. There is no one I'd rather eavesdrop on as he ponders "the brink of everything." This book is a companion for not merely surviving a fractured world, but embodying—like Parker—the fiercely honest and gracious wholeness that is ours to claim at every stage of life.

—KRISTA TIPPETT, founder of On Being Studios, author of *Einstein's God* and *Becoming Wise,* winner of the 2014 National Humanities Medal

Parker Palmer is the most integral and wholehearted teacher of our age. For nearly eight decades, he has seen much, questioned everything, and returned with a wisdom essential to everyone. His latest book, *On the Brink of Everything,* is a deep reflection on aging that offers a master's earned view of the large and the small, and how we're all vital threads woven together by life. This book will stir your soul and bring you closer to everything.

—MARK NEPO, author of *More Together Than Alone* and *The Book of Awakening*

Parker J. Palmer's tenth wise book, *On the Brink of Everything,* is a wondrously rich mix of reality and possibility, comfort and story, helpful counsel and poetry, in the voice of a friend. It's an honest wake-up chime, no matter where you are in your own time line, because somehow, these pages hold all of time—past and present, stirring together—refreshing the spirit. This is a book of immense gratitude, consolation, and praise.

—NAOMI SHIHAB NYE, author of *Transfer* and *Voices in the Air: Poems for Listeners*, and National Book Award finalist

Our entire culture is deeply in need of true elders, and you can't be one until you have arrived there—chronologically, spiritually, and intellectually. Parker J. Palmer is a writer and a man who has clearly earned the title of elder. And he elders with such readability and humor! This book is a generous gift to all of us—and to our attempts at a truly human civilization.

—RICHARD ROHR, founder of the Center for Contemplation and Action, and author of *Falling Upward* and *Adam's Return*

Parker J. Palmer's books are long-treasured companions on my personal journey. His newest offering is clear-eyed and good-humored, luminously prophetic and disarmingly honest. It is tender to the core for our shared human condition and fierce with love and unguarded hope for our shared human possibility. It has the feel of a lovely kitchen table conversation between the author and reader, exploring thoughtful aging, finding meaning in hard times, and harmonizing our inner and outer landscapes at every stage of life. This book is a generous gift to a worried and weary world.

—CARRIE NEWCOMER, musician, recording artist of *The Beautiful Not Yet*, author of *A Permeable Life: Poems and Essays*, and Grammy songwriting award winner

Parker Palmer has given me so many gifts through the years. His writing has done for me what I can only hope mine does for others. *On the Brink of Everything* has given me new and special gifts. Parker, now in his late seventies,

has helped this guy in his early sixties think of my years ahead as "triple wrapped in mystery." Savoring this book is a kind of mentorship in aging, and it ends in a crescendo of poetry. My first thought when I turned the last page: "I want to read this again from the beginning, starting right now."

—**BRIAN D. McLAREN,** author of *The Great Spiritual Migration*

Parker Palmer has been a mentor and midwife to countless young people in my generation, including me. When I was in my twenties standing at a crossroads, his book *Let Your Life Speak* inspired me to pursue an untraditional path as an activist-artist; he released the music within me. Now in my thirties, as the cacophony of vitriol and violence becomes deafening, his friendship teaches me how to remain faithful to my own melodies and keep playing them. In the darkness, Parker has taught me how to wonder at the night sky, keep death in my mind's eye, and listen to the wisdom of my grandfather and ancestors, whose music lives within mine. He has poured these insights into a book that feels more like a treasure chest. *On the Brink of Everything* is filled with gems of wisdom, each a prism that helps us see our own vast interiority and sing our own truths. My greatest aspiration is to journey through life and arrive at the brink as Parker has, with humility and faithfulness, and pockets full of gems.

—**VALARIE KAUR,** civil rights activist, lawyer, filmmaker, and founder of the Revolutionary Love Project

One of the wisest people on the planet has written one of the finest books on growing b/old gracefully. This warm and witty book will delight and inspire readers of all ages.

—**RICHARD LEIDER**, best-selling author or coauthor of *The Power of Purpose, Repacking Your Bags,* and *Life Reimagined*

ON the BRINK of EVERYTHING

Other Books by Parker Palmer

The Active Life
The Company of Strangers
The Courage to Teach
Healing the Heart of Democracy
The Heart of Higher Education (with Arthur Zajonc)
A Hidden Wholeness
Let Your Life Speak
The Promise of Paradox
To Know as We Are Known

ON the BRINK of EVERYTHING

Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old

PARKER J. PALMER

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a BK Life book

On the Brink of Everything

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
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Project manager: Susan Geraghty. Text and cover designer: Paula Goldstein. Compositor: Andrea Reider. Copyeditor: Michele Jones. Proofreader: Sophia Ho.

To Sheryl Fullerton, my editor and friend, without whom several of my books would not have been written, and publishing would not have been so life-giving for me.

—and—

To my readers—young, old, and in-between—who've been a community of meaning for me through ten books and forty years of writing.

Three essays in this book are accompanied by songs written and performed by the gifted singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer in response to themes in those essays. All three songs can be downloaded free of charge at NewcomerPalmer.com/home.

Contents

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With Gratitude

WE GROW OLD AND DIE IN THE SAME WAY WE'VE LIVED OUR LIVES. That's why this book is *not* about growing old gracefully. My life has been graced, but it certainly hasn't been graceful—I've done more than my share of falling down, getting up, and falling down again. The falling down is due to missteps and gravity. The getting up is due to grace, mediated by people to whom I owe great debts of gratitude.

My dear friend and longtime editor, Sheryl Fullerton, has been my partner in publishing since 1997. I'm forever grateful to Sheryl for her belief in me, her discerning editorial eye and her patient way of helping me get through long spells of aridity. Without her, this book would not exist.

Sharon Palmer, my wife, gets the first look at everything I write, and reads it with an artist's eyes. When I asked her how she edits my stuff, she said, "I ask three questions: Is it worth saying? Is it said clearly? Is it said beautifully?" I asked her only one question: "How do I manage to get *anything* past you?" I'm beyond grateful for Sharon—for her editorial skills and intuitive understanding of what I'm trying to do as a writer, for sharing her

love of nature in a way that has enriched my life and my writing, and for the fact that we get to grow old together.

Carrie Newcomer, gifted singer-songwriter, poet, and essayist, is a dear friend and conversation partner whose sensibilities I value deeply. Drawing on our decade of dialogue about the themes explored in this book, Carrie has made a generous gift to me and to my readers: three songs based on three of those themes, available free at NewcomerPalmer.com/home. Carrie's music takes this book beyond the printed page into realms where only good music can go.

Courtney Martin's influence is laced through these pages. I met Courtney ten years ago when she was in her twenties, and we soon became friends and colleagues. Commenting on her 2010 book, *Do It Anyway,* I called her "one of our most insightful culture critics and one of our finest young writers," words that have proved prophetic. I owe Courtney deep thanks for many things, including this book's title and some of the inspiration that led me to write it.

Marcy Jackson and Rick Jackson have been treasured friends and the finest of colleagues for thirty years. In the 1990s, we laid the foundations for the Center for Courage & Renewal (CCR), whose work is now worldwide. There are no words adequate to say how blessed I am by our shared journey and by the work we've done together in service of things worth caring about.

Marcy and I have cofacilitated countless CCR retreats over the past two decades, and we cocreated a program for young leaders and activists that has enriched our lives and

served a lot of young people well. Along the way, we've had a running conversation about many of the topics in this book. I'm ever grateful for her deep listening, her honest and open questions, and the care and creativity with which she approaches everyone and everything.

Rick Jackson is one of the most compassionate, generous, and socially conscious people I know. He's also one of the CCR pen pals who read my manuscript with care, and commented on it in ways that helped me sharpen it. That list includes Caryl Casbon, Cat Greenstreet, Diane Rawlins, and Judy Skeen, all of whom I'm proud to call friends and colleagues. I value their keen observations and questions as well as their encouraging affirmations.

Christine Craven, my stepdaughter, has the sharpest proofreading eye of anyone I've ever worked with. I'm grateful to her for caring about this book and going through the manuscript with a fine-tooth comb.

Many of the reflections I rewrote in order to weave this book together first appeared on the website of On Being Studios, producers of the public radio program *On Being.* Deep thanks to Trent Gillis and my dear friend Krista Tippett for inviting me to become a weekly columnist, putting me in the company of writers and readers who encourage the very best of online conversation. Special thanks to Mariah Helgeson, senior editor at On Being, whose extraordinary editorial skills have helped me become a better writer.

This is my first book with Berrett-Koehler Publishers. It's been a grand ride because of the people I've worked with, all of whom have my heartfelt thanks: Maria Jesus

Aguilo, Michael Crowley, Matt Fagaly, Kristin Frantz, Susan Geraghty, Sheri Gilbert, Paula Goldstein, Michele Jones, Neal Maillet, David Marshall, Liz McKellar, Courtney Schonfeld, Jeevan Sivasubramaniam, Mayowa Tomori, Johanna Vondeling, and Lasell Whipple. I also thank the many other B-K staff who worked quietly backstage to make the book possible. It takes a village!

Finally, I want to thank three friends whose personal knowledge of aging exceeds mine, people I want to be like if and when I grow up.

Joyce and Dick McFarland are forces of nature, deeply engaged with important social issues, full of curiosity and questions, passionate about the young, generous in every way, and brimming over with laughter and light. They embody the most important qualities I write about in this book.

Lois Boyer stood on the brink of everything with as much grace as I've ever seen. Attending her 100th birthday party in October 2017 was a joy for me. I'm sad to say that Lois died before this book was published, but she was delighted to know that this story would appear in it. At her party, Lois asked me what I'd been up to lately, and I told her about this book. "Parker," she said, "you're not old enough to write a book about aging!"

So I send this book out with humility, well aware that I'm not qualified to write it! What I am is one lucky man when it comes to family, friends, and colleagues. Over the past eight decades, I could not have found better companions for the journey.

Prelude

EVERY DAY, I GET CLOSER TO THE BRINK OF EVERYTHING. We're all headed that way, of course, even when we're young, though most of us are too busy with Important Matters to ponder our mortality. But when a serious illness or accident strikes, or someone dear to us dies—or we go to a class reunion and wonder who all those old people are—it becomes harder to ignore the drop-off that lies just over the edge of our lives.

I'll be nearly eighty when this book is published, so it shouldn't surprise me that I can sometimes see the brink from here. But it does. I'm even more surprised by the fact that I *like* being old.

Age brings diminishments, but more than a few come with benefits. I've lost the capacity for multitasking, but I've rediscovered the joy of doing one thing at a time. My thinking has slowed a bit, but experience has made it deeper and richer. I'm done with big and complex projects, but more aware of the loveliness of simple things: a talk with a friend, a walk in the woods, sunsets and sunrises, a night of good sleep.

I have fears, of course, always have and always will. But as time lengthens like a shadow behind me, and the time ahead dwindles, my overriding feeling is gratitude for the gift of life.

Above all, I like being old because the view from the brink is striking, a full panorama of my life—and a bracing breeze awakens me to new ways of understanding my own past, present, and future. As one of Kurt Vonnegut's characters says in *Player Piano*, "out on the edge you can see all kinds of things you can't see from the center."[1]

Looking back, I see why I needed the tedium *and* the inspiration, the anger *and* the love, the anguish *and* the joy. I see how it all belongs, even those days of despair when the darkness overwhelmed me. Calamities I once lamented now appear as strong threads of a larger weave, without which the fabric of my life would be less resilient. Moments of fulfillment I failed to relish in my impatience to get on to the next thing now appear as times to be recalled and savored. And I've doubled down on my gratitude for those who've helped me along with love, affirmation, hard questions, daunting challenges, compassion, and forgiveness.

Looking around at our shared world, its suffering and its promise, I see the courage with which so many live in service of the human possibility. Old age is no time to hunker down, unless disability demands it. Old is just another word for nothing left to lose, a time of life to take bigger risks on behalf of the common good.

Looking ahead to the day when I go over the brink to what Leonard Cohen calls our "invincible defeat," all I

know for sure is that it's a long way down.[2] Will I spread my wings and fly, fall wordless as a rock, or flame out like a screaming banshee? I have no idea.

But of this I am certain: that I've come this far makes me one of the lucky ones. Many people never had a chance to see the view from where I stand, and I might well have been among them. I've known days when the voice of depression told me that death was a better idea than trying to carry on. For a long time, I bored my doctors, but over the past fifteen years, I've become a "person of interest" to several kinds of specialists.

So I'm not given to waxing romantic about aging and dying. I simply know that the first is a privilege and the second is not up for negotiation.

In 2004, shortly after my sixty-fifth birthday, I spent an evening with friends who gave me a hard time about my generation's motto, "Never trust anyone over thirty." Amid jibes like "You've exceeded your shelf life by more than twice," someone asked, "Seriously, how do you feel about getting old?"

"I'll let you know when I get there," I said. "But I can tell you this. The Dylan Thomas poem I loved when I was young—'Do not go gentle into that good night'—no longer speaks to me."[3]

It was a late summer evening, and we had a lovely view to the west. "Look at that sunset," I went on. "It's beautiful, and it keeps getting more beautiful before things go

dark. If that sun began to rise right now, we'd be shrieking, *Apocalypse!*, knowing that our solar system had gone bonkers, that the laws of nature had failed.

"I don't want to fight the gravity of aging. It's nature's way. I want to collaborate with it as best I can, in hopes of going down with something like the grace of that setting sun. For all the wrinkles and worry lines, it's a lovely thing simply to be one of those who's lived long enough to say, 'I'm getting old.'"

Today, I smile at the notion of "collaborating with aging." It reminds me of the exchange between the nineteenth-century transcendentalist Margaret Fuller and the writer Thomas Carlyle. "I accept the universe," proclaimed Fuller. "Gad! She'd better," replied Carlyle.[4] I'm with her in this little spat, though I do admire his wit.

We have no choice about death. But we do have choices to make about how we hold the inevitable—choices made difficult by a culture that celebrates youth, disparages old age, and discourages us from facing into our mortality. The laws of nature that dictate the sunset dictate our demise. But how we travel the arc between our own sunrise and sundown is ours to choose: Will it be denial, defiance, or collaboration?

For many years, writing has been one of my ways of collaborating with life. For me, writing is not about filling my head with ideas, then downloading them to the page. That's not writing; it's typing.[5] Writing is an unfolding of what's going on inside me as I talk to myself on a pad of paper or a computer, a version of talk therapy that requires neither an appointment nor a fee. This book, my tenth, is one fruit

of my collaboration with aging—an offering from a fellow traveler to those who share this road, pondering as they go.

A few words about "grace, gravity, and getting old." I'm writing this Prelude in Santa Fe, New Mexico. For over a decade, my wife and I have come here in the late spring for a couple of weeks of hiking, writing, napping, eating Southwestern food, and enjoying spectacular sunsets.

At my age, the napping, eating, and sky-gazing are no stretch. But out on a mountain trail, I feel both grace and gravity more keenly than when I first came here in my mid-sixties.

The grace is that I have the health and resources to get myself out to the high desert; that, after a couple of days, my heart and lungs are still able to adjust to the 7,000-foot difference between Santa Fe and my Midwestern home; that I can stand at a trailhead and still feel confident about getting partway up, maybe even to the top of a trail that climbs from 9,000 to 10,000 feet; that every foot of the way I'm surrounded by beauty that a lot of people never get a chance to see.

But as I climb, gravity kicks in. I hike more slowly than I used to, stopping to catch my breath more often. I have to be more attentive to where I'm putting my feet lest a momentary imbalance pitch me into a fall. The tug of gravity is an inescapable part of aging. As they say, "Everything goes south." Energy, reaction time, muscle tone, the body itself—they're all headed back into the earth, as far south as it goes.

There's no antidote for the gravity that takes us to the grave. But there is a countervailing force called "levity." According to an online etymological dictionary, "In [the] old science (16th–17th Century), [levity is] the name of a force or property of physical bodies, the opposite of gravity, causing them to tend to rise."[6] For us, of course, levity means the kind of humor that eases the burden of life's gravitas, the kind G. K. Chesterton had in mind when he said, "Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly."[7]

As Leonard Cohen writes in one of his many memorable verses, "Well, my friends are gone and my hair is grey / I ache in the places where I used to play."[8] It's all true, and the first few words are heavy. But the laugh that comes with the second line lightens the load.

Poetry also lightens the load by lifting weighty things using the leverage of metaphor. Here's an example from the poet Jeanne Lohmann, who wrote with insight and elegance until her death at age ninety-three. Her poem helps me deal with the sense of heaviness about aging that occasionally comes over me. It also helped inspire me to write this book—a meditation on aging in which I've tried to be true to gravity, to grace, and to the voice of my own experience in a way that invites the reader to listen to his or hers:

Invocation

Let us try what it is to be true to gravity,
to grace, to the given, faithful to our own voices,
to lines making the map of our furrowed tongue.
Turned toward the root of a single word, refusing

solemnity and slogans, let us honor what hides
and does not come easy to speech. The pebbles
we hold in our mouths help us to practice song,
and we sing to the sea. May the things of this world
be preserved to us, their beautiful secret
vocabularies. We are dreaming it over and new,
the language of our tribe, music we hear
we can only acknowledge. May the naming powers
be granted. Our words are feathers that fly
on our breath. Let them go in a holy direction.[9]

I hope that the words on these pages refuse "solemnity and slogans" and "honor what hides and does not come easy to speech." My words are no more than "feathers that fly," but that does not matter. What matters is that they fly "in a holy direction," the direction of life.

My first book came out in 1979 when I was forty, my ninth book in 2011 when I was seventy-two. So on average it's taken me three or four years to write a book. Every book has felt like a marathon, and after I finished number nine, I felt certain I didn't have another long-distance race in me.

Toward the end of 2015, I was talking with Sheryl Fullerton, my longtime editor and friend, who wondered if I was working on a new book. "No," I said, "I don't have the energy for it. But I'm really enjoying short-form writing—brief essays and a little poetry."

Sheryl asked, "Have you thought about gathering those essays, along with some of your poetry, editing them,

writing some new material, and weaving all of it into a book, the way you did with *Let Your Life Speak*?" The conversation that followed is a good example of how we get by with a little (or a lot) of help from our friends, just as the Beatles claimed:

Me: No, I haven't. I mean, a book has to be about *something*. My short pieces have been all over the map.
Sheryl: Um, that's not true. I know, because you've sent me a lot of those pieces over the last few years.
Me: And you think there's a theme running through them?
Sheryl *(after a brief silence)*: Parker, do you ever *read* what you write?
Me: Of course not. Why should I? I *write* the stuff. But, OK, I'll bite. What, pray tell, have I been writing about?
Sheryl: Getting old! That's what you've been writing about. Didn't you know that?
Me *(lights blinking on in my brain)*: Well, no . . . But now that you mention it, a book on aging might be interesting . . . Wow, am I ever glad I had *that* idea!

Thus was conceived this book, in which I've tried to craft a many-faceted reflection on aging from twenty-four brief essays and a number of poems, including some of my own.[10] The book is not a "guide to" or "handbook for" getting old. Instead, it's me turning the prism on my experience of aging as a way of encouraging readers to do the same with theirs. We need to reframe aging as a passage of discovery and engagement, not decline and inaction.

Since we're all aging all the time—if we're lucky—I hope the book will resonate not only with my age-mates but with people not yet certifiably old. After all, there are young people whom we rightly call "old souls." I think, for example, of my twenty-seven-year-old granddaughter, Heather Palmer, who is also one of my best friends. The journey we've shared since the day she was born has opened my eyes, mind, and heart to so much.

I turn the prism seven times in the course of these pages, refracting my experience of aging in a different light with each turn:

I. **The View from the Brink: What I Can See from Here** probes some things I'm learning as I age, especially the importance of keeping my eyes open to the experience and asking the right questions about it.
II. **Young and Old: The Dance of the Generations** focuses on creative engagement with the young. When young and old are connected like the poles of a battery, the power that's released enlivens both parties and helps light up the world.
III. **Getting Real: From Illusion to Reality** reflects on the spiritual life, which I understand as an endless effort to penetrate illusion and touch reality—a vital task at any age and an imperative for aging well.
IV. **Work and Vocation: Writing a Life** is about the voice that calls to many of us, saying, "Whatever your paid work may be, *this* is what gives you life"—the voice that has long said to me, "Write!" As we age, it's important to get clear about the difference between

the jobs by which we make a living and the callings, or vocations, by which make meaning. Many elders leave or lose their jobs. But it's possible to follow a calling to the end of life, and continue to make meaning at a time when it's much needed.

V. **Keep Reaching Out: Staying Engaged with the World** makes a case for the importance of elders never ceasing to care about our shared world, and acting on what we care about—if only in our minds and hearts and via words spoken to people close at hand.

VI. **Keep Reaching In: Staying Engaged with Your Soul** is about the centrality of inner work done in silence and solitude. Knowing yourself and sinking your roots into the ground of your being are critical in old age. Becoming comfortable with silence and solitude can ease the final transition from life to death—a journey we must make alone back into the silence from which we came.

VII. **Over the Edge: Where We Go When We Die** answers the age-old question, "What happens to us after death?" My original marketing plan was simple: "Want the answer? Buy the book." But my publisher nixed that idea—something about truth in advertising. I'll simply say that, after reading Chapter VII, you'll know where heaven is, though I may be a little off with the longitude and latitude.

Welcome to the brink of everything. It takes a lifetime to get here, but the stunning view and the bracing breeze in your face make it worth the trip.

I. The View from the Brink

What I Can See from Here

Introduction

Check the *Cambridge Dictionary* online, and you'll find the phrase *on the brink* defined as "the edge of a cliff or other high area, or the point at which something good or bad will happen," followed by this example: "The company was on the brink of collapse."[1]

I'm not sure why most uses of the phrase are negative—as in on the brink of giving up, or losing my mind, or going to war—even though it can be used positively. Perhaps it's because, deep in the reptilian brain, we're afraid of falling from heights or crossing boundaries into the unknown. But isn't it possible that we're on the brink of flying free, or discovering something of beauty, or finding peace and joy?

As I said in the Prelude, I like being "on the brink of everything" because it gives me new perspectives on my past, present, and future, and new insights into the inner dynamics that shape and drive my life. The essays in this chapter explore a few inner-life findings that have taken

me by surprise in recent years. Some of them have been humbling; all of them have been life-giving.

The first essay, "On the Brink of Everything," explains how I stole the title of this book from a superb piece by my friend, the writer Courtney Martin, who wrote about the wonder of watching her daughter, Maya, discover the world. Reading that essay early one winter morning, I realized something that started me down the path to writing this book: what Maya was discovering at sixteen months, I was rediscovering in my late seventies.

In the second essay, "Does My Life Have Meaning?," I recount how I learned what's wrong with that ancient and oft-asked question: when you ask the wrong question, you end up with the wrong answer. So I set out to find the right question—or at least one of them—and found one that works for me. If my question doesn't work for you, maybe my musings will encourage you to find one that does.

"Withering into the Truth" puts a positive spin on the wrinkles that come with getting old. Age gives us a chance to outgrow what William Butler Yeats called "the lying days of [our] youth" and wither into what Oliver Wendell Holmes called "the simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity."[2] I've long thought of old age as a time when all that's left is to tell the truth—trying to remember to tell it in love. It's liberating to be at a point where I no longer need to posture or pretend because I no longer feel a need to prove anything to anyone.

This chapter ends with my poem "Grand Canyon," a reflection on the many-layered lives we lead, and how every layer contributes to the majesty of the whole. I wrote

the poem during a rafting trip down the Colorado River where, for nine days in a row, I experienced what the boatmen often call "another day in the ditch."

Occasionally, I find myself using that phrase at the end of a difficult day, when life has been as rough as a class 10 rapid—while all around me is the grandeur of this astonishing thing called life.

On the Brink of Everything

In March 2015, I read an essay by my friend and colleague Courtney Martin called "Reuniting with Awe."[3] It painted an exquisite picture of how her sixteen-month-old daughter, Maya, helps her see life's wonders through a toddler's eyes.

I was mesmerized by Courtney's opening line: "My daughter is on the brink of everything." That's exactly where I am today at age seventy-nine. I'm frequently awestruck as I stand on the brink of the rest of my life, including the part called death, which I sometimes think I can almost see from here.

I'd be lying if I claimed to be awed by *all* that comes with old age. Courtney wrote about Maya scooping "haphazard little bits of cottage cheese into her mouth,"

My friend Carrie Newcomer, singer-songwriter, was a conversation partner in the development of this book. As I drew close to finishing it, Carrie wrote a song titled "The Brink of Everything" as a musical blessing on these pages. For a free download, visit NewcomerPalmer.com/home.

then applauding herself between bites. My mealtime misdemeanors do not merit applause. At dinner last night, my wife grinned, pointed to her chin and said, "You've got food on your face again." Reaching for a napkin, I grumped, "I was saving it for a snack."

Courtney reported that when she takes Maya out for a walk, Maya bounces "with the delight of freedom" and "quickly swivels around" to make sure her mom is following. If I bounced and swiveled, I'd need to see my doc about repairing some mission-critical body part.

Speaking of my doc, like many people my age, I live with a couple of ongoing challenges to my health. They pose no immediate threat to my life, but it gives you pause when you start meeting more frequently with specialists, especially as you watch family members and friends and colleagues fall ill and die. And yet it's *because* of the diminishments of age, not in spite of them, that I often find myself in awe as I stand on the brink of everything.

The morning Courtney's essay was published online, I began my day by waking up, an event worthy of celebration in itself. I paused on the edge of the bed to check my balance and gather my wits, then followed a well-worn path to a small room I visit a couple of times a night.

It was a hard-frozen winter day in my part of the world, and the east-facing window was filigreed with ice. Beyond the bare trees, the horizon glowed with a crimson sunrise that, viewed through the tracery of ice, turned the window pane into stained glass. I stood there for a couple of minutes taking in that scene as if I were contemplating one of the great rose windows of Chartres Cathedral.

I went downstairs, turned up the thermostat, and began heating water for coffee. Twice-warmed by the whispering furnace and the hissing burner on the gas stove, I was thrice-warmed as I reread a handwritten letter that had arrived the day before, thanking me for a book I published when I was in my early sixties. "What you wrote about your experience of depression," said my correspondent, "helped save my life."

As I laid the letter down, I thought back on all the early mornings when, in my haste to get back to my writing, I'd failed to pause for even a few minutes to take in the loveliness of an awakening world. I've long been an obsessive writer, and before age slowed me down, my impatience about hitting the keyboard kept me from seeing the beauty around me.

Part of me regrets that. And yet, back in the day—focused laser-like on surveying and mapping what's "in here" while ignoring what's "out the window"—I wrote something that helped a stranger find new life.

Looking back, I'm awed by the way that embracing *everything*—from what I got right to what I got wrong—invites the grace of wholeness. When psychologist Florida Scott-Maxwell was eighty-five, she wrote, "You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done . . . you are fierce with reality."[4]

Fierce with reality is how I feel when I'm able to say, "I am that to which I gave short shrift and that to which I attended. I am my descents into darkness and my rising again into the light, my betrayals and my fidelities,

my failures and my successes. I am my ignorance and my insight, my doubts and my convictions, my fears and my hopes."

Wholeness does not mean perfection—it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life. I'm grateful for this truth as age leads me to look back on the zigzagging, up-and-down path I've hacked out during my far-from-perfect life.

The teakettle whistled, and I filled the French press with boiling water. As I waited for the coffee to brew, I booted up my smartphone, got online, and read Courtney's essay, "Reuniting with Awe." By the time I finished, I'd begun to brew this piece, aware of how much had already awed me here on the brink of a new day.

Every hour, I'm closer to death than I was the hour before. All of us draw closer all the time, but rarely with the acute awareness that comes when old age or calamity reminds us of where we stand. I have no wise words about dying and death. I've watched one loved one die in anguish, another at peace. How I will travel that last mile is anyone's guess.

As for death's aftermath, I'm not privy to reports from the other side. But I'll know I've made it to heaven if I can get early-morning coffee there—and I have reason to believe that's a possibility. I'm told they can dark-roast beans in the Other Place.

What I know for sure is this: we come from mystery and we return to mystery. I know this, too: standing closer to the reality of death awakens my wonder at the many gifts of life.

On the morning I read Courtney's essay, those gifts were numerous. I saw the world at sunrise through my own rose window. I read a stranger's generous letter alongside a friend's evocative essay. I had the physical and mental capacity to make it down the stairs, brew coffee, go back up to my office, and begin this piece. I found a line that eventually became the title of this book. And I had a laugh with myself about coffee roasted in hell and served in heaven. The spiritual bread of life gives me a bellyache if it isn't leavened with humor.

Courtney says that her daughter "approaches the world with only one giant, indiscriminate expectation: delight me." Like sixteen-month-old Maya, I want to approach the world with only one expectation as I close in on eighty. Because I'm old enough to know that the world can delight me, *my* expectation is not of the world but of myself: delight in the gift of life and be grateful.

Does My Life Have Meaning?

> . . . all that I have written seems like straw to me.

Those are the words of Thomas Aquinas—*Saint* Thomas Aquinas to Catholics—one of the Western world's most influential theologians and philosophers. He spoke them three months before he died in 1274.[5]

Aquinas was wrestling with a question that dogs people of all sorts, from parents to plumbers to professors, people like you and me who will never achieve anything like Aquinas's fame or historical impact. It's a question asked by adults of all ages, but perhaps most urgently by

elders who wonder if all those years add up to anything worthwhile: Does my life have meaning?

As I go deeper into elderhood, that question rises in me more often than it did when I was young. Sometimes, I'm able to affirm that I've made meaningful contributions in at least parts of my private and public lives. At other times, everything I've done seems as flimsy and flammable as straw.

If you've ever been downcast about the meaning of your life, you know that reassurance from others, no matter how generous, doesn't do the trick. The question of meaning is one all of us must answer for ourselves—or so I thought until 5:15 a.m. on Thursday, May 12, 2016.

I was starting my day as I often do, with coffee and poetry, when I ran across a poem on the nature of love. As I read and reread it, I began to see that brooding on the question "Does my life have meaning?" is a road to nowhere. Whether I give myself a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down, there's a flaw at the heart of the question, a flaw created by my old nemesis, the overweening ego.

Here's the poem that opened my eyes, by the Nobel Prize–winning Polish poet Czesław Milosz:

Love

Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many.
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,
Without knowing it, from various ills.
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.

Then he wants to use himself and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves:
Who serves best doesn't always understand.[6]

There's truth and liberation in those last two lines. No matter how clear my goals may be, the truth is that I often don't know whom or what I will end up serving.

I remember a talk I gave a long time ago. My intent was to blow the audience away, but they were not impressed, as indicated by a brief and tepid round of obligatory applause. I was young, and it took weeks to get the bitter taste of failure out of my mouth. Years later, by rare chance, I met a person who'd been in that audience. "I'm glad to meet you," he said. "I've wanted to tell you how your talk changed the way I approach teaching, and how good that change has been for me and my students."

His words were a powerful reminder that I don't and can't know the meaning of my life, let alone dictate or control it. As Milosz says, "It doesn't matter whether he [she] knows what he [she] serves." All I can control are my own intentions, and my willingness to give myself to them: may they always be to serve rather than show off.

The poet goes on to say, "Who serves best doesn't always understand." Those words are liberating because there's so much about life that's triple-wrapped in mystery. When I'm sure I know exactly what I'm doing and why—so sure that I miss vital clues about what's actually needed and what I have to offer—it's a sign that my ego's in charge, and that's dangerous. My best offerings come

from a deeper, more intuitive place that I can only call my soul. Embracing the fact that there's no way to know with precision whom or what I'm serving helps free my words and actions from the ego's dominion.

Speaking of the ego, the first few lines of Milosz's poem are a direct challenge to its lust for center stage: "Love means to learn to look at yourself / The way one looks at distant things / For you are only one thing among many." Ah, yes, now I remember: I'm not the sun at the center of anyone's solar system. If I keep trying to put myself there, insisting that I am special and my life must have some sort of special meaning, I'll die in despair or in delusion.

Peace comes when I understand that I am "only one thing among many," no more and no less important than the bird and the tree Milosz writes about. There's much I don't know about birds and trees, but this I know for sure: they don't wonder or worry about whether their lives have meaning. They simply *be what they be.* In the process, they befriend people like me who are elevated simply by taking time to appreciate the gifts so freely given by the natural world.

Milosz says, "whoever sees that way heals his heart, / Without knowing it, from various ills." Time and again, that's been my experience. There's nothing like a walk in the woods, into the mountains, alongside the ocean, or out in the desert to put my life in perspective and help me take heart again. In places like that, the things of nature

befriend me—just as Milosz says they will—as I settle into the comforting knowledge that I am "only one thing among many."

Then there are Milosz's beautiful words about allowing one's self and the things of the world to "stand in the glow of ripeness." Please don't ask me exactly what that means, because I don't know. But I do know this: once I understand that I'm not the sun, I can get out of the sun's way and stop casting shadows. I can step aside to let the true sun shine on everyone and everything, making all things ripe with the glow of life. This, it seems, is Milosz's ultimate definition of love, and it works for me.

At the moment, I rest easy with the notion that I don't need to ask or answer the question "Does my life have meaning?" All I need do is to keep living as one among many as well as I can, hoping to help myself and others grow ripe with life and love as we stand under the sun.

If the Big Question returns to me over the next few days or weeks, and I find myself struggling to come up with a "Yes" or dodge a "No," I won't be surprised. When it comes to jailbreaks like the one Milosz's poem gave me, I'm a lifelong recidivist.

It's not easy to subdue the overweening ego in order to free the adventuresome soul. But whenever we manage to do so, it saves us grief and serves the world well. So if you see me on the street one day, quietly muttering "only one thing among many, only one thing among many," you'll know I'm still working on it. Or it's still working on me.

Withering into the Truth

The Coming of Wisdom with Time

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun,
Now may I wither into the truth.

—William Butler Yeats[7]

Every year, when friends say they don't know what to give me for my birthday, I respond with the same old bad joke they've heard from me before. They sigh, roll their eyes, and change the subject. (This is a perk that comes with age: repeat yourself so often that folks think you're getting dotty, when in fact you're fending off unwanted conversations.)

Q: What do you give a person who has everything?
A: Penicillin.

I don't need gifts of a material nature. But I do need to remember a few things I've learned during nearly eight decades of life. So here's a collection of six lessons as birthday gifts to myself. If one or two of them turn out to be gifts for you, that will make my next birthday even happier.

1. The Yeats poem at the head of this essay names something I don't want to forget. Actively embracing aging gives me a chance to move beyond "the lying days of my youth" and to "wither into the truth"—if I resist the temptation to Botox my withering.

My youthful "lies" weren't intentional. I just didn't know enough about myself, the world, and the right relationship of the two to tell the truth. So what I said on those subjects often came from my ego, a notorious liar. Coming to terms with the soul-truth of who I am—with my complex and confusing mix of darkness and light—has required my ego to shrivel up. Nothing shrivels a person better than age. That's what all those wrinkles are about.

Whatever truthfulness I've achieved on this score comes not from some spiritual practice that helps me summon the courage to face myself honestly. It comes from having my ego so broken down and composted by life that I found myself compelled to cry uncle and say, "OK, I get it. I'm way less than perfect."

2. Poetry has redemptive power for me, as it does for millions of people. Poets like Rainer Maria Rilke, Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, Naomi Shihab Nye, William Stafford, and Gerard Manley Hopkins have provided life jackets to keep me from drowning, ballast to keep me from ascending to altitudes where there's not enough oxygen to support life, and maps to keep me from getting lost in the wilderness. By following Emily Dickinson's advice to "tell the truth but tell it slant," good poets have a way of sneaking up on me to deliver messages I might have tried to dodge if I'd seen them coming.[8]

I write poetry as well as read it because it's one of the best forms of self-therapy I know. Here's a poem that came to me years ago while I was trudging down a country road past a plowed field, deeply depressed and wondering if *this*

was the day. It's a poem that, over time, helped me find my way back to life.

Harrowing

The plow has savaged this sweet field
Misshapen clods of earth kicked up
Rocks and twisted roots exposed to view
Last year's growth demolished by the blade.

I have plowed my life this way
Turned over a whole history
Looking for the roots of what went wrong
Until my face is ravaged, furrowed, scarred.

Enough. The job is done.
Whatever's been uprooted, let it be
Seedbed for the growing that's to come.
I plowed to unearth last year's reasons—

The farmer plows to plant a greening season.

"Harrowing" doesn't merit a place in the Western literary canon. But because it helped me emerge from a deadly darkness into a "greening season," it's canonical to me.

3. Through ten books and hundreds of essays, I've written hundreds of thousands of sentences, some of them long enough to wrap around a giant redwood. But perhaps the most important sentence I've ever written is that one word, "Enough."

Said on the right occasion, that word can safeguard the soul, and saying it comes more easily with age. These days I say "enough" without hesitation to anything that's not life-giving—whether it's frenzy and overwork, a personal prejudice, an unhealthy relationship, a societal cruelty or injustice, the feckless exercise of power in fields from religion to politics, or the racism, sexism, xenophobia, and crypto-fascism sickening the US body politic.

When I was young, saying "enough" often seemed risky. I've known people who lost favor, friends, reputations, money, and livelihoods for saying, "This far and no more." But risk looks different from the vantage of old age. More than fearing the cost of taking risks for the things I care about, I fear aging into subservience to the worst impulses in and around me.

I'm among the very fortunate ones whose material needs are largely met, so I don't have to worry about losing things that some folks require for survival. For people like me, the notion that old age is a time to dial it down and play it safe is a cop-out. Those of us who are able should be raising hell on behalf of whatever we care about: freedom's just another word for not needing to count the cost.

4. One thing I care about is the younger generation and the world they're coming into, a world they're helping remake. To care about them, I find, is also to care for my own well-being.

Psychologist Erik Erikson said that en route to old age, we face a critical choice between "generativity" and "stagnation."[9] Generativity means something more than creativity. It means turning toward the rising generation,

offering whatever we know that they might find useful—and, even more important, learning from them. I talk and work with young people as often as I can, and always come away the better for it.

Several years ago, I held a two-day meeting in our home with a small group of young adults less than half my age. I listened as they talked about how the emerging world looks from where they stand. At some point, I said something like this:

> I feel like I'm standing partway down the curvature of the earth, while you're close to the top of that curve looking at a horizon that I can't see. I need to know what you're seeing, because whatever's on that horizon is coming at me as well. Please let me know what it is—and when you do, speak loudly and clearly so I can hear what you're saying!

Hint to my age-mates: next time you think, "I'm over the hill," say to yourself, "Nah, I'm just standing farther down the curvature of the earth."

5. Most older folks I know fret about unloading material goods they've collected over the years, stuff that was once useful to them but now prevents them from moving freely about their homes. There are precincts in our basement where a small child could get lost for hours.

But the junk I really need to jettison in my old age is psychological junk—such as longtime convictions about what gives my life meaning that no longer serve me well. For example, who will I be when I can no longer do the

work that has been a primary source of identity for me for the past half century?

I won't know the answer until I get there. But on my way to that day, I've found a question that's already brought me a new sense of meaning. I no longer ask, "What do I want to let go of, and what do I want to *hang on to*?" Instead I ask, "What do I want to let go of, and what do I want to *give myself to*?"

The desire to "hang on" comes from a sense of scarcity and fear. The desire to "give myself" comes from a sense of abundance and generosity. That's the kind of truth I want to wither into.

6. Sooner or later, "withering into truth" culminates in death, the ultimate form of withering and perhaps the ultimate source of truth. Who knows? Maybe death will be as the poet Lucille Clifton has it in her remarkable poem about her husband's death:

the death of fred clifton
11/10/84
age 49

i seemed to be drawn
to the center of myself
leaving the edges of me
in the hands of my wife
and I saw with the most amazing
clarity
so that I had not eyes but
sight,

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