

# Aging Upstream



Memoirs & Mirth  
for the Silver Years

Kevin Banet

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for the Silver Years*

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Help My Senior Publishing

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*This book is dedicated to aging seniors –  
especially those who have problems of mind  
and body, and to those who care for them.*



# Contents

1. Superman Senior.....	1
2. “I Knew Him Thirty Years ago” .....	5
3. He Plants Trees to Serve a Race to Come .....	9
4. “Devil Dog” of the Battle of the Marne .....	14
5. Grandpa’s Cane .....	18
6. A Wrestling Coach’s Hot Pepper Trick.....	22
7. Stashu Fears His High School Reunion.....	25
8. Three Famous People and Mental Illness.....	28
9. A Time-Traveler’s Anguish (Part I) .....	32
10. A Time-Traveler’s Anguish (Part II).....	37
11. Parents’ Splish-Splash into the Bath .....	42
12. What You Learn After Saying “No” .....	46
13. They Want Us to do <i>What?</i> .....	50
14. Grandpa’s Job was to Sweep the Snow .....	56
15. A Native American Legend Lives On .....	60
16. Prayers that Seem to go Nowhere.....	65
17. Poetry.....	67

## *Introduction*

Aging is a journey that takes you to a challenging new land, sometimes akin to ascending a steep hill or swimming upstream. In the following pages, this book explores the often-overlooked advantages of growing older, drawing inspiration from historical and personal experiences as well as from the timeless wisdom amassed over centuries. It is when we are drawn out of our own narrow daily experiences by means of a good read that we are put in touch with the deeper meaning and beauty of life.

*Aging Upstream* is a perfect companion for individuals facing the challenges of a medical recovery or from dementia. And it's a delightful bedtime read for anyone looking for a few moments of insight and inspiration. You'll be pleased with its 16 chapters of essays and brief poetry collection at the end.

Kevin Banet is a journalist and marketer, and edits HelpMySeniorNow.com, which aims to lighten the burden of caregivers and those for whom they care.





# 1.

## Superman Senior

**H**ave you seen those *superman seniors* out there – those odd birds in their 60s, 70s or older who astound their neighbors and friends with their outstanding athletic accomplishments?

You may have read about them in the papers or on the internet. They seem to have overcome the limits of old age like a phoenix that is always rising out of the ashes.

One such person was a man named John, age 86. One day at a YMCA he ambled into the locker room from his swim. Slow-moving, short and stooping, he was approached by another, younger swimmer and the two began talking. In his quiet voice John explained that he came to the Y three times a week, each time swimming *half a mile*.

*Kevin Banet*

This is nothing to sneeze at. Half a mile is 32 lengths of a 25-meter pool, the size of most public swimming pools.

Just think – back and forth, back and forth – for maybe three-quarters of an hour. “I used to swim a mile at a time when I was younger,” he added proudly.

This, no doubt, must have been in the pristine youth of his 60s or 70s.

In the pool, he kept up a steady pace, arm over arm, lap after lap. The younger man could not maintain his reliable cadence.

“I’ll keep it up as long as I can,” he said about the years ahead of him.

## **Short but strong**

One week John didn’t come to the pool. He asked where he had been. John explained that he had to take his wife to the doctor.

We can imagine him driving cautiously down the street, just barely able to see over the steering wheel, with

## *Aging Upstream*

his wife sitting quietly next to him. He probably drives a rust-free 1988 Buick Regal that's meticulously kept up and faithfully parked in his garage every day.

John is very unassuming. If you saw him picking up his newspaper on the front porch or pushing a grocery cart in the store with his wife, he would not look remarkable – like the super athlete that he was.

Many seniors have given up their once-loved athletic activities, either because of fear of injury or they have grown complacent. But John keeps showing up faithfully in the pool.

The younger man talked to his doctor about John. He expressed some disappointment in not being up to the level of this man as well as others he'd met.

“Don't think that way,” the doctor opined. “Much of it may be due to genetics. And on the other hand, men in their 50s have poorer health than you do. And you might die some day of something else entirely.”

Nice thought. Like John, you do what you can while you are able.

*Kevin Banet*

• [Return to Table of Contents](#) •

2.

## **“I Knew Him Thirty Years Ago”**

**A**n older man and his grown son were sitting around the dining room table. The older man put down his newspaper.

He looked up and mused, “I knew him *thirty years ago*.” The father had read an obituary from their church’s newspaper from their hometown area that was a day’s drive away.

The death of his former friend came as sad news. The son knew nothing about him. Had dad known this fellow from the private boarding school he had attended? Was he the one who helped him sneak off the school grounds

in the dark of night to spend fun time driving around with friends?

Or was this friend another young instructor at the college where his dad had started his career as an English teacher years ago?

In any case, the man had passed, and even though the two friends hadn't kept in touch with each other over the years, it seemed that a part of dad's past vanished like a puff of smoke. Their friendship was like a kite that had broken away from the string.

The young son, in his twenties, wondered silently at the thought of such a long span of years slipping by in what seemed like a blink of an eye. Even knowing someone that long ago – before his own birth – was incomprehensible.

## **Goodbye old neighborhood**

And yet here is the younger son today, at about the same age as his father when those words were uttered. The younger man is now grown up, with a family of his

## *Aging Upstream*

own. Having seen the panoply of life played out before him, he knew what his dad meant about old friends.

The son, too, had lost touch with his old friends from high school, sports activities, and college. Whatever happened to that cross-country friend who used to drive around with him looking for an open tennis court on hot summer days? Or his other friend who became a construction worker and who had four children but then unfortunately got divorced?

Then he realized that both he and his father had moved away from their original cities, in search of better job opportunities. Try as they might to keep in touch, the everyday demands of their own families had in effect, for both of them, severed their ties with old friends.

Years ago the young man yearned to get away from his hometown with its familiar streets and dull evenings. Now he yearned for old friendships as one warms himself by a fire.

If you are lucky, when you have so many years in the rear-view mirror, you can keep the friendships from long ago. The website *Our Mindful Life* says, “If you have

*Kevin Banet*

brought a childhood friendship into adulthood, you are the lucky few.”

And the writer Joseph Perry said, “Make new friends, but keep the old: Those are silver, these are gold.”

• [Return to Table of Contents](#) •



### **3.**

## **He Plants His Trees to Serve a Race to Come**

**T**he song by the group Kansas says, “All we are is dust in the wind.” Is that all? No, we are a point in the line of individuals who make up the flow of families and nations, always building on the foundation of the structure of humanity, as it were.

Thus we are related to the past and the future. Our actions affect those who come after us. In the Middle Ages, it was taught that a murder not only stopped the life of one man or woman, but of all the descendants that might come from that person afterwards. The person was held guilty of ending all those lives.

Conversely, if we give life to others, and raise them with a lifestyle of virtue, we are passing along something very good to future generations.

Years ago, the great orator Cicero quoted the poet Statius, “He plants his trees to serve a race to come.”

Thus, the man’s children, as well as his future family descendants, and the society of tomorrow would benefit from what was planted - the shade and possibly the fruit of the trees that he so carefully nurtured and guarded.

## **For the immortal gods**

Cicero takes it a step further into the supernatural. He says that a farmer, however old, if he were asked for whom he planted the trees would say, “For the immortal gods, whose will it was that I should not merely receive these things from my ancestors but should also hand them on to the next generation.”

Thus there was a certain duty, imposed by the gods above, to “pass it forward” to those who come after us. Our lives are a continuum, from one generation to the next, like chapters in a book. Our ancestors have given us

## *Aging Upstream*

gifts, and we have a responsibility to pass our own unique contributions to future generations.

On that note, we all have ancestral histories – it's just that, depending on our ethnic background, we have forgotten them.

In many Asian cultures it is common for families to keep books documenting their ancestry and genealogy, often called family trees or genealogical records. Chinese, Japanese and Korean families will proudly produce such books that go back hundreds or even a thousand years.

In Europe, some baptismal records of old churches go back hundreds of years. Historians refer to them to track down the births and living areas of persons.

## **Fingerprints to the past**

Today we delight in using our blood samples to find our DNA fingerprints that point to the countries of our ancestors of origin. Thus, you might see spots on a map of Europe, Africa, Asia, or another continent. These seemingly random dots, which may be spread out over large areas, give us a sense of wonder. A glimpse into the

hidden lives of our great-great grandparents, and even those farther back in time.

But these tiny blips on a screen do not seem to satisfy us; they tell us nothing of our forebearers' lives - how they struggled, how they occupied themselves, and what they loved or hated. How they insisted on good behavior of their children or contributed to society through their work or social life.

Looking forward, think of all the good we can pass along to, not only our own children, but to those who come afterwards.

The book of Deuteronomy in the Bible (Deut. 30:19) says,

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live....”

The message here is to choose life – God’s will – and the blessings will be passed along to you and your future generations.

## *Aging Upstream*

Plant trees that you may never see fully grown. But someone will.

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## 4.

# “Devil Dog” of the Battle of the Marne

**T**he large man lay in his nursing home bed while the young orderly moved him about. The orderly, who was 20 years old, was hired in part because the home needed a man to work with the heavier patients.

At one point the older man in the bed stated abruptly, “I fought in the Battle of the Marne. I’ve got *shrapnel* in my chest.”

Hmm... sure, the orderly thought, his mind racing back to his high school history class. The Marne. France? This didn’t sound like a World War II battle, so it must have been *World War I*. Seems like too long ago to be

## *Aging Upstream*

true. Well, any patient in a nursing home might say anything, the young man concluded. This is where people with dementia live, and the words of such people just cannot be trusted.

But the old man was correct. One of the nurses told him that yes, this patient fought in the Battle of the Marne. The young man was taken aback. This patient would have to be at least 75 years old now if he had fought in, let's say, the Second Battle of the Marne. This took place in 1918, when U.S. troops helped French and British soldiers push back the last major German offensive in the war, within a scant 45 miles of Paris.

The old man's bold words were not in fact the distracted musings of an Alzheimer's patient. In fact, there was a hint of pride in his voice. He had survived, and even triumphed, over the anguish and challenges of a real battle with bullets and the threat of death. The old veteran, who had risked his life at about the same age as was the orderly now, was trying to reconnect the honor and respect that society awarded him at the war's end with this young man's world.

But it didn't click with the orderly. His life was that of a comfortable middle-class existence. And as far as war, the social atmosphere was different now. The Vietnam War had just ended. The nation had cast a shadow over the Vietnam War, showing disregard for the necessity and appreciation of those who endure the struggle of armed conflict.

## **Storming through bullets**

The old veteran had a lot to be proud of. The Second Battle of the Marne in France was a hard-fought victory in 1918 that turned the tide of the war in favor of the Allies and lead to the eventual defeat of the Germans. One fight was that of Belleau Wood, in which the 5th and 6th U.S. Marine Regiments beat back four German divisions which were well dug in.

Was this patient one of those Marines? Was he one of those who stormed through the wheat field under heavy machine gun fire and face the enemy....a foe that was well equipped with modern artillery, trench mortars, heavy machine guns, and poison gas?



## *Aging Upstream*

Maybe he served under Sgt. Major Daniel Joseph Daly, who was awarded a Navy Cross for his leadership. Or maybe he was Sgt. Daly himself! Did this patient help earn the Marines at Belleau Woods the name *Devil Dogs*, a moniker given them by the Germans and which the Marines still rally around today?

Sometimes history stands before us unawares. We might be turning an old man over in his bed to prevent bed sores but might also be acknowledging a warrior's sacrifices that remain hidden from the eyes of today.

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## 5.

# Grandpa's Cane

**A**s a child I remember that every Sunday afternoon my mom, dad and my siblings would drive to our grandparents' house a few miles away. Dad sometimes mowed the lawn for his parents with their whirring push-mower.

We kids might be given a Coke with ice, which was a real treat, since we normally didn't have soft drinks at home. Then in the evening we would watch Walter Cronkite announce the news.

When we arrived at the house, we kids were told to kiss grandma. Her face seemed like a mass of soft mush, and this sign of affection was not especially welcomed by me. Grandpa slowly ambled around with a cane. He

## *Aging Upstream*

didn't say much, except for some strong words uttered when his team lost a euchre game. Years later, near death, he would have to be carried by my uncle from his chair to his bed at the end of each day.

These experiences were our initiation into old age and what it means. Older people cannot mow their own lawns; their skin sags and wrinkles; and they cannot run around as we did as children.

### **Social movements**

Today we find social and political movements around the country claiming to ease the disappointments of old age in the form of assisted suicide. Whoops – I mean *medically assisted death*. It is said that this will relieve a person from unbearable suffering and reduce the burden on loved ones.

No matter what the arguments pro or con, it seems that voluntarily ending one's own life runs against all that we know. When we get sick, our natural tendency is to want to get better. When we sense danger to life or limb, we try to move away from the threat.

What we miss are opportunities to grow in character, or even to act as an example to others. Old age is an opportunity to show the younger generation that there is meaning to enduring one's suffering.

## **Mel Gibson hero**

There is a scene in Mel Gibson's 2006 movie *Apocalypse* in which an indigenous American tribe is captured by Mayan warriors. In one scene, a leader of the captors notices that one of the young prisoners is looking longingly into the eyes of an older man who has also been captured. The leader notices a relationship, probably that of a father and grown son. The leader, with full spiteful intent, instructs one of his warriors to kill the older man. Instead of a futile struggle, the older man stands and gazes toward his son in a stoic glance as a knife flashes across his throat. He will not shrink from the pains of a violent death.

There is something here that those who clamor for "medical aid in dying" need to learn.

## *Aging Upstream*

Solon, the ancient Athenian lawgiver, described life in ten stages. In the last stage, he says,

When nine such periods have passed,  
His powers, though milder grown, still last;  
When God has granted ten times seven,  
The aged man prepares for heaven.

• [Return to Table of Contents](#) •

6.

## **A Wrestling Coach's Hot Pepper Trick**

**A**l Vega was a wrestling coach in a south Chicago suburb who gained the trust of his students - but he could be a trickster at any moment.

Mr. Vega once picked up my cross-country friend John and I in his big dark green Buick Electra. That car seemed as big as a boat. Mr. Vega took us on one of his Sunday morning athletic jaunts. He would drive us to the YMCA in his old neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, or to Rainbow Beach to play handball. John and I would then play sports and otherwise horse around for the morning, and then he would drive us back.

## *Aging Upstream*

One day on the way home Mr. Vega stopped at a favorite Mexican food store. As he got onto the expressway, he reached into a brown paper bag and handed us a plump green jalapeno pepper.

“I want to see what you guys think of this,” he quipped, holding up the small innocuous-looking vegetable. “I’ll bite off the tip, and you guys take the next bites.”

Our ignorance of Mexican spices would be our downfall.

There was no doubt some trick to this. Maybe Mr. Vega’s Hispanic taste buds were more accustomed to the scorching hot flavor. As soon as I bit off the end of that spicey explosive, my tongue and mouth erupted into a flaming hot furnace. I remember rolling down the car window and gasping for cool air – to no avail. I felt like dousing my burning mouth with water, but these were the days before water bottles.

My friend John suffered as well, laughing to ease the pain. Even today I recall the joke when putting a jalapeno pepper into my own bean recipes (and very sparingly, by the way). It was a humorous event that has me thinking to

this day. A tough but caring coach, Mr. Vega was not above a bit of tomfoolery.

The wrestling room at the Calumet City high school is now named after him. Al Vega passed away about five years ago, leaving many happy memories.

## **Steve Jobs and teachers**

We probably don't think much about it, but I'm guessing that any of us could think of a few good teachers and coaches that inspired, pushed and prodded us through our more reluctant years.

One thinks of Steve Jobs, who credits some success in his efforts at starting the Apple computer revolution to his fourth grade teacher. And when I look back I can think of Mr. Vega as well as others who helped me along the path. Many, like Mr. Vega, were single who, without the cares of a family, were able to focus their energies on their young charges. Thus, values and good habits are formed in the next generation.

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)



## 7.

# **Stashu's Three Fears of His High School Reunion**

I saw my old friend Stashu Golabki the other day. He was sitting on his front porch scrolling through his cell phone. I asked him if he was telling others about his recent high school reunion.

“Sure, although I won’t tell them what I was really thinking before I went,” he said.

“I had a couple of fears going into that reunion, and I almost didn’t go.”

“What were they?” I asked, wondering if we were heading in a direction that only a therapist should go. But

Stashu is not the type of guy who would ever do anything like that.

“First of all, I knew my old girlfriend was going to be there and didn’t know what to say to her.”

“Wouldn’t you just say, hello, and how has it been going for the last fifty years?”

“Don’t be smart with me,” he retorted, adjusting his Cubs cap. “Actually, we just made small talk and things turned out well. I guess we both put aside whatever bad blood there was between us.”

## **Not a millionaire**

“My second fear was that everyone else was going to be a millionaire, and I was only a pipefitter for all those years.”

“How many millionaires did you meet?”

“None. As a matter of fact, many people bounced around from one type of unrelated job to another. At least I had a pension when I retired.”

## *Aging Upstream*

“And there was one more nervous moment. I didn’t know whether the school bully was going to show up,” he said, taking a swallow from a Red Bull. “I thought the bully might do a follow-up to what he did in the fourth grade - steal my turtle that I brought for show and tell. He might want to steal my wallet this time.”

“Did you have a showdown with him?” I asked.

“No, I found out he died five years ago in prison.”

“So I guess you had a good time?”

“Yes,” he answered. “And none of those bad things even happened.”

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## **8.**

# **Three Famous People Who Struggled with Mental Illness**

**I**f you have an aging parent who struggles with emotional difficulties or mental illness, did you ever wonder how they are going to get along in life?

One common form of mental illness is depression, which, in a clinical sense is defined as a long-term sense of loss, of purpose, or sadness in one's life.

In other words, can you hope for any bright side to something like depression?

## *Aging Upstream*

If we look at history, we can find notable figures who have suffered from what we would today call clinical depression and yet contributed great things to society. For example, Abraham Lincoln suffered from depression. He struggled over the lifetime losses of his mother when he was nine years old, and later fiancé, his wife, his two sons, and other family members.

Winston Churchill, the great British Prime Minister during World War II, is believed to have had bipolar disorder.

### **Doorkeeper with scruples**

Another lesser-known historical figure who struggled with mental illness was Alphonsus Rodriguez, the son of a wool merchant who was born in the sixteenth century in Spain. Alphonsus' father died when he was young. He then got married, and then his wife, daughter and mother died within the space of three years. The family business that he was running failed. All three of his children passed as well, before he was 40.

One of the consoling facts is that Alphonsus, who died in 1617, found a way to deal with it all. He lived an exemplary life and was later declared a saint by the Catholic Church. It is encouraging to know that those who struggle with depression or other forms of mental illness can live an admirable life, and even a holy one, and one that is officially recognized in a public way, such as through canonization.

After his family members died, Alphonsus applied to join the Jesuits. But since he was not sufficiently educated, and since he was too old at the age of 40, he was rejected. Later, however, he was accepted as a Jesuit lay brother.

Alphonsus worked as a doorkeeper of a school, but also devoted himself to prayer and penances. The website *Catholic Ireland* relates that through “attention to his own inner struggle,” he was able to influence many people. It is also said that Alphonsus was troubled with “scrupulosity and agitations of mind.”

During his life, Alphonsus, who had great insights into spiritual matters, was sought after by local civic and

## *Aging Upstream*

social leaders, who came to his house for advice and direction. By the time he died at age 85, he left several writings which consisted in encouragements and advice on cultivating virtue.

Although Alphonsus Rodriguez was much troubled by anxieties and mental struggles, he lived a noble life and contributed much to society. Families of elderly parents afflicted with Alzheimer's disease and other mental difficulties can thus look to him for encouragement.

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## 9.

# A Time-Traveler's Anguish (Part I)

Just the other day I came across my friend Stashu Golabki. He was sitting alone in a nearby restaurant munching on his two eggs over easy.

"I don't know how it all happened," he said.

"How what happened?"

"How I got transported to the 17th century. I know I was in a different land, at a different time."

"What?" I asked incredulously, looking closely at him to see if he was losing his mind.

"Yes, I was sitting in the park, and had clicked on this very cell phone to answer an ad for a bereavement



## *Aging Upstream*

therapist. I was using a special new app that combines advertising with a mechanism that promised to give special, real-life experiences.

“You know that my dear Angie passed recently, and I’ve been heartbroken since then. It’s been hard to sleep. You understand. When I clicked on the app, the air around me became suddenly engulfed in a cloud of smoke. Then it cleared and I found myself on a strange street with horse-drawn wagons next to a huge castle-like structure.”

“What? Are you sure you weren’t dreaming?” I asked.

“No – this was for real. A fellow there told me that this was the Chateaux something-or-other. When I asked him to explain this, he surprised me by telling me that the date was October 7, 1604 and we were in Annecy, France.

Stashu said that he was told by a curious passerby that this was the residence of the bishop, François de Sales, who was good with personal problems. And this was just what Stashu needed. Since Angie had passed, he was trying to get his life together without her... maybe work

through some guilt feelings and wishing things had gone differently with her – that kind of thing.

## **Beam me somewhere**

Well, I mentioned that internet apps must have become quite sophisticated nowadays. My friend assured me that it was just as much of a surprise to him as it was to me. But if he was transported back four hundred years to get to an expert in his time of need, so be it.

He explained that he walked up to the castle and rapped on a huge iron ring on the door. He was soon ushered in by an elderly man and found himself standing in front of a stately-looking gentleman with a colorful robe, a head as bald as the moon, and a flowing beard.

“How may I help you?” asked the tall man in his deep voice, after introducing himself as indeed the François that he expected.

“I know my clothes might look out of place,” explained my friend to the bishop. “I think that I time-traveled from another century. Um, I just want to cut to the

## *Aging Upstream*

chase and ask for your help in my anguish over my wife's recent passing."

"Hmm...", the bishop replied, stroking his long grey beard. "By your accent and clothes, you indeed seem to have come from a different era. But the Lord works in mysterious ways. Tell me about your problem."

Taking a seat with the bishop in a high-ceilinged room with walls covered with huge drapes, Stashu poured his heart out about Angie's sudden stroke and her quick decline. He endured a funeral of well-wishing friends but was later trying to figure it all out. His marriage had been troubled with various disappointments, and he wished he could have talked with her more about their problems. Her passing was made without an adequate good-bye. There seemed to be so many unresolved matters. It just didn't make sense.

### **Not much thought**

"We must always be prepared for death," mused the bishop.

“One’s spouse may die suddenly, or we might pass also,” Bishop de Sales explained. Whether rich or poor, nobleman or country bumpkin, our casket will one day be brought rolling down the center of the church like everyone else.”

“I...I don’t even go to church,” replied my friend. “I used to, but.... I must admit, I haven’t given much thought to practicing any religion at all. As far as death, I haven’t given it much thought. Maybe we all just disappear somehow – but what if I’m wrong?” Stashu seemed lost in his thoughts.

“Hmm...” mumbled the bishop, stroking the end of his long beard. “Maybe your lack of a faith has kept your mind off of things like death.”

Just then a bell rang and an attendant brought them a bottle of port wine and two tall glasses. The two men looked up.

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## **10.**

### **A Time-Traveler's Anguish (*Part II*)**

**W**e continue with the story of Stashu Golabki, who traveled back in time four hundred years to seek counsel and solace from François de Sales, a bishop known for his skill in easing emotional pain.

The bishop has advised Stashu that his wife's passing is an opportunity to think more seriously about death.

"To tell you the truth, I don't even want to think of death," Stashu said. "I keep busy doing other things. You might know the words of the poem, 'Do not go gentle into that good night....Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'"

“It must be the words of one of your poets,” the bishop said. “There is a lot of raging there, and not much peace, it seems.”

“Well, I feel full of rage. My wife slips away from this life, and I know I will follow someday, maybe soon. It doesn’t seem right. So I might as well rage.”

“Hmm...sorry to hear about your discontent, my friend. It seems to me that it is always a matter of great reproach to mortals that they should die without having thought about death; but it is doubly wrong for those whom Our Lord has favored with the blessing of old age.”

“To use an analogy from war,” the bishop continued. “Those who get their armor ready before the alarm sounds are always better prepared than people who rush around collecting their breastplate, thigh pieces and helmet when the alert has actually been given.”

## **What’s a breastplate?**

“I don’t have a breastplate, and I don’t even know what a thigh piece is - outside of Kentucky Fried Chicken,” Stashu replied. What kind of preparation for

death can a man make anyway? He is going into the cold earth one way or another.”

“My friend, if you will allow me...we must eventually bid the world a calm and deliberate farewell and withdraw our affections from created things little by little. Trees uprooted by the wind are not fit for transplanting because their roots are left behind in the soil; but if they are to be moved to another plot of ground their roots must be deftly and gradually disengaged one by one. And because we are to be transplanted from this miserable earth to the land of the living we must loosen our affections one by one from this world.”

## **Land of the living**

“Hey, *this* is the land of the living,” my friend shot back. “This is for real. What comes later – well, no one knows what happens.”

“Well, I can understand your disagreement, and maybe disappointment,” the bishop said wistfully. “If you were a believing person, I would say that that it would bring you great comfort to set aside a space of time every

day and put yourself in the presence of God and of your guardian angel and to turn over in your mind what you need to do to have a happy death. How would you arrange your affairs if the end were to be soon?"

"Well, I am not even sure I believe in guardian angels and all that stuff. And as far as death, it certainly does not seem to be a happy event."

The bishop de Sales, a bit taken aback, paused and said calmly, "I know that such thoughts might be new to you. But if you will give them a chance, you should let them pass through your mind in a new way, in the presence of God, with calm attention, seeking to engage your affections rather than to enlighten your intellect. Then you will more easily be able to withdraw your affections from this world and transplant them to heaven."

Stashu then looked pensively into his nearly empty wine glass. Suddenly he was whooshed into a cloud of smoke and found himself back in the familiar park by his home, with its shady trees and a flock of pigeons pecking at the ground around him.



## *Aging Upstream*

“I guess I will have to think about this for a while,” he said. “Maybe I need to think about life beyond tomorrow.”

• [Return to Table of Contents](#) •

## **11.**

# **Parents' Splish-Splash into the Bath**

**T**here is an old rock and roll song by Bobby Darin, “Splish Splash.” It is a lively, care-free tune that captures the essence of a playful summer party, where the infectious rhythm and lyrics make you feel like you're dancing in a bathtub without a care in the world.

Splish splash, I was taking a bath  
Long about a Saturday night, yeah  
A rub dub, just relaxing in the tub  
Thinking everything was all right

## *Aging Upstream*

You know what happens next. The man opens his door and discovers a party going on in his house with his friends dancing in the living room.

Imagine that a couple at that imaginary party grew up and now carries out the same frivolity in their backyard. In a popular Facebook reel of today you can see a joyful and spontaneous water skirmish between a middle-aged man and a woman in their backyard.

Aptly titled, “My parents after 30 years of marriage,” the clip shows a man, likely in his 50’s, resting peacefully in a comfy lawn chair. Suddenly, he gazes upward through his sunglasses only to spot his wife rushing into the frame carrying a menacing-looking tub.

The astonished man swiftly leaps to his feet. He embarks on a quick retreat, taking refuge behind a hanging net in a comical attempt at protection. However, his adversary advances upon her target, wielding the tub with calculating gestures.

He cautiously inches away from his sanctuary, but she is a good shot, delivering a precise, square hit to her victim’s chest. They break out in playful laughter. The

next shot cuts to the revengeful husband gently picking up his wife and heaving her into a waist-high children's pool while the wife sinks out of sight, her legs kicking up and down in protest.

## **The goat and the hippo**

This heartwarming display provokes nothing but gleeful chuckles. It evokes the analogy of marriage as an unaware hippo (the husband) who is occasionally nudged, teased, and even kicked by a spirited goat (his wife). The hippo, simply desiring solitude, finds himself engaged in playful combat as the persistent goat seeks attention in her own provocative way.

Not everyone enjoys this kind of fun. An experienced clergyman once remarked that when a man retires from the workplace and spends all his time at home with his wife, trouble can emerge. This is often because they haven't had the chance to develop the skill of enjoying time together – time that was not tied to meeting schedules, working out the bills, or taking the kids to their youthful commitments.

## *Aging Upstream*

Yet, when we look at the couple engaged in the water fight, we expect that retirement won't have too many pitfalls – maybe just some pratfalls. One would assume that they'll continue to discover inventive ways to interact, patiently tolerating each other's quirks, and even revel in moments of joy and practical jokes.

Comedian Phyllis Diller summed it up well: "Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight."

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## **12.**

# **The Power of Regret: What You Learn After Saying "No"**

**W**hen I was in college, I was asked by an older student in the psychology program if I would visit an elderly couple who lived in the rural area around our college.

The college had an outreach program in which students visited others who were poor or needed some other help. The couple in question was unable to get around and were lonely. They just needed someone to provide some companionship in their home every now and then. I imagined the elderly couple resting on rocking chairs in an old farmhouse surrounded by the endless cornfields of our college town.

## *Aging Upstream*

I was even offered a car to borrow if I needed a way to get there. I thought about it for a day or two, and then told the woman that, no thanks, I would not be interested.

My reasoning was thus: was there any benefit here for me? I realized that first of all, this was not a class assignment. And there was no social angle to this, such as enjoying a common activity with friends. Of course, I was not getting paid. I did not think about other factors, such as whether it would benefit my career or help in my study of psychology.

But in the end, I said no. Why go if it didn't benefit me, I selfishly thought. But as the years went by, I pondered the incident and my decision. I wondered about the lonely couple sitting on the rocking chairs staring at the endless rows of corn with nothing to hear except for the lonely chirping of red-winged blackbirds. I felt a tinge of regret that I could not quite identify. I felt that on this day long ago I had done something less than noble.

## **No reward**

Famed UCLA basketball coach John Wooden said, "You can't live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you."

It's probably rare for a person to help another person while expecting no apparent reward in return. We think of heroic people like Mother Teresa, or those who found nonprofits to help the poor.

Volunteers who work with an organization such as a nonprofit or a church give their time for many reasons. Most of them, myself included, see some benefit in it for ourselves. A social experience. Impressing others. A new learning experience. Or just plain donuts and coffee.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with mixed motives. It's rare for any of us to act with completely pure, unselfish motivations. About the closest we come is that of a mother who wakes up in the middle of the night to care for a sick child.

Elderly who live alone in fact often suffer from intense loneliness, and the visits from caring persons mean



## *Aging Upstream*

the world to them. Those who have lived a long time especially like to see their value acknowledged by the younger generation. It helps them see that kindness and generosity will survive in our world long after they are gone.

“Social connections are essential for health and well-being at all ages and may be especially important for promoting health in later life,” says a study published in the journal of the National Institutes of Health by Kimberly A. Van Oden, and others.

It seems clear that the impact of brightening someone's life, even for a short while, radiates outward in unseen but profound ways. Striving to be unselfish is key to greatness of spirit.

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## **13.**

# **They Want Us to do *What?***

**E**ver felt lost in the maze of do's and don'ts that experts prescribe for seniors, all in the name of living a healthy life?

Amidst the sea of instructions and recommendations, one can't help but ask: Can we truly keep up with the demands imposed on seniors striving for a normal happy life?

There seems to be all kinds of “fake news” sages out there – doctors, professors, and marketing people – pushing us to unreasonable heights that go beyond what ordinary mortals could ever do.

## **Pure-air puffery**

For example, how often should you vacuum your house?

A maker of an air purifier opines in a senior magazine about ridding the air of allergens, mold and viruses in your home. OK, fair enough. But they assert that the rule of thumb is to vacuum the number of times per week as are the number of persons and pets in your home.

*Gimmie a break.*

At that pace, with two adults and two dogs, you are pushing your Hoover four days a week in every room of your domicile.

How many people would be willing to order family members lounging on the couch to lift their feet while the noisy vacuum agitates the path in front of them for more than half the days of their lives?

Instead, why not just move your entire family to an area with better air, such as Paw Paw, Illinois?

## Bootcamp brutality

Or this zinger: how often should senior citizens engage in physical exercise? The CDC says 150 minutes per week, which is for example, 30 minutes per day, five days per week.

But what does the same agency recommend for *adults in general*? It's the same demand – two and one-half hours of bothersome exertion. You would think that the older folks would be asked to do less. Nope - no break for the elderly whose bones creak and who tire out on the couch after the 6 p.m. pumpkin pie!

Not only that, but for all other adults, the CDC omits the onerous tasks of strength exercise and balance that it weighs upon the burden of seniors. I thought the golden years meant that you slowed down after working so hard for so many decades. Your system just can't handle the stress anymore.

Can you imagine a 25-year-old man, jogging with his grandfather saying, "Let's get some ice cream, grandpa!"

“Sorry kid, after this run I’ve got another hour of pumping iron in the gym.”

## **Ruff the robot**

Or how about this provocation: what should seniors do to avoid social isolation?

There was a news report recently out of New York that said that aging departments in 21 states have distributed thousands of *furry robots* to befriend lonely old people. I guess these devices are supposed to fool the feeble-minded among us to think they are real canines.

My friend Stashu Golabki can testify to that. He was recently visited by a social worker who towed along a fake dog that was so real that it walked over to the kitchen counter and purred for food scraps.

“I beat it with a baseball bat,” Stashu told me bluntly. “I just want to be left alone.”

## Cross words

Buckle up, folks, here's another slice of lunacy. No doubt you've heard the old canard that working cross-word puzzles keeps your mind sharp in old age.

But how much time does this take away from your well-earned retirement time?

It is said that *The New York Times* puzzles are the easiest on Monday, after which they become more difficult each day, ending in Sunday's grand teaser. One obviously smart person on Reddit, who hides his identity under the moniker `Excellent_Project789` says he's worked 5,782 puzzles. He claims that his average times range from 7:42 minutes on Monday, to 36.58 minutes on Sunday.

Some people are gluttons for punishment. When you add up all the time in the week, he wastes an average of 2:22 hours from Monday to Sunday scratching his head and breaking his pencil lead in anger.

And you can bet that the average geezers like you and I will take a lot longer than the whizzes, such as the word

## *Aging Upstream*

crunchers who compete in the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.

How many average Joe's or Jane's will tally for four, five, or even six hours each week ciphering enigmas such as a four-letter word for a Trojan War hero? (Hint for you folks in Hegewisch: it's also the name of a kitchen cleanser.)

Yo, chums. You do this and you have no time for your four hours of vacuuming each week.

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## **14.**

# **Grandpa's Job was to Sweep the Snow**

**E**arly in the morning, the elderly Filipino man swept the snow from the driveway of the modest two-story brick home.

The older gent's breath misted in the cool air. He must have been a rugged guy, wearing shorts, sandals and socks whenever the white stuff covered the ground.

Grandpa could be seen outside on a regular basis, tidying up the well-kept corner house. No matter what the weather, he shuffled around, healthy as a goat.

The younger man of the house, Manuel, and his wife were health care workers, an occupation of many



Filipinos. They sent their daughters across the street to the public grade school, and Manuel made sure that they got into the advanced curriculum. Gramps was either Manuel's father or his father-in-law.

All in all, a well-disciplined family that cared well for their elderly.

## **First generation respect**

This caring for one's elderly in a family is often an integral part of the culture of first-generation immigrants, whether they be Mexican, Filipino, African, Asian or other background.

One home care company owner once told me, "Immigrants take care of their elderly." Although they were not be her customers because they had no need, she admired those born outside of the U.S. who had a strong cultural tradition for looking after their grandparents or relatives.

I countered that the elderly sometimes don't *want* to live with their children. They like their independence. Or their children live in distant cities because that's where

their jobs take them. And some cities and housing communities have restrictions on the number of generations which can live in a home.

Thus the need for professional home care services and assisted living.

## **What grandma wants**

There are also challenges to be faced when a grandmother or grandfather lives with their grown children. The physical living situation is crucial. Having a separate room, living space, or even separate access for the grandparent can make the arrangement more manageable.

The authority in the family must be made clear. Grandparents usually give in to the leadership of their children.

The availability of family members to provide care and support matters. If everyone in the family works long hours or has other commitments, it can be challenging to effectively care for the grandparent.

## *Aging Upstream*

But ultimately, one's priorities about all these situations determine what will be done so that the best interests of all in the family are satisfied.

• [Return to Table of Contents](#) •

## 15.

# A Native American Legend of 1832 Lives On

Is it true that as a person gets older that they get interested in older things? Old buildings, old photographs, and old books.

On my bookshelf is an 1899 copy of *Brumbaugh's Standard Reader*. My copy of the book's pages are yellow and the front pages are filled with lavish handwriting in pencil with names of children that go back a century. The stories inside are rich in culture with essays, poems and short stories. They seem quite advanced for fifth grade students of today.

Chapter LXXXII is called "The White Man's Book." It tells of how, in 1832 four Native Americans (called

## *Aging Upstream*

Indians in the book) of the Flathead tribe in Oregon came all the way to Saint Louis to get a copy of a book which the missionaries had told them “would show the way to heaven.” The story explains how, when the Native Americans reached a fort in Saint Louis there was not a single copy of the Bible in the place.

The Native Americans were greatly disappointed. One of them, Hee-oh’ks-te-kin, delivered an address in which he said,

I came to you over a trail of many moons from the setting sun.... My people sent me to get the white man's book of heaven. You took me where you allow your women to dance as we do not ours and the book was not there. You took me where they worshipped the great spirit with candles, and the book was not there. You showed me the images of good spirits and pictures of the good land beyond, but the book was not among them to tell us the way.

He continues his sad tale,

I am going back the long, sad trail to my people of the dark land. You make my feet heavy with burdens of gifts, and my moccasins will grow old carrying them, but the book is not among them.

A heartwarming but sad account, wouldn't you agree? There might be pundits who question the authenticity of this account, but there are too many details here, and even a drawing in the book of the native person whose name is mentioned.

## **Christianity favored**

We might find it odd with our modern minds to find that Christianity is favored in this way in a book that was used widely in public schools. We are advised now, with today's peculiar cultural outlook, that the white man's religion – Christianity – was just another form of oppression that went along with the slavery of indigenous people and other ills brought to them by Europeans.

And yet this tribe sent out a delegation to recover something that was very valuable – something that they could not find in their own religion or culture. Their wise men held out hope of something true and beautiful that they found in the promise of Christianity – a promised that was a beam of light in their apparent world of darkness.

## **Rediscovered at Walmart**

Copies of the old Brumbaugh book can be found on Amazon and other sites. Interest in the book is holding steady. The reprinted volume has also been made available by Walmart, in a leatherbound edition. Curiously the ad states, “NO changes have been made to the original text. This is NOT a retyped or an ocr’d reprint.” (OCR is optical character recognition — the way old books are digitized.)

Walmart knows that a certain set of its customers are sensitive to modern editorial changes that would delete or water down the eloquence, style and especially the values promoted in 19<sup>th</sup> century writing. Yet there is a segment of modern parents who treasure the teachings – especially Christianity – found in the culture and accepted by public educators as a given so many years ago. These parents are likely homeschoolers and others who want authentic writings, without a watered-down or modernized version. They seek this because they are suspicious of today’s educational system.

What is also maintained by reading old books is that our culture has a rich history of such values as virtue, patriotism and religion — all wrapped in a package of poems and prose in many rich styles of writing. Parents today would rather pass up the revisionist theories and bland text and instead get the pearl of great price within these books' yellowed pages.

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)



## **16.**

# **Prayers that Seem to go Nowhere**

I know of two men who take turns making regular trips to the dementia unit of a local nursing home.

Coming from a local Catholic parish two or three times a month, one of them brings a statue of the Virgin Mary and leads the residents in the rosary.

When one of the men arrives, the TV is turned off and the prayers are led. This is not a rousing congregation of enthusiastic worshippers.

About 15 residents, mostly glassy-eyed or with eyes closed, gather in the community room, many slumped forward in seeming stupor. They are arranged in rows in chairs or wheelchairs. An orderly or assistant at times

comes in to help a resident with their breakfast. The leader's words are heard throughout the room. One or two women in the front row might move their lips with the words of the Hail Marys and Our Fathers.

In less than a half an hour, the leader ends with a few positive words and a smile for the residents. One of the older ladies might say "thank you." The statue is put back in a bag, and the man leaves.

## **What good is this?**

For the residents, many of whom may have lost their ability to communicate or are even aware of their surroundings, these visits offer a sense of routine and familiarity. Even if the residents don't actively participate in the prayers, the presence of the leader and the sound of the prayers being recited may evoke memories, emotions, or feelings of comfort. For individuals with a religious background, this may be particularly meaningful.

Additionally, the staff members who support and care for these residents also benefit from this atmosphere of compassion and empathy, however short-lived. This can

## *Aging Upstream*

bring a sense of fulfillment to the staff members, reminding them of the importance of their work and the positive impact they have on the lives of those who cannot acknowledge the help they get.

What good are these visits, you may ask? The consistent presence of these men and the practice of prayer can have subtle yet important impacts on the residents, staff and wider community in this challenging and isolating environment.

And on the supernatural level, who can deny that God's grace is extended in this way in a circle of grace, providing far-reaching but unknown effects?

[• Return to Table of Contents •](#)

## **16.**

# **Poetry**

## **Twenty Three**

“Twenty-three” said he to me  
Is what I’d rather be.  
Is that some special age, I ask  
That makes, you think, a man more free?

What for you  
Will ever last?  
Your golden age is always in the past.

I’ll tell you what it is to me.  
Yes ... twenty-three...  
It makes me think — of opportunity

## *Aging Upstream*

But no less do I  
Now dwell upon eternity.

And I think I'll do the same  
At thirty-three, and eighty-three.  
I hope that all those years, for me  
Will pass without reluctance.

### **Echo of the "Just Man"**

Amid our hearth and home, the bell did toll,  
A sorrow swift that left us feeling bare,  
No chance for parting words to soothe our soul,  
Death's dark angel didn't pause, nor care.

Our "just man," echoing St. Joseph's name,  
Jim's life and gifts – his love and care we need,  
Not yet three score and ten, it feels a shame,  
A thief at night, it seems an unfair deed.

Yet, from above, a voice now softly sings,

*Kevin Banet*

“His mission's done, three acts in life's play,”  
“In My own time,” it whispers on the wings,  
“His virtues guide you; put his flaws at bay.”

Jim's opinions firm, as current flows in wire,  
With stern admonishments his tongue would  
frame,  
Respect was earned, and hearts remained inspired,  
His words, a force that kept our actions tame.

A teacher of the faith, a noble role,  
He shared its light with fervor and with grace,  
For Church, o'er years, he played a guiding role,  
Help'd others find their way to Christ's embrace.

His family's love, his heart's supreme delight,  
As father, he rejoiced in every phase,  
The cakes and celebrations, big and bright,  
He cherished moments with a father's gaze.

God's true plan for us is grand,  
And we, those left, will skip and run,

### *Aging Upstream*

Amid the currents, sharp stones withstand,  
Knowing that our mission's not yet done.

And on that Friday, as the sun did set,  
Jim breathed his last, his earthly journey done,  
Embracing Christ's own love he met,  
His spirit rose, eternal life began.

*The subject of the above poem was the father of a family who was also an electrical engineer and a parish catechist. He passed at age 68.*

### **Road to Emmaus**

Don't leave, oh stranger, from us,  
Your words do strike a chord.  
Our sad and fearful hearts,  
Do need your hopeful word.

Jerusalem behind us,

*Kevin Banet*

Our Leader has been killed.  
And now our steps are fretful,  
Our only dream's been stilled.

Come stay with us, the day is long,  
Give us the bread of life.  
And show your hidden mercy,  
And end our daily strife.

## **Hymn of Thanksgiving**

In self-made echoes, we claim undue credit  
For all our successes and every merit.  
Yet our thanks toward others is a truer tale,  
Without which life's journey would certainly  
pale.

In the heart of gratitude, our thanks should unfold,  
First to our parents, for their love untold.  
And ancestral forebears gave us freedom's embrace,  
Paving paths for our liberty, a sacred grace.



## *Aging Upstream*

Beyond this world lies a benefactor divine,  
God, the wellspring whence all blessings en-  
twine.

In humble reflection, our spirits rise,  
A Thanksgiving hymn that reaches for the skies.

## **Time Enjoyed**

Time gives of itself  
Freely to the doer  
When its moments are enjoyed.

## **Spanish Steps and Whizzing Wheels**

The song of Roman chatter fills the air,  
A hundred – no, a thousand stroll around  
The buildings yellowed for three hundred years  
of wear,  
The Spanish Steps, in glory hereby found.

But more than ancient ways here do the trick,

*Kevin Banet*

The hundred thirty-seven steps demure,  
'Mid pilgrims 'round the world with cameras click,  
Fast cars that beep, and ATM's that whirl.

The hilltop church and monastery built,  
By Frenchman strong five hundred years ago.  
Back then a steep decline of trees and silt,  
Led to the Spanish embassy so low.

Each country grasped for power in its plan,  
Great wealth, control and dominance to dream.  
But light and peace struck France's Roman man,  
He built the steps a-flowing like a stream.

Today "bon jour" still sounds 'mid Frankish walls,  
While just "¿Quien sabe?" can be said of Spain.  
New danger lurks, years past these nations' falls,  
Just watch your steps — for whizzing wheels  
now reign.

## **Dixie Ladies**

Two southern ladies with their mystic drawl  
Met fellas strolling in the board game mall;  
A tiresome game of Scrabble,  
Reduced the boys to babble,  
And now they only say “y’all.”

• [Return to Table of Contents](#) •



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