Notker Wolf
with Leo G. Linder

Aging Starts in Your Mind

You're only as old as you feel

Translated by Gerlinde Büchinger-Schmid

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Aging Starts in Your Mind: You're Only as Old as You Feel

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You're only as old as you feel

ABBOT PRIMATE NOTKER WOLF

Abbot Primate Notker Wolf was born in 1940. He studied philosophy, theology, zoology, inorganic chemistry, and the history of astronomy and holds the title Doctor of Philosophy. In 2000 he was elected abbot primate, the highest representative of the Benedictine order. He is the worldwide spokesman for Christianity's oldest order that has 7,500 monks and 17,100 nuns.

LEO G. LINDER

Leo G. Linder was born in 1948. After a period in the navy, from 1972 onward he studied film and philosophy at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf and history and Spanish at Düsseldorf University. From 1977, he worked as a cameraman and in 1985 changed to direction, making numerous documentary films. Since 1990 he has published forty five books on topics such as theology, history, and politics. The author and director lives in Düsseldorf.

Notker Wolf gives us the courage to accept old age not only with all its advantages and accumulated experience, but also with its physical limitations. For him what counts is the way we see things.

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1.

Ciao, Bella!

The older I get, the more I find it difficult to take the world seriously. Close up, it can appear merciless, almost threatening. But with increasing distance, it is looking more and more comical to me. When this happens, I pull on my pipe, grin to myself, and think, *Go on. Try to impress me. Take a tumble; I'll watch.* I admit, I sometimes enjoy the spectacle. Of course I'm to blame when I don't keep my mouth shut. But I blame my increasing age too.

I'm not the only one who feels like this. Years ago, I was invited by the then–Federal President of Germany Roman Herzog to accompany him on a trip to Korea. Once during our journey, I sat next to him on the bus. Herzog was in his midsixties, and I asked, "Mr. President, what will you do when your term has ended? What are your plans?"

"Pursuing my favorite pastime, which I'm unfortunately prevented from doing at the moment," he replied.

I looked at him. "Yes, and what would that be?"

"Poking fun."

I laughed. "Then we both have the same weakness—or strength."

I felt sorry for him; how awful to have to keep your mouth shut because of your job.

It's strange. As your own situation becomes more serious—after all, I'm now approaching seventy-five—the world becomes more of a source of amusement. My overanxious, high-and-mighty contemporaries, for example. This is nothing new for me. Directness and mild mischievousness have always been a few of the benefits of Benedictine independence. Over the years, however, my inner freedom has grown.

This freedom is a beautiful gift of old age. But perhaps the desire to poke fun is just a transitional stage. I can't yet call myself "really old." Maybe someday I'll achieve that truly endearing good humor that makes old people so thoroughly enjoyable. I'm reminded of two very old women I met by chance one day in an Italian mountain village.

On the way to the rectory, I turned down a small lane, and there they sat in cozy togetherness on a gnarled bench, backs against the side of a house and blinking into the late afternoon sun. I had hardly reached them when they perked up and boldly seized the opportunity to chat with a stranger. They wanted to know where I came from, what had brought me to their village, and all kinds of other things.

They were so delighted with this unexpected distraction that they asked a long string of questions. I responded with amusement, we chatted and joked, and then one of them asked me with a mischievous smile, "Can you guess how old Elisabetta is?"

It was difficult to say; Elisabetta could have been seventy or a hundred. So I shook my head and guessed, "Just past seventy-five?" I was hopelessly wrong.

"What do you mean?" the questioner rebuked me with mock indignation. "Ninety-two."

Elisabetta added, wagging her finger, "Plus two months."

We laughed. I sincerely complimented Elisabetta on how well she looked for ninety-two and promised to come by again on her hundredth birthday.

I continued on my way with a smile. Lovable old people like these are the purest and most delightful examples of our species. How easy and pleasant it is to have a warmhearted and humorous conversation with them, free of any egotism and ulterior motives. They no longer ask much of life—they've became modest and undemanding and seem liberated for just that reason. Liberated from wishes and desires, from greed and craving for life.

Having had so many jolts from life, having so often been delighted and so often disappointed, they've learned one thing above all others: to take life as it comes. Not to resist, not to rebel, not to have objections to their own fate. The rules of the world have lost validity for them; they no longer feel the need to intervene; they've long since withdrawn, and this gradual leave-taking has released in them a guileless, downright sunny humor. So they are one step ahead of me.

The ninety-two-year-old Elisabetta acknowledged my compliment with a smile touched by a little justified pride mixed with a slight melancholy. Are pride and melancholy the crucial ingredients of the kind of humor that, if we are lucky, old age brings? Let's look at a figure I particularly treasure, on the stage of everyday life: the elderly Roman woman.

Elderly Roman women take care of themselves. They don't go out without putting on their makeup, doing their hair, and putting on jewelry. They are ladies; they want to be seen and noticed, and they move accordingly, with a steady gate and heads held high. They have style, and style always goes down well in Rome.

One of these old ladies comes into the market when I am shopping. In all her finery and beauty, she first has a long chat with the owner. He's probably heard all her stories before, but man does not live by bread alone, and before the main performance there must be an overture. She proceeds to assemble her purchases with great care and connoisseurship.

The bacon is tried, the cheese felt, the honeydew melon sniffed; everything is selected piece by piece as if it were a treasure. A spectacle in itself.

And when she has stowed her delicacies into two shopping baskets and turns to go, the seller calls out a farewell, *Ciao, bella!*

These two Italian words might be translated as, "Bye, beautiful." But that's not quite right; it sounds a little patronizing. It was meant here as a real compliment, appreciative and at the same time humorous—as if he could still see in her the attractive young woman she had been long ago. And how does the old lady react? With a bittersweet smile she says one word to the gallant stall holder: *Magari*. Which means "If only."

Magari—the whole drama of life in a single word. If only. Because this old Roman woman has no illusions. She's long since learned that you have to say goodbye to many things. She retains her wish for beauty and admiration, while accepting that those things are far behind her. *Magari*—if only.

And I thought about how the climb from the market to my monastery, Sant'Anselmo, is getting increasingly difficult for me. *Yes, that's clever, perhaps even wise: when the years can no longer be hidden, gloss over them.*

With pride and melancholy.

With humor, in all its forms: with poking fun, like Roman Herzog and me; with harmless joking, like Elisabetta and her friend; with wise resignation, like the old Roman lady in the market. Or clothed in a big theatrical gesture like the Roman emperor Augustus who, when he was already mortally ill, summoned the Senate one last time and appeared in makeup and carefully combed hair, saying after his short farewell address: "If you liked my performance, applaud again."

Most of us, in our final years, won't be in a position to expect applause. So, we'll need humor even more. Because aging is actually

both extremely funny and extremely sad. We've never been so good: rich in experience, rich in learning, rich in understanding, insight, and knowledge of human nature. And now, precisely when we've never been so good, our strength starts to diminish.

Didn't we always wish for this serenity, this self-confidence, this inner freedom, this sovereignty? Just when we're where we've always wanted to be, our body starts sending increasingly clear signals that it's had enough. A decisive battle is in the making between our body and our ego, with a predictable end.

"Dying is shit." Thus author Sibylle Berg sums up her horror in the face of our mortality. And speaks to us from the heart. It's unbearable to think that one day we'll no longer be here. Once in this world, we never want to leave it. We hope for life in all its glory, fullness, and intensity—in all its charm. And we never stop hoping against all reason to avoid death, that dreadful cleft that runs through creation.

Some people in old age wake up in a cold sweat. Once again the coast has come a bit closer—that foreign coast where our ship will be dashed to pieces. We can see the end of our journey and we're scared stiff. As far back as we can remember, we've cruised the open sea and felt nothing but an endless expanse around us, feeling that it will go on forever—happily taking it for granted.

There would be tomorrow, of course, and then the day after tomorrow, and next year, and the year after that, and we would always encounter incredible new things—things we hoped for, and unexpected things that would keep us on our toes. What was ahead of us was incalculable and infinite. We drew our courage to face life from the inexhaustible richness of what lay ahead.

And then suddenly there's land in sight. First a small, dark strip of coastline on the horizon, it comes closer with every new morning. It dawns on us that the days of our life are numbered. We cannot correct

our course. We can look back, but not turn around. All these years we've lived in blissful error, intoxicated by an illusion. In a future we now can foresee, we'll no longer be a part of things; we no longer eagerly await what lies ahead. This realization takes us by surprise.

But can you ever make your peace with mortality, with having to die, with this "shit"? Or is futile rebellion the inevitable result of our pride? I remember an obituary. It was an indictment, a reproach against God written by the husband of the deceased. There was no trace of peace or reconciliation with a merciless fate.

"Where were you, God?" it said. "Where were you when my wife was stricken with an insidious disease and received the wrong treatment for nine months? Where were you when she was torn from life after selflessly nursing her sick mother for many years? Where were you when she passed away two days after her mother? And why are you punishing me with her cruel death?"

The bitterness of this obituary touches our hearts. It confronts us with the awful abyss of our existence. It would be obscene to recommend humor. However, I've often found that the elderly, the sick, and even the dying show nothing of the bitterness with which Sibylle Berg curses our mortality, or the bleak despair with which relatives react to the suffering and death of a loved one. What I remember much more is people facing the ends of their lives serenely and in a manner that can only be called cheerful.

This joy is, as it were, a product of their faith in Jesus Christ. It arises from the confidence of being destined for a new life after death by the grace of God. Their humor is like the little brother of their faith. This attitude, which can probably be termed *serenity*, is best represented by Sister Bertwina, the last German Benedictine nun in a Korean convent. When I visited her there, she was just celebrating her hundredth birthday.

Since I wanted to show her my full respect, I arrived with a bouquet of one hundred tea roses. Sister Bertwina received the roses with shining eyes and clapped enthusiastically when I serenaded her on the flute with improvisations on Korean and German folk songs. That she could still feel joy after all she had been through is a miracle. After the Korean War, in the fifties, she went through the daily torments of a four-and-a-half-year imprisonment in a North Korean prison camp, including the customary torture.

This didn't seem to have had any effect on her state of mind; in any case, she didn't harbor the slightest grudge against her former tormentors.

"They were also just people," she told me. "They had their orders and who knows how much pressure they were under. . . . I already forgave them when I was in the camp." That settled things for her. She was reconciled, and that reconciliation had saved her from bitterness. Also, Sister Bertwina laid no claim to happiness, so disappointments haven't harmed her.

When I asked her if there was anything I could do for her, she answered, "No, my only problem is that I'm feeling so great." She said goodbye with the words, "See you in heaven, if there's still a place free for us." When I got into my car, she waved to me cheerfully with both hands. I'll never forget this. Sister Bertwina with her joyful serenity was at least one step ahead of me. How lucky to have met this woman. A great moment.

I'm learning. On a sultry summer evening three years ago, I wanted to have a quick dip in our monastery's swimming pool, was too hasty, and stubbed my second toe hard on the edge of the pool. It hurt terribly—periosteum injuries are the most painful ones. I gritted my teeth. I didn't have time to go to the doctor. Later I noticed that the toe was crooked. Hitting the edge of the pool must have broken it, and it

healed at an angle. Should I go to the doctor and have it broken again and straightened?

What the heck, I told myself. *It's not worth it anymore. For the remaining ten or fifteen years, it's good enough. It's not perfect, but I can walk, and that'll have to do.* You see, at my age you include death in your plans. And I think I showed an appropriate sense of humor.

2.

It's Easier Not to Plan

The alarm clock tears me from sleep at the usual time of ten to six. A new morning dawns over Rome, and I would give everything not to have to get up.

Last night I was up late again. I replied to a pile of letters and twenty emails and wrote a column for the German magazine *Bild der Frau.* It was two in the morning when I switched off the desk lamp. That's not unusual; after midnight when the day's work is done and my head is free, I often get a second wind.

That's when I have my creative phase. When I have these moments of inspiration, I need to seize on them, and not get bogged down in brooding over an upcoming lecture, like a student over a homework assignment. So as long as the ideas flow, I keep at it. Four hours of sleep should be enough.

Four hours of sleep ought to be enough. It always used to be enough. What is it my father used to say in his final years? "I must get up, otherwise my whole mind will go to sleep." And the morning is my time. I have my best ideas. While I'm asleep, so much accumulates that needs jotting down immediately. And today, I have nothing to complain about.

How often do I wake up in the middle of the night because of jet lag after traveling to Rome from Manila or New York? Instead of tossing and turning, I will go back to my desk, say some psalms, and work for another hour. But not tonight; I slept through. So why the overwhelming desire to stay in bed?

Half-awake, I say to myself: *How long can this go on for? How long will it be at all feasible? Until you're eighty? It's just under six years until then. That's not much. You might have more time. Your parents got to eighty-five. Why shouldn't you live to be the same age?*

Eleven years—that's not much either.

It's better to banish such thoughts immediately. Not that they scare me—I've never thought about my end with horror; I don't get depressed like some do at the beginning of each new decade of their lives.

Nevertheless, I do notice changes in myself. I have to admit that since seventy, nature is putting the brakes on me. I'm becoming slower. Four hours of sleep is at least one hour too few. Recently my legs have started bothering me. After giving a two-hour lecture followed by discussion, if I remain on my feet the whole time, sometimes I hardly know how I'm going to get down from the podium, even though it's only a few steps. It's in the genes. My father also complained about his legs when he was old. Although, he did stand from morning to night at an ironing machine in the garment factory.

Come on now, I say to myself. *Your work is waiting. You've got a lot to get through today. The new strategic plan, the meeting of the construction committee—at some point the renovation of Sant'Anselmo has got to be finished. So get out of bed!* "*The early bird catches the worm.*" The classic kick in the pants, delivered to me, by me.

I'm sitting on the edge of the bed now. But I'm still not ready for action. Do I really have to do my morning exercises? Maybe I'll shave first. The face looking at me from the mirror sets me back again—I don't

look very enthusiastic. But I get a grip on myself and do some stretching exercises, then take a shower, alternating several times between hot and cold water. And, finally, the Notker I see in the mirror can smile at himself. *Well then.*

On the way to the first Divine Office I meet two Indian students in the elevator. We smile and silently acknowledge each other as we collect ourselves for prayer. Here in Sant'Anselmo we say only the bare minimum, and preferably nothing at all, to one another early in the morning. I enjoy the silence, and that too has changed over the years. As a young monk, silence was hard for me. Now I'm one of the advocates of continuous silence in the early hours, at least until breakfast is over.

When I enter the church I'm completely focused on the Liturgy of the Hours, and the moment I chant the first notes of the Gregorian antiphonal I'm finally wide awake. It's great starting the day with singing, in the choir with my confreres, the text of the Psalms on my lips. I forget myself in the process and look to God who created me and will accompany me through the day. The Psalms always show me new examples of how firmly I am anchored in my faith—nothing could do a better job of encouraging me and giving me energy at the start of the day.

Then the singing comes to an end. Together with the others, I leave the church and go through the cloisters heading for the refectory, our dining hall where we have breakfast together. It's a magnificent Roman morning; the sun has already risen, and its rays are warming up the cool morning air. Blackbirds are singing. I quietly whistle their melody, and one hops closer. She looks up, glances at me, and whirs away—I'm probably not the partner she had in mind.

As I enter the big hall of the refectory, my usual confidence and serenity has long set in. Nothing can shake me today. The working day can begin.

It might sound as if I still have big plans. But I don't live in the future. Nor, however, do I live in the past. I live in the present. I don't have the time—or any desire—to look back at my life and take stock. I've got better things to do than rehash old stories. It may sound crazy, but I still feel, at almost seventy-five, as if life is still ahead of me, endless.

An eighty-nine-year-old confrere from an Austrian monastery once said to me, "I still know why I get up every day." I feel the same way. As long as the spirit of optimism doesn't leave me, the best years are not in the past; and so far every new day instills in me the spirit of optimism—even if getting up in the morning now takes more willpower.

It's not as if I suppress thoughts about my death. I sometimes involuntarily ask myself at night, *Will you wake up again in the morning?* I sometimes think about how many years I've probably got left. (Of course the answer is different each time.)

This is not new. At thirty-seven, driving my little Fiat on the Italian highway from Rome to St. Ottilien after my election as archabbot, I suddenly thought, *What if you were snatched from life by a fatal accident right now?* I remember very well. It was a dazzlingly beautiful summer day; gorse and oleander bloomed in the highway's center strip. *This is splendid!* I thought—and suddenly imagined not living to see the end of the day. It didn't frighten me in any way, oddly enough. *You've had so many wonderful experiences in life so far*, I said to myself, *more than others have in seventy or eighty years*. I would have died then blessed and rich, gratefully satisfied with life. But I arrived safe and sound in St. Ottilien, and my life changed fundamentally.

No, the thought of death has been with me for a long time. In recent years, though, a certain uneasiness has crept in. The driving force of hope is gradually losing its power. The thought of the future no longer

consoles and encourages me as it used to. Dying is a possibility at any age, but the certainty of death is a new experience.

Even if my light still burns as brightly as before, I've only got a stump of candle left, and I can't hide that from myself. How long will it last? Another ten, at most fifteen, years? In any case, a meager stock, a pitiful remainder. And a strange feeling creeps over me.

Years ago, dying seemed easier. Perhaps you're more generous with your life when you feel you're drawing on unlimited resources; life feels more precious the less of it that remains.

Moderation seems quite appropriate where eating and drinking are concerned. For quite some time, I've contented myself with half of what I could eat, and I abstain almost entirely from alcohol. I accept these restrictions willingly because they increase my well-being, just as I enjoy using my new hearing aid, because it saves me from moments of extreme embarrassment. I repeatedly used to find myself dropping off in meetings.

The talk at meetings and conferences is usually in English or Italian, and mumbled, so I have to put twice as much effort into listening. I would be overcome by fatigue, and give meeting participants the uninspiring sight of a sleeping abbot primate. As I said, it was embarrassing, but now that's over. With my hearing aid, I stay wide awake even during the toughest meeting. It's become as natural to me as my glasses.

I'm happy to make this kind of concession to my age, but slowing down doesn't suit me. I want to work; I need to be creative. Some people consider me a workaholic. Maybe they're right. Sitting on the couch and watching TV would be a nightmare for me.

But neither do I have plans or targets—no "government program" or brilliant new idea about how the Benedictine order can be optimized

or restructured. I don't even have a concept—for the simple reason that throughout my monastic life, for a wide variety of reasons, I have found I never accomplish my original plan—things always turn out differently from what I want, imagine, or anticipate—and it is a good thing.

I get by better without a plan. I let myself drift—go with the flow in a way I've learned to trust. From my perspective, each task presents itself of its own accord—you could say it finds me.

Then it's up to me to deal with it—to recognize it, grasp it, and meet the challenge it represents. Does something need to be tackled and satisfactorily completed? Well then, let's get started—God doesn't make it easy for us. And when that task is finished, I start the next one. I'm delighted when the new task demands even more commitment, even more ingenuity. And under no circumstances do I rest until I've gotten a good result.

Meetings, conferences, and lectures in the United States, Israel, or India—long-distance flights, time differences, the constant change of climate, and on top of that, air-travel chaos, constant delays, the race to make up for lost time: it's exhausting.

It's rare that a long trip doesn't include cancellations or incidents; sometimes I feel like a juggler in the circus, only without an audience. For a conference of abbots in Chicago, a strike of Lufthansa pilots meant I had to change my booking. All right; I could fly through Washington instead of New York. In Washington, we landed one hour late. The usual irritatingly scrupulous American passport control cost me another two hours. When I reached the gate for the connecting flight to Chicago, boarding had just closed. It was futile to protest; in the States you can't appeal for sympathy like you can in Germany—the ground staff won't soften. So I had to find another flight, and I arrived in Chicago

at midnight instead of 4:00 PM. I then had a one-and-a-half-hour car ride. Finally, at two in the morning, there were no more obstacles to a refreshing sleep—at what was, after all, my usual time.

The next day I had appointments from morning to evening. The day after that, I had to go on to Savannah, Georgia, so this time I traveled by car to Minneapolis and took a plane back to Chicago, but that plane landed late, and of course I missed the connecting flight to Savannah.

When was the next flight? "No chance," I was told. "Certainly not today; all the flights are full." Really. It was 11:00 AM. I sat in the lounge of the airport in Chicago, opened my laptop, and started looking for flights myself. I discovered a flight from Charlotte to Savannah. *Well then.*

"Can you at least get me to Charlotte?" I asked the two ladies at the counter. They tapped away impassively at their keyboards, while my feeling of triumph rapidly faded until at last the face of one brightened—good news. In three hours there was a flight to Charlotte, and they put me at the top of the waiting list. *At the top—that has to work. Some passengers always cancel.* And so it was. A small odyssey, and I was in Savannah. Again at midnight.

A day in Savannah, then back to Munich via New York. The following evening, I was due to give a lecture in Münster, and all three hundred tickets were sold. *This time, nothing must intervene.* I arrived punctually at the airport in Savannah, boarded, stowed my carry-on luggage, and cheerfully sat down. And the plane didn't start. We finally took off after an hour-and-a-half delay, and when I looked at my watch as we came in to Newark airport, I saw I had just half an hour to catch the connecting flight. I was never going to make it—it's a huge airport.

Now I had to pull out all the stops. I took out my cell phone, called Lufthansa in Germany, explained my situation, and said, "Please ask

the staff at gate B61 to wait for me! I absolutely have to make my flight!" Lo and behold, they really did wait this time. The plane took off into the night sky over the Atlantic, en route to Munich with a contentedly smiling abbot primate on board—who, incidentally, arrived in Münster on time and gave his lecture feeling quite relaxed (but then had trouble stepping down from the podium).

So, yes, it's exhausting, and I rarely take breaks. But staying flexible mentally and physically, searching for new solutions, and taking on the unexpected is still for me what life is about. My previous achievements don't particularly interest me. What lies behind me is checked off like a to-do list; you crumple it up and throw in the wastebasket when everything's been done. In any case, we should beware of being too proud of our achievements—clinging to the past.

My heart is with the future of my order, and this attitude has always invigorated me. Recently someone unexpectedly submitted a proposal concerning our work at Sant'Anselmo, and I confess, at first I was not happy. *Please, not another new idea! For once, can't we just keep to what we agreed on long ago?* After considering it, though, I decided the idea had some merit. Without further ado, I embarked on implementing it, only to find it was some of the much younger confreres who were resisting change. So then, in addition to the work of making the changes, I had the hard work of persuading them.

Sometimes, though, I'm the one who's had enough. *Lord God, does it never end?* I moan. The next moment, God looks at me and says kindly, "Come on, keep going," and I obey. This has, if not exactly a dismaying effect on my schedule, at least a dizzying one—it is chock-full, with an unbroken sequence of lectures, trips, meetings, and quite unusual projects.

I am booked out twelve months in advance, and there are practically no free days. Thank goodness I have the experience of having had such schedules for years: I know that what can be done will be done, and what, despite my best intentions, I find I don't have the strength for will fall by the wayside.

What has always really annoyed me is something else entirely: constantly having to resist the well-intentioned advice to, at last, slow down is downright debilitating!

I know I am no Hercules. In my childhood, I was bedridden for a long time, and I was hopeless at sports—I was the one who ended up in the water when we had to jump over a ditch. Since early on, people have tried to turn me into a hypochondriac: "Slow down." "Don't overdo it." "Think of your health." This was the tune I was offered to dance to, and the refrain was always, "You can't do it; you'll never do it." This is the stupidest form of suggestion I know; rather than help in any way, it undermines your self-confidence, and eventually you do indeed fail.

In old age, the doom-laden chorus is getting louder and louder. After every long trip abroad I have to listen to the same words: "You're expecting too much of yourself." "Don't do this to yourself anymore." "Jet lag is doing you long-term harm." People even prophesy: "You're not going to last much longer—you're overtaxing yourself. If you keep this up, you're going to collapse." "Let go," they say. One of the most popular pieces of advice to the aging? "Treat yourself to a peaceful old age." The word is *retirement*.

I don't know what these admonishers understand about happiness. I don't deny that their concern is authentic, but everything in me resists this uninvited compassion, because it hides a fearful, despondent attitude—a gloomy pessimism that is always convinced that "this can only go wrong, it's bound to end badly."

Oddly enough, it's always the others who get ill. Those who take care of themselves. I, thank God, enjoy fairly stable health—to the surprise of the doubters. What many people probably can't understand is that I draw tremendous strength from my work—from the stresses and even from the misadventures. And steeplechasing is almost my favorite discipline, because after every unpleasant surprise—to my repeated amazement—my mind is suddenly crystal clear and operates calmly as if on automatic pilot, spitting out unexpected solutions. This was so in the past, and it is still the case.

Of course jet lag takes its toll. Of course sometimes pressure in my head prevents me from sleeping. Such small maladies are inevitable. But when faced with a great task, I get to not think about myself—just like a mother whose child cries at night doesn't think of herself. On the other hand, the energy I have to extend to deal with compassionate pessimism is a total waste.

I do find allies. One of them is St. Paul. He writes in his Letter to the Philippians, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13). He was not young when he wrote that. My second ally is the American swimmer Diana Nyad. At the age of sixty-four, she jumped into the sea in Cuba and came ashore in Florida fifty-three hours later after having swum 177 kilometers (110 miles) without stopping and without a shark cage. That impresses me. Because what counts is passion—and then you put up a good fight as long as it's at all possible.

3.

Greetings from Pink Floyd

I still have the words of an eighty-seven-year-old lady in my ears. "As a young person," she said, "you have no idea what it's like to be old." That's probably true. For many years, age remains something abstract. I assume this is, at least is in part, because we don't want to know too much about it. We recoil from this final chapter—it's just not the most attractive period of life, and the thought of it is at least uncomfortable and embarrassing, if not scary. It's enough to know that being old probably won't be much fun.

So you don't lose any sleep over it. And when the time comes, when people on the street look past you or through you as if you were invisible, you tell yourself in desperation, "I've nothing to fear, everyone's as old as he or she feels." This wards off the worst for the moment. Surveys have found old people feel on average ten years younger. Some even twenty or thirty years.

Of course that's nonsense. The body is counting the years, and it's an incorruptible chronicler. It counts methodically, with no intent to conceal true age (in most cases, at least; there are lucky exceptions). The writer Uwe Timm is probably nearer to the truth with his practical definition: "As long as you can still put a sandal on while standing on one leg you're not yet old."

There is some truth in the comforting idea of perceived age, though, because body and soul experience time differently. While the body obediently follows the law of impermanence, more or less punctually presenting the corresponding signs of deterioration, the soul measures itself by a different standard.

It changes; it expands or shrinks, matures or withers, becomes more beautiful and rich or uglier and poor. But it doesn't grow old; it's timeless. It absorbs all we've experienced over time and all the ages we've passed through, and it leads a life of its own beyond space and time through a colorful mix of childhood dreams and the hopes, disappointments, experiences, and insights of later years.

The years don't challenge the soul at all. If all we had was our soul, resolutely vibrant, cheerful, and full of a zest for life, we wouldn't have to speak of age at all. We would speak of fulfillment and repletion. At worst, we would speak of emptiness.

So, aging is not a simple matter. Being old is certainly not as threatening and scary as we're lead to imagine. From a psychological point of view at least, it's the most exciting period of life, as body and soul slowly diverge and the body increasingly gives rise to worries while the soul's appetite for life goes on unabated.

In other words, just as the evening of an ordinary working day is a different experience from the morning and afternoon—relaxation and increasing tiredness for the body, pleasure and fulfillment in the company of old and new friends for the soul—so the so-called evening of life also has its own character.

I propose seeing old age not as the beginning of the end, but as a fully valid third period of life, in which our earthly existence shows itself in a new and by no means repellent way. The duration of old age alone justifies this view. If everything goes well, after retirement we can expect another twenty, perhaps even thirty years—childhood

and youth are shorter, so even in terms of quantity, it's no pitiful remainder. And it's in these years that the timeless and ageless part of us really develops.

Think about it: Your struggles are behind you. You've weathered the times of uncertainty. Trials and tribulations are largely a thing of the past. Hormones have more or less settled down. The pressures you suffered under for decades have been released. You are free, free as you've never been before in your life; you finally have time, and you know what to do with it. One person will do a doctorate in the history of art, another will get his hunting license, another will lie on a lounger in the garden smelling a newly opened rose; many want to travel to the foreign countries they've known only from business trips if at all.

The fact that this third phase will certainly end in death isn't relevant. To those in their seventies, at least, surveys have shown that they are enjoying their lives and are more satisfied than any other age group. It seems that everyone else has the wrong idea about age.

In any case, what these old people say about themselves makes total sense to me. I am one of them, even if as a monk and abbot primate, I'm a rather unusual example. I will describe how I'm enjoying the so-called retirement years.

This summer I had a two-week holiday in a monastery on Lake Wolfgang. (My annual leave is usually shorter and sometimes canceled altogether.) While I was there, I received an invitation to the Tollwood Festival in Munich, and I must admit I didn't know exactly what it would be like: a kind of Woodstock but lasting for weeks and without the mud? It didn't matter; the offer to perform with my band in the Andechser tent was appealing.

Well, I said to myself, *if Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger, and others from the glorious age of rock music, with their lined faces, still dare to perform, you can do it too—in any case they won't have to get you off any drugs first.* I accepted the invitation.

Someone drove me from Austria to Munich. "Oh yes, you're the father from the mountain," said the security guard at the entrance to the Tollwood grounds with a glance into our car. Apparently, he'd seen the television interview I did on the summit of the Dürrnbachhorn with Werner Schmidbauer. "Tell you what, I'll let you through here, then you won't have so far to walk to the tent."

I already felt at home, even though I'd never been here before. The guard signaled his colleagues, so the way was open all the way to the Andechser tent, and after a short sound check (the other band members had arrived earlier) we were ready for our concert, two hours of rock music in the tent from 7:30 to 9:30. Although, I have to admit I sometimes left the stage. A concert that long is too much for me these days, plus I don't have the time to rehearse enough songs to fill an evening program. I'm lucky if I find two or three hours at Sant'Anselmo a few days before our performance to put on our CD and rehearse my parts on guitar and flute. So I played in two of the four sets, and my band did the rest on their own.

Apart from the singer, our band always has the same members it did in the good old days when I was archabbot of St. Ottilien and the others were students at our school. That's a long time ago now; my fellow musicians have also grown older, but unlike me, they aren't aware of it yet.

And it's still tremendous fun for everyone. For example, we did a performance under the southern sky in front of a large audience at an arena in Pescara, Italy, dubbed "Pink Floyd Sends Greetings from Pompeii," which was unforgettable. As was our show soon afterward in Seeon, a magnificent monastery on a lake island in Bavaria. Seeon

has made a name for itself as an event location, and I was invited to give a lecture there to the managers of the Ingolstadt hospital. "Bring your band along," they said. After the talk at dinner in the magnificent, colorful refectory, I still had my doubts about playing in this setting, wondering if rock and Baroque really went together. But a little later the set got going, and I enjoyed playing as usual, and the experience was a real miracle.

That's what the head of trauma called it anyway—it was absolutely unbelievable how all differences disappeared immediately, all formalities forgotten, all inhibitions gone. Everyone danced until they were ready to drop: consultants, lawyers, administrative staff, the whole management team, men and women, all mixed up together. Rock and Baroque do go together after all.

This was followed the next evening with a performance in Carinthia, Austria, inside the venerable walls of St. Paul, where on the following morning I would be saying the celebratory Mass and preaching, before flying back to Rome in the evening.

Let's catch our breath. I know the whispers that are going around. From one direction I hear the heavy sigh, "He'll never fit in with the rest of us." From another the warning, "Be careful, you're the abbot primate; please behave accordingly." And then there are my primary-school classmates, who to this very day visit me in Rome from time to time and exclaim with amazement, "Werner [my birth name], you haven't changed a bit!" What can I say?

Yes, it's probably true—no one who's known me for a long time will notice any big difference today. I've never been antisocial; my constant activity isn't a gift of old age. And while it's true I'm the abbot primate, the expression "befitting one's social status" has never meant anything to me.

How I go about my work, how I define my role and how I shape it, is my decision, and anything that could possibly qualify as "unseemly" I clarify with the Lord Jesus Christ: he's my model.

Of course I'm going to make mistakes, but I don't lose sleep over it, because I know nobody's perfect, and I don't need to be either. Christ himself appointed the far-from-perfect Peter as the leader of his followers, a person who even disowned him when it came to the crunch. So we can go wrong, but we shouldn't let ourselves be influenced by the worriers. I'm reminded of a grave inscription in the Campo Verano, a cemetery in northern Rome, which says, *Non flectar*, "I will not bend."

"Slow down a bit," some say. "Please tone it down," say others. And I say, "Come with me." Come, for example, to Altenburg Abbey close to Vienna for the interreligious song event. The first benefit concert was held there in 2012 for restoration of the nearby Jewish cemetery that was devastated in 1938. The abbot of Altenburg had urgently asked me to participate. "We need you, and don't forget your flute!" Oh no, another appointment. But miraculously I found a gap in my schedule, and I traveled there without knowing what awaited me.

With four hundred visitors, every seat in the monastery's library was filled. I was in good company. The singer was the chief rabbi of Vienna, a man with a sense of humor and a powerful voice; another rabbi played the keyboard, the Protestant bishop of Vienna was drummer, and a gentleman from the local finance ministry was saxophonist—completing the spectrum, as he had left the Church.

Behind us was the boys choir of Altenburg, and we gave it all we had, playing Yiddish songs and gospel songs, and receiving enthusiastic applause at the end of every number. Afterward, when everyone was standing around in the richly decorated, brightly lit library, still suffused with the music, a high-ranking politician from Lower Austria came up

to me and said, "You know, Abbot Primate, our church in Austria is at such a low ebb. If it wasn't for you Benedictines. . . . You're the enlivening element."

The enlivening element? I am grateful to hear that. It's exactly what I want to be. It's exactly what I wish for my order as a whole—to have a stimulating effect on society, in all the places in the world where we're represented: this is one of the three great visions that guides me.

To achieve this goal we must of course be alive ourselves, and this requires abandoning well-worn tracks. I can't determine the pace of the world, I have no influence on the great upheavals of the time, but we mustn't isolate ourselves from these changes and lose contact with the world, with life, with other people. After all, what are we here for? For the world, life, and other people.

I think my continuous connection with the world of rock music has had very positive consequences. First of course for myself, because I love rock music, and after all these years it still epitomizes vitality and zest for life. Second, however, because I reach many people through this music.

For example, in Barcelona, I was to give a lecture to the executives of an international corporation. In the introductory session the moderator told them about our band's performance supporting the legendary Deep Purple. When they didn't quite believe him, he referred to the YouTube entry "Deep Purple mit Abtprimas Notker Wolf—Smoke on the Water." (Yes, we played the song together.)

As if on cue, all the participants took out their smartphones and were too busy tapping and swiping away to listen to my words of welcome, but with this I had won them over. Abbot Primate Notker Wolf supporting Deep Purple? On stage with Ian Gillan and Steve Morse? An introduction like this greatly increases receptiveness. It breaks with convention, makes it easier to talk to people, and spares me the usual small talk.

Sometimes the rock music even merges informally with the Christian message. During our Tollwood performance in the Andechser tent, a banner with the words "Highway to Heaven" hung above the stage, a combination of the AC/DC title "Highway to Hell" and the Led Zeppelin classic "Stairway to Heaven"; I would never have worked it out myself, but of course it fit superbly. And many of the songs we play are original compositions and reflect our origins at the St. Ottilien mission monastery.

My favorite song is "My Best Friend," and if you listen carefully, you'll realize that we're singing about Jesus Christ, the only one who doesn't abandon you if all your other friends let you down. To play it safe, I introduce such songs myself, also so no one in the audience thinks my black Benedictine habit is just a particularly crass stage outfit.

Travels abroad, stage performances, meetings, conferences, lectures, interviews, TV appearances, magazine columns, books, and building projects: admittedly some things in the repertoire traditionally belong neither to the responsibilities of an abbot primate nor to the role of an almost-seventy-five-year-old.

One side effect is the challenge of managing my schedule. This involves never-ending tinkering: appointments constantly have to be changed, inserted, or added. Because of special requests and spontaneous inquiries, half of it ends up being improvisation, so no one else could possibly be expected to get their head around it. That's why I take my schedule into my own hands.

Another side effect is amateur psychologists having reasons to whisper about me. "He needs it," they say. "He can't do without it. He's determined to make a difference and leave his mark on the history of the

order. He can't stop for fear of losing his importance." Or, "He's running away from himself."

It's true that I have a duty as abbot primate. It's also true that I see it as my greatest and finest duty to open as many doors to the future as possible for my order. That would scarcely be possible if I didn't keep on the move, respond to contemporary trends, try out new and perhaps even unheard of things, while at the same time giving an example of the vitality I wish for my order. We've both reached a certain age, my order and myself—in the case of the former it's 1,500 years. Wear and tear are not alien to us.

But that shouldn't be a reason for either the order or me to slacken. Of course no one is irreplaceable. *But as long as we live, we're needed.* That is a possible answer to the questions confronting anyone in the third phase of life. We may be unimportant as individuals, but the ideas we promote, the efforts we make out of love or conscientiousness, are not.

We're needed. And it's wonderful to be needed. It may be quite strenuous, as in my case. But when people ask me, "How do you manage it? How can you stand it?" the answer is simple: Joy is my lifeblood—joy in my work, joy of meeting people, joy in music. Also joy in nature—the different shades of green of the oaks, pines, cypresses, and olive trees in the southern sunlight. Joy in the sea I like to sit by and swim in. Joy in the warm golden tone of the evening light flooding into my study.

And especially joy in the Liturgy of the Hours with my confreres, and in the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, when I unite myself with Christ in order to live from this unity. The memory of his death and resurrection renews my own hope of life each time.

Joy makes you free. So it doesn't bother me that people always need things from me, that I'm assailed and under pressure from all sides. Passionate commitment lets you make any work your own, even when

it's imposed or unavoidable. The freedom arises when you tackle work with joy. On the other hand, if you work morosely and halfheartedly, plod listlessly through your quota of tasks, you'll always feel confined and pressured.

So, once I've put my mind to a task, my yes is always 100 percent. I throw myself so completely into the work that it gives me, and others, pleasure, and people say, "He made the project his own; he never wanted it any other way."

I also believe that fundamentally liking people—all people, wherever you encounter them, on the doorstep in Rome or in China—will keep you young. You don't come off like many older people, for whom the pleasure in meeting foreigners is spoiled by xenophobia. The fear that what is different could be dangerous is known to increase in some people with age. They shut themselves away, isolate themselves while on journeys, fear unfamiliar food and hygiene methods, and prefer to keep solely to their familiar and extremely clean surroundings.

That's not my cup of tea. Every day people approach me because I also approach them. It's "Good day, Abbot Primate. I know you from television," as I'm getting off the boat on Lake Wolfgang; or, "Look, there's the traveling monk," when I check in at the airport (even though I'm in civilian clothing); or, "I have an audiobook by you. I like it so much that sometimes I stay sitting in my car at the end of a trip, so caught up in it that I can't turn it off," when I'm in makeup for a TV appearance.

In these moments, politicians would feel flattered. What I feel is like someone coming home to his people, protected and surrounded by the whole human family. I'm indifferent to my prominence—it leaves me cold—but I enjoy being welcome, being at home with people, being at home on this earth.