

The Inside Story

The Surprising
Pleasures of Living
in an Aging Body

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Introduction

I woke this morning to balmy air, a clear sky, and a burning desire to head out with the dog to the eucalyptus-shaded trail near my home in the Berkeley hills. As I always do these days, I first stretch the kinks out of my knees, ankles, and back. Then I carefully make my way down the dusty, rutted hill at the start of the trail, placing each foot firmly. The light is filtering through the cathedral of trees in a particularly glorious way this morning, and as I look up and lock into that beauty, my foot hits a small rock and I lurch. “Watch your footing!” I hiss to myself under my breath. This sense of cautiousness is with me more these days. I’m in pretty good shape, but at seventy-four I know I have to watch it. I’m not the invincible forty-five-year-old I used to be. I can feel age creeping slowly through my body—nothing major, but a bit slower on the uptake, a tad weaker, an ankle that acts up if I don’t keep it strong, a bit less sure of my balance.

The facts are incontrovertible. I was born and will age and die like every other human being and every other living thing on the planet. No exceptions. I have no choice about this. How I age, however, is where I have some choice, although there will also be plenty of surprises and no say whatsoever about the outcome. As I gaze up at the eucalyptus trees, which, like me, are aging by living, I know that my sanest choice is not to protest or deny the inevitable but to get to know and make friends with my aging body. I need to develop a new, healthier relationship with my older body; or, more accurately, I need to develop a relationship with my *new* body, my new aging body.

When not on the hiking trail, I have, for the past thirty-five years, been thinking deeply about women’s bodies. As a clinical psychologist,

I've been teaching, training, publishing articles, and doing psychotherapy centered on body-based difficulties, like eating disorders, as well as aging. The "body sense" is what I'm most interested in—the body we feel and experience *from within*. I'm particularly interested in promoting the integration of mind and body, which allows us to have the invigorating sense of actually *living* in the body, what we call "embodiment." Western civilization has been, until very recently, so strangely focused on the mind to the exclusion of the body, when, in truth, the body is the foundation of all of our experience from birth until death.

It is now scientifically established that our minds are rooted in our bodies. Our minds are formed through sensing and feeling our moving bodies as they interact with the environment, especially the important people around us. Our emotional awareness, our sense of well-being, our very sense of "self" is created from our inner body sensations! In other words, the future of "you" depends on how well you attend to and process all the crucial information streaming from within your body.

Yet, hardly any scientists or scholars are asking how our body experience affects how we *age*—even though the body is the visible evidence, bellwether, and "messenger" of aging! The aging female body, as women *experience* it—whether comfortably or uncomfortably, positively or negatively—is still routinely ignored, rendering it irrelevant or unthinkable. I passionately believe that our inner body experience is of utmost importance as we age, and I will urge you to develop your body awareness as the best way to get to know, accept, and enjoy your older body.

In this book, we will look at aging through a focus on the body, based on cutting-edge neuroscience and psychology, which will transform your view of your aging body and your later years. How do we know we have a body? How does the body sense develop? How do we create our emotions out of body sensations? How do we develop body awareness? How does our body sense change as we age? What happens to our sense of self when we don't feel comfortable in our body, especially as we age?

One of my interviewees told me, with a little smile, "I'm so much more comfortable in my body at sixty-eight than I was in my twenties or thirties, even though I look older." She was describing the pleasurable experience of being embodied, at home in her body, sensing her body from within.

What allows my interviewee to override the dictates of our youth-obsessed, image-saturated culture? What makes it possible for this particular woman to feel comfortable in her body, while so many of us feel fear, sadness, anger, or shame in this ageist, Botoxing, tummy-tucking society? Why are so many of us so *disconnected* from our bodies—so focused on how our bodies look rather than how they feel? Why do we continue to focus on our appearance rather than our experience *even as we age*, when we become more physically vulnerable and must take excellent care of our somatic selves? These are essential, unaddressed questions, which I'll explore in this book, as we begin to reflect on our sense of ourselves from the inside out.

This book is not about trying to look fifty when you're seventy or thirty when you're fifty or training to run marathons at eighty—unless you're the outlier who really wants to and can. It's not a book about trying to stop the clock. It is, instead, a book about forging a healthier relationship with your *actual* maturing body—a relationship not of fear, hatred, or shame but of respect, appreciation, tenderness, and, yes, even love. I want to help you create an older yet still positive and vital sense of your body that you can live with for the rest of your life.

I believe we older women are actually *primed* to experience our bodies more deeply and pleurably. Our bodies are quieter and slower. There is less dramatic action inside the theater of our bodies without the cyclical changes of our younger years. There are also certain brain changes that come with aging that allow our bodies to become less reactive, particularly to negative stimuli, and give rise to a greater sense of well-being. Aging can thus open up a transformational and pleasurable new capacity for body awareness, allowing many women to become truly embodied only in older age.

But . . . are you perhaps thinking at this point that this is a perfect book for your mother or grandmother and doesn't really apply to you? Think again if you're forty-five or over. As a perimenopausal woman, you're entering the second half of your life, a time when you should assess where you are and where you're going. And if you're beyond or well beyond menopause, there's no time like the present to rethink your relationship with your body. How comfortable you are *with* and *in* your aging body has a huge impact on how you feel about yourself as you grow older.

I am at the leading edge of the Baby Boomer generation, which includes almost forty million American women aged fifty-seven to seventy-five. Driven by the aging of the Boomers, the number of people over sixty-five has grown by over a *third* since 2010 and will make up 20 percent of the nation's population by 2030, compared with 13 percent in 2010. The fastest-growing age group is eighty-five years and older. We older folks make up a powerful new demographic, with women increasingly outnumbering men.¹

We're living longer and longer, and we need help negotiating the profoundly altered sense of the body that comes with aging. We feel both like the same person we've always been and yet remarkably different. Sometimes it's almost eerie—that woman in the mirror doesn't match the one we see in our mind's eye. We have to *learn* how to age—from confronting our mortality to the nitty-gritty of learning to live in a changing body. Our society offers few “instructions” for these years, unlike in earlier stages when our “tasks” (like school, marriage, child-rearing, and career) are laid out for us.² What are the tasks of older age? What do we need to learn to live wisely? How can we make peace with—even *friends* with—our older bodies? While I don't want to downplay the real and sometimes difficult physical and mental disabilities that can accompany aging, I do want to show that we have a lot of choice about how to guide our precious bodies through the unpredictable terrain of our later years, changes you might start seeing as early as age forty-five.

To do this, we need to have a sense that we are standing shoulder to shoulder with other women going through the same process, who will “tell it like it is.” Here is the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska talking about how her poetry was changed by the upheaval of World War II. She could just as easily be describing the way we are changed by aging: “It was not possible to use the same language as before. We all felt the need to use a very simple, very brash language. We wanted poetry without artifice.”³

I include throughout the book the “simple, brash” language of the thirty women I have interviewed, as well as my patients and friends, all of whom range in age from forty-eight to ninety-one years and in ethnic, socioeconomic, and health status. There are many different paths through the tangled aging terrain, and I will let these women speak for themselves

about how they've experienced their bodies from childhood to the present and how they've thrown off the negative, constricting body messages from earlier years, like a coat that no longer fits, and found renewed pride and pleasure in their bodies as they age. I acknowledge the real and sometimes difficult physical and mental disabilities that can accompany aging and have interviewed women with both with lifelong and recent disabilities. My fervent hope is that my book will help women of diverse abilities, circumstances, outlooks, and gender identities create an accepting yet still vibrant sense of their older bodies.

Because it's so easy to think of our aging bodies as a jumble of aches and pains and sags and losses, I will endeavor to help us understand and appreciate all the extraordinary things the body does for us beyond those physical functions that can become compromised as we age. When we appreciate the breadth and majesty of our body's offerings, we counteract our society's obsessive preoccupation with physical appearance.

One of the most amazing bodily processes is what's called "interoception," the science of how we sense ourselves from within. Internal sensory signals streaming from all over the body get integrated in different parts of our brains until they are ultimately mapped in a special part of our cortex called the "insula," which gives us a sense of the condition of our entire body, which, in turn, allows us to feel emotion and maintain our sense of "self."⁴ The exciting new science of interoception has the power to transform our vision of what we are and who we can be as we get older. Strong "interoceptive awareness" also helps us take good care of our bodies as we age. Our evolving understanding of the body's central role in "neuroplasticity"—the ability of the brain to change and grow—also has wide repercussions for older age.

In our current blatantly ageist, media-saturated culture, the ideal twenty-first-century Western woman is perennially stuck—like Dorian Gray—in an eighteen- to twenty-three-year-old body. Even if you're a vibrant forty-eight, you're seen by many as "an older woman." What is new and particularly insidious is that the body is now viewed as a crucial personal "project"⁵ to be honed, altered, and transformed through exercise, dieting, cosmetic surgery, injections, implants, peels, and, more recently, Photoshop. The number of cosmetic surgeries in the United States more

than doubled between 2000 and 2015, and the biggest increase is in those under thirty who are opting for “early maintenance” to avoid larger procedures later on.⁶ Why is our society so fixated on the young female body? Why do we seem to need to control and alter women’s bodies? It’s a difficult time in history to feel comfortable in a body of *any* age, much less an older body. My aim is to disrupt this sorry scenario and help us take our bodies back.

How can we manage the multiple losses of aging without disappointment, anger, disgust, and shame? I will urge you to stop focusing on the “outside body,” which others *see*—the one you may think is too fat, too wrinkled, or too saggy—and move your attention to what I call the “inside body,” which you sense and feel. When you pay more attention to your body sensations—such as the ache in your lower back, which signals it’s time to rest—you actually build more neural connections in those parts of your brain that monitor internal sensations and thus become more adept at living in and nurturing your body. The burgeoning new body science helps counter our culture’s terrible fear of aging, instead transforming our vision of who we can be as we age.

Our fear and hatred of aging is part of our much broader cultural problem—what I call the “triumphing over the body” narrative, which is related to the “triumphing over nature,” “triumphing over aging,” and, ultimately, “triumphing over death” narratives. I think of actor Carrie Fisher, at age fifty-five, dancing with great effort up a ladder in heels in her one-woman show, “Wishful Drinking.” Women’s narratives, we shall see, usually have to do with conquering the *body*. And we keep trying to find “solutions” to the “problem” of aging, as if it were a disorder. I particularly love this passage from Ram Dass: “It is as if we are urged to fight over and over again a losing battle against time, pitting ourselves against natural law. How ghastly this is, and how inhumane, toward both ourselves and the cycle of life. It reminds me of someone rushing around the fields in the autumn painting the marvelous gold and red leaves with green paint.”⁷

Triumphing over the body is not a good narrative for us as we age. It’s not a good idea to ignore or subjugate our bodies at the very time that they are becoming more vulnerable and need special attention and care.

We need, instead, to develop a more respectful and loving relationship with our bodies, and I offer strategies to help you inhabit your older body with more ease and equanimity.

We will also delve into the nitty-gritty of how to live well in an aging body. I lay out the scientific findings on the benefits and the “how to” of increasing our body awareness through Eastern body practices like meditation and yoga and breath work. The benefits are stunning, including better emotional regulation, sharper concentration, greater empathy, firmer emotional “boundaries,” and more overall happiness. There is a direct physiological link, research shows, between being aware of your body and being able to regulate your body functions and restore your physical and emotional health. I will show you how body awareness made me more able to “fix” parts of my body that weren’t functioning properly. Finally, I will encourage you to really *enjoy* your body and offer suggestions about how to embrace the distinctive beauty of every age and discover and embody your unique attractiveness.

It was striking to me that all of the women I interviewed for this book told me, without being asked, that their lives had gotten *better* in many ways with age. Burgeoning research shows that aging spurs new psychological development in later life, including greater happiness, emotional regulation, and optimism, with age eighty-two being the year of greatest happiness!⁸ It is also my strong belief that the shedding of the veils that accompanies a true encounter with our mortality allows us to truly accept the reality of our lives—including the reality of our aging bodies—in a way not before possible.⁹ Seeing ourselves as part of the larger cycle of life allows us to feel more profoundly connected to other human beings and the natural world. These new capacities do not make up for, but do soften and buffer, the many losses of the aging process. If we’re clear-eyed about our mortality, confront our fears, and settle comfortably into our bodies, we can move from a focus on who we *were* to who we’re *becoming*.

Imagine this. What if we became part of a movement to transform our society’s dismal view of aging? Our older generations have successfully advocated for the rights of women and people of every color, sexual and gender orientation, and disability. But the universal human

process of *aging* remains a human rights frontier! What if we could help usher in a different view of our aging bodies, one more like that in Asia, where elders are not expected to have youthful bodies and are treated with admiration and celebration?

This book will help get us there. When you grasp that your bodily, “lived” experience is the very foundation of your self-awareness, emotional life, and well-being, you’ll appreciate it more and attend to it more carefully. When you assimilate the burgeoning science on the benefits of meditation, yoga, and breath work, you’ll become more motivated to pursue these transformative body practices. As you get more comfortable with and in your maturing body, you’ll be better able to face the perfectly normal process of aging and death. When you learn about the multiple, surprising *benefits* of growing older, you can challenge our society’s profound ageism (including your own) and see your last stage of life as an essential and illuminating one. I invite you to join me in creating a more positive, even proud, sense of your aging body, as you delve into *the inside story* of your life.

Chapter 1

Living in the Body

The studio in North Berkeley was small, steamy, and dimly lit, yet the air was alive with energy. The women around me, in their fifties, sixties, and seventies, were stretching and laughing, their powerful, bare arms and shoulders glowing in the soft light. Their voices resonated deep in their chests; they stood erect, with straight spines and heads held high. They radiated health and joy. They were magnificent! What was going on here? I felt as if I had landed on another planet inhabited by superwomen.

Earlier in the week, I had signed up for a class for older women on “strengthening the pelvic floor,” and, somehow, I had ended up in a class filled with master yoga teachers! As I unrolled my mat and sat down, I found myself stealing glances at a powerfully built woman in a lime-green leotard who seemed to move with no effort at all. Years later, I can still see her and feel the energy of that room. By slowly and radically training her body over time, she had actually changed her body, as well as her presence, her energy, and her very being.

This experience, from more than a decade ago, made a huge impression on me. I felt so awed, yet so different and so removed from these powerful women. Yes, as a kid I’d been active in sports in school, and as an adult I’ve done running, tennis, skiing, swimming, workouts, yoga, and lots of hiking. But I had never really taken my body as seriously as my mind—except for its appearance, of course. I hadn’t conceived of my body as something to be deeply listened to, taken care of, and carefully

developed. I didn't yet know that feeling rooted in my body in an ongoing way was crucial to my sense of well-being. I felt such admiration for those yoga teachers, who had so deliberately and devotedly dedicated themselves to their bodies.

I've also had my lifelong disappointments with my body, of course—too “boyish,” not curvy enough, hands and feet too wide, hair too frizzy, and so forth—and it certainly didn't help that my mother never seemed comfortable with her own sexuality. Doubtless you, like most women, have your own issues with your body. Was your mom always putting you on the scale? Or maybe when you'd walk into the living room all dressed up, your dad wouldn't even notice you? Did your brother and his friends call you “meatball”? Have you spent your life dreading seeing your reflection in shop windows? Or maybe you had terrible period cramps or a particularly difficult childbirth, from which your body never seemed to recover. Or you experienced sexual abuse or physical abuse or traumatic injuries or surgeries, so now your body feels like a dangerous place to inhabit. Perhaps when your teenage daughter became anorexic, you could recognize in her something of your own hatred of your body. Or maybe you saw your mother injure her back and then, following doctor's orders, put on a back brace and slowly descend into disability, which she called “getting old.”

No wonder you came to see your body as something to be rejected or ignored. No wonder you developed a fundamental *mind-body disconnect*. So then, perhaps, you focused more exclusively on academic or workplace achievement or social status, and you've never thought very much about your physical body. It just operates silently in the background. And when the yoga teacher says, “activate your abs,” you have no idea what she's talking about or how to do it. Or perhaps you did finally begin to pay attention to your body when you sprained your knee and had to go to physical therapy and learned more about how your body is put together (like how a hip misalignment caused your knee injury), and you wished that you had understood all that earlier. The fact is that when most of us were growing up, our physical bodies *as we experienced them* (as opposed to our appearance) were not really focused on or valued. If you're a Boomer or older, there were few intramural sports for girls, and no one really “went to the gym” outside of school, nor did we do Eastern