

**Johann Christoph Arnold**

*Foreword by Cardinal Seán O'Malley*

# Rich *in* Years

*Finding  
Peace and  
Purpose  
in a  
Long Life*



# Acclaim

**Marva J. Dawn** *author, Being Well When We're Ill*

Using profound and stimulating stories, Arnold welcomes us into an elegant fabric of elderly life, abundant with significance. I know you will find this book spiritually enriching.

**Sr. Carol Keehan** *president, Catholic Health Association*

This book gently invites us to reflect on the gift of aging more than the challenge of aging, and reminds us in a wonderfully consoling way that we age in the care of our gracious God.

**Dr. Megan Best** *bioethicist and palliative care practitioner*

How refreshing to read a book that describes the enrichment that comes with the passing of time. With the author we can celebrate the joys of imperfection; the importance of a sense of humor as we age; and the importance of giving thanks for what our years have given us. This is timely wisdom.

**Tim Costello** *chief executive, World Vision Australia*

Arnold is a trusted fellow traveler and guide. His book encouraged me to reflect on my own journey, and I am excited about my future. I hope that it will have the same impact on you.

**Fleming Rutledge** *author, The Undoing of Death*

What a wonderful book! For those who care about their elders, it provides a treasury of wisdom. For those of us facing the years of declining powers, this is a gold mine of encouragement. I will refer to this book often and recommend it to others.

**Cardinal Cassidy** *president emeritus, PCPCU, the Vatican*

I have found much in these pages for reflection and comfort and hope this book will reach many who are in need of such consolation and understanding as the years mount up.

**Richard J. Foster** *author, Celebration of Discipline*  
*Rich in Years* is rich in wisdom, rich in courage, rich in hope. The people we meet in these pages and the stories they tell all build in us a confident assurance that God is with us every step of our journey.

**Ian Harper** *professor emeritus, University of Melbourne*  
The key to finishing our days well, writes Arnold, is to cultivate thankfulness for each new day and to devote our time to the love and service of others. Wise words indeed, and especially comforting for those whose days are numbered – and isn't that all of us?

**Catherine Wiley** *founder, Catholic Grandparents Association*  
An inspirational read for grandparents and indeed people of all ages. It deals sensitively with so many issues relating to aging and infirmity that people do not like to talk about, but really should. I found *Rich in Years* beautiful, helpful, and full of love.

**Stephen Judd** *chief executive, HammondCare*  
Arnold does us all a great service by encouraging us to see aging as a part of the normal progress of life. Its challenges are to be faced with hope and in community rather than alone and in despair. This book is full of wisdom, encouragement, sadness and joy.

**Hashim Garrett** *speaker, Breaking the Cycle*  
Reading this book is rewarding but hazardous – you will need to invest in a box of tissues as well. The introduction alone made me reach for them. Powerful.

**Steve Auty** *chief executive, Pilgrims Hospices*  
*Rich in Years* does not shy away from the difficult aspects of aging – loss of faculties, health issues, loneliness, and facing the end of life. But its wise insights, often told through touching real-life stories, ring true and point the way to a more hopeful and humane path for older people and their families and caregivers.

# Rich in Years

This is a preview. Get entire book here.

# Rich in Years

*Finding Peace and Purpose  
in a Long Life*

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Johann Christoph Arnold



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*My wife, Verena, and I dedicate this book  
to our parents, Heinrich and Annemarie Arnold  
and Hans and Margrit Meier. Because both these couples  
remained faithful in marriage and faithful to Jesus,  
their lives were richly fulfilled into old age,  
and touched thousands of others.*

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# Foreword

*by Cardinal Seán O'Malley*

**I**N THIS BOOK, Johann Christoph Arnold has once again offered us a translation of the meaning of God's love for us through all the days of our lives. Here he shares with us a meditation on what Teilhard de Chardin called "passive diminishment" – the human experience of aging and suffering.

What's remarkable in these pages is how Arnold unifies so many of the strands that run through his previous books. For example, he expands on his book on marriage and human sexuality – *Sex, God and Marriage* – by describing the love of husband and wife that is both within history and yet simultaneously related to God's eternal love.

Similarly, he builds on his book *Why Forgive?*, which focuses on the centrality of forgiveness and

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mercy as the basis of peace, reminding us of the mercy that we each receive. He calls us to allow that mercy to work in us by forgiving others, and so enter into the life of eternity.

Crucially, Arnold also highlights the importance of prayer: “Whatever time on earth we have, we should use it to lead others to a deeper, more prayerful relationship with God. This is perhaps the greatest gift we can give.”

Arnold’s work thus reflects the heart of Pope Francis’s first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* (“The Light of Faith”). Here Pope Francis adopts the work of Pope Benedict XVI while adding his own insights to his predecessor’s important engagement with Scripture and tradition, stating:

There is an urgent need to see once again that faith is a light. For once the flame of faith dies out, all other lights begin to dim. The light of faith is unique, since it is capable of illuminating every aspect of human existence. A light this powerful cannot come from ourselves but from a more primordial source: in a word it must come from God...Faith, received from

God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time.

In keeping with this vision, the Roman Catholic Church is now embarking on the “new evangelization” – a process of renewal through the Holy Spirit’s gifts, leading to an invigoration of our witness to the gospel. As Pope Benedict has reminded us, this renewal is closely linked to the call to unity among all Jesus’ followers, across denominational boundaries:

The spiritual poverty of many of our contemporaries, who no longer perceive the absence of God from their life as a deprivation, constitutes a challenge to all Christians. In this context, we believers in Christ are asked to return to the essential, to the heart of our faith, to bear witness together to the world to the living God, that is, to a God who knows and loves us, under whose gaze we live; of a God who expects the response of our love in everyday life. (Address to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, November 15, 2012)

It is a joy to be able to acknowledge in Johann Christoph Arnold’s book a manifestation of what

Pope Francis and Pope Benedict describe. The work of Pastor Arnold and the community to which he belongs, the Bruderhof, is a testimony to the bond of faith that we as Christians share.

*Cardinal Seán Patrick O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap.  
Archbishop of Boston*

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## Preface

*by Rolland G. Smith*

**Y**EARS AGO I did a television interview with Ruth Gordon, the actress, and her husband Garson Kanin. They were in their mid-seventies at the time. I asked them, “What is the hardest thing for you two as you move into your senior years?” In unison they said, “Losing your friends.” And then Ruth said to me, “I would encourage all old people to make friends of various generations – ten years younger, twenty, thirty, forty. Make friends; be a friend.”

I think that is wonderful advice. As I age (I am now in my seventies, like Johann Christoph Arnold), I find that I have some difficulty relating to my teenage grandchildren. So I always look for the connection between what was and what is now. I find it interesting when my grandkids call me up and say,

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“You experienced such and such. What was it like? We are studying that in history class.” All children love stories, so this sharing is extremely important to create a commonality between the younger generation and the older.

One of the low points of our Western culture was when we decided that a three-car garage was more important than a room for an aging aunt or uncle or grandparent. The proliferation of nursing homes is something I detest; most old people should be living with the family and dying at home. We live in the “me generation.” Hopefully there is a way to get away from the “me generation” to the “we generation.” How can we create connections between generations when the young and the old no longer even live in the same places?

I’ve spent a lot of time in native cultures, watching how they integrate with one another. One of the most profound experiences was with the Embera Indians, an indigenous tribe of Panama. I took a boat up the Chagres River and spent some time with them at their camp. They prepared a wonderful meal of tilapia that they had just caught on the river and cooked it on an

open fire. But they also did a dance. And when they dance, the younger and the older dance together as a community, the younger holding on to the older, and the older holding on to the younger. What a powerful image: each group appreciates and needs the other. I think we can learn from this. While some of us might feel *less* useful to society after we retire or slow down, maybe we can learn from other cultures that our place in the dance of life is actually getting *more* important.

In this book, Johann Christoph Arnold answers a lot of the questions that my wife Ann and I ponder as we get older. We certainly deal with small difficulties that crop up every day. We've always done certain things; I'll take out the garbage and she'll vacuum. But we have found as we get older, it's important not to expect that to continue to happen. What's important is to say "thank you" and to appreciate the gift of living together.

Illness is another big factor in aging. (Ann and I know what that's like; she's had four cancers.) If you are infirm you've got to be willing to change. You can't stay stuck in what used to be. But it's not only in big things like cancer. Small changes are necessary too. I

find as I get older, I can't lift things the way I used to; I have to ask for help.

As I age, it takes more effort to be tolerant of some of the junk that I see in the world. Perhaps "tolerance" is not the right word; I don't agree with much of what I see in government and in popular culture. Still, I try to be enthusiastic about new things, because that helps keep you young and in touch with the younger generation. The word "enthusiasm" is really interesting. Its root word is *theos* (God), so it basically means, "inspired by God."

Ann and I also think about dying and about life after death. I really don't fear death. If we believe what we say we believe, we should be ready to go any time. If we've finished what we came here to do, why would we want to stay in this time and density when what is next is so glorious and wonderful?

I also have no doubt that there is a heaven. Maybe that comes with age, or maybe it's a gift from God that allows you to understand things if you take the time to think about them. Take the time to see the absolute joy of living in this time and place, to

appreciate a summer rain, or flowers in a garden.

Longfellow writes:

For age is opportunity no less  
Than youth itself, though in another dress,  
And as the evening twilight fades away  
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day.

In this book, Johann Christoph Arnold helps us to see these stars. I thank him for taking the time to write it.

*Rolland G. Smith, former CBS news anchor*

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# Introduction

*by the author*

**M**Y WIFE AND I LOVE TO HIKE, and over the years we have met countless people on the trail. Some are young and vigorous, with new equipment and a spring in their step. They may act like they know what they are doing, but in many ways they are naïve and inexperienced. Others move with a steadiness and confidence that come from having passed over this ground before. And some, quite frankly, are lost. They don't know where they are coming from or where they are going.

This is our human experience. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan compares life to a long journey. Bunyan's pilgrim knows his ultimate goal, but he constantly battles dangers along the way: tempting distractions, ferocious beasts, and trackless swamps.

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Often the way is narrow, edged with steep cliffs and a plummeting abyss. As the pilgrim nears the finish, he is attacked more than ever. So too is life. In old age, we begin to lose our faculties in ways younger folks can't imagine, and sickness, loneliness, and death itself loom ever larger.

Every journey is plagued with doubts about whether we'll reach our final destination. Often, we get hurt along the way. Broken and disoriented, we struggle on. This is always harder if we walk alone. The surest way to stay safely on the path is to help one another. Whether a veteran traveler or novice, we are all on this journey together. Striking out alone, as any weathered outdoorsman will tell you, is the quickest way to lose your bearings.

When we experience hardship, we gain knowledge of the trail that can and should be shared with others. We know the most stunning views and the importance of stopping to appreciate them. We know the secret springs that never run dry, and where to safely stop and rest. In the same way, we who have reached old age can be a source of wisdom, hope, and inspiration for others. That is why I wrote this book. I have

stumbled frequently and lost the way more times than I care to admit. But I do know what might make the journey less fearful and more fulfilling. I hope the stories in this book will encourage you to keep on going. And so I dedicate this book to my fellow seniors, wishing them strength to continue helping other pilgrims.

All seasoned hikers carry a compass. They may not use it for many days, but when they do, it will quickly direct their steps again. On my own journey, the most important guide for staying on track has been prayer. When I turn to God, and away from my worries about the road ahead, he points my heart anew to the final goal. Peace of heart also comes from a daily focus on forgiveness and from service to others. These are tools we can use as we travel on.

In the end, it is God, not we, who determines the length of time we spend on the trail. Each of our journeys begins at birth and ends at death. Some of us walk for years, losing the trail occasionally, only to come across it again. Or we backtrack to help a straggler along the way, perhaps wondering if we're not wasting our precious time. Others travel only a short

time, but even so, who can say that they, too, have not reached the goal set for them by God?

But each of us does reach the end, and there Jesus will be watching and waiting for us to arrive. He knows when we started out, and he has watched our every step. He will judge us if we have passed by or ignored a struggling traveler without reaching out a helping hand. But he will reward us for every deed of love that we may have done for others, and he will welcome us with open arms: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).



*Rudi Hiddel*

*“I may be growing older, but don’t fuss over me!”*

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# 1

## Growing Older

Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was made:  
Our times are in His hand  
Who saith "A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God:  
see all, nor be afraid!"

*Robert Browning*

**T**HIS POEM IS A FAVORITE of Ellen Keiderling's, a former secretary of mine who was a great help on many of my other books. Although she no longer works for me, she is a vibrant member of my church and often contributes when there is an opportunity for open discussion. When I first got inspired to write this book, Ellen wrote the following:

*Growing Older*

Although I am eighty, and struggling with old age, I don't want to go back to twenty-five. These are the best years of my life.

In my old age, I know that it is important that someone helps me. As Jesus told Peter, "When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18). I am certainly being led where I don't want to go, and this is hard to accept.

I don't always like it when people boss me around and hover over me. I don't really need help with getting dressed – but I do appreciate it. I don't like it when people walk with me everywhere – but I appreciate it because I am getting older. And I am so glad to be at peace. What Browning writes is so true – I have no reason to be afraid.

Not all of us are like Ellen. The fear of death coupled with the fear of growing older fills our minds, but we don't want to talk about it. What is it that we are trying to avoid? I wonder if it isn't these simple truths from Shakespeare, who wrote (I still know these lines from having to memorize them in high school):

*Growing Older*

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances...

*(As You Like It)*

Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

*(Macbeth)*

Many of us worry that no matter how successful our lives have been, they will fade into oblivion and soon be forgotten. Or we may fear losing our mind, our memory, and our independence. We also fear loneliness, pain, and suffering. Many worry that they have not lived as they should. But all this can be overcome. Growing old doesn't have to be a prison of hopelessness and despair. It can present us with unique opportunities, where life's meaning and purpose find fulfillment and where we can express the love we've always wanted to but somehow were never able.

*Growing Older*

Our society has lost perspective on growing old. Advances in medicine have given us a false sense of immortality. We seem to think we can live forever and pride ourselves on pushing the limits of age, but by doing so we push God out of our lives. In idolizing youth, vigor, and bodily health, we become obsessed with increasing life's length, but God is concerned with deepening life's meaning.

There is an entire industry dedicated to helping us rebel against the physical symptoms of growing old. The myriad cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and exercise programs tailored to the elderly all try to convince us that being young is the only way to be. But realistically, by the time we are in our seventies, each of us has at least begun to lose some of our abilities. Our hair gets grayer (if it's there at all), our skin more wrinkled, and our gait slower. Why can't we accept this?

God certainly accepts us as we grow old. Scripture makes it quite clear that God loves the aged and holds them in high regard. Shouldn't we do the same? A long life is a blessing from God, and with it comes a responsibility to the next generation.

There are many stories of God using old people to accomplish his purposes. Abraham and Sarah were already old when their son Isaac was born. Moses was eighty years old when he led God's people out of Egypt. Zechariah and Elizabeth were "well along in years" when John the Baptist was born to them. If we could have even an inkling of the ways of God, we would find that growing old does not have to be a slow decline. We do not need to assume that our best days are behind us.

Those who retain a sense of adventure as their health declines will be able to face the indignities of old age with grace and good humor. John Hinde, who gave up a budding business career at Lloyd's of London to join a rural farming community, was one of my role models during childhood. A lifetime later he told me:

When I was twenty-one, life was a great adventure. Now everything is somehow so sedate. Of course at eighty-three, I don't have quite the same urge for adventure as I did at twenty-one. But when you think of it, growing old is an adventure! It's something you've got to go at with daring. You lose one thing

after another and become more dependent and more stupid and all kinds of things, but still it should be an adventure.

Of course, not everyone has such a positive outlook on growing old. Embracing the aging process and the approaching end of our life is never easy.

Rudi Hidel, a close friend since childhood, was a widower in his eighties. He wanted to stay independent, even though it was obvious that he needed more assistance with daily activities. We had many fiery discussions about how he felt fussed over, when he simply wished to be left alone. He once told me:

Yes, I am getting older and people are lovingly concerned with my health, but it can go too far. This “over-concern” is a big problem for me. I’m constantly asked, “Can you really go alone?” “Shall I lend you my arm?” “Be careful, you may catch a cold!” “Careful – you may fall and break a hip!”

Rudi’s stubborn streak would almost cause his downfall. He had an electric scooter, and as it became clear that he could no longer drive it safely, his son-in-law took away the keys. But Rudi cajoled one of his

grandsons into finding them, and soon he was driving again. Next, the family called on an electrician to more permanently disable the scooter, but again, Rudi convinced a grandson to do some clandestine repair work, and he was on the road again. A few days later, driving down a steep gravel path, he lost control of the scooter and began going through a ditch and down an embankment. Only the chance presence of a passerby, who grabbed the back of the seat and hung on tight, prevented a catastrophe.

It was only then that Rudi realized the danger of his independent streak. The scooter was put in storage, and though reluctant at first, he learned to accept being pushed in a wheelchair.

Eileen Robertshaw, a feisty Englishwoman, was in excellent health well into old age. She swam regularly until she reached her eighties. But eventually, she found a silver lining in the act of relying on others.

There seem to be two temptations as we grow older. One is to take advantage of any help that might be offered to us and become lazy and self-indulgent. The other is to be too intent on independence. Yielding to the first makes one spineless and selfish; yielding to

the other can absorb our strength and attention at the expense of our relationships with other people.

The latter (at least in me) is due to vanity. I was proud that I could do something that others my own age or younger couldn't do as easily. Like all vanity, it is absurd. It is no merit of mine if I retain some faculty or the other, and in any case, it is unkind because I am putting myself above others.

When I finally decided to get a caregiver, life became enriched in ways I had not imagined. In becoming more dependent, I had more time and opportunity for interaction with others. Even if I didn't need a proffered arm, I learned to say, "I don't really need it, but I'd love to have your company." My philosophy is, keep going as much and as long as you can, but don't let it isolate you.

Growing older, as Rudi and Eileen discovered, certainly does involve a battle, because so much of what we have known is coming to an end. The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas captured this in his famous poem, "Do not go gentle into that good night," writing:

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

