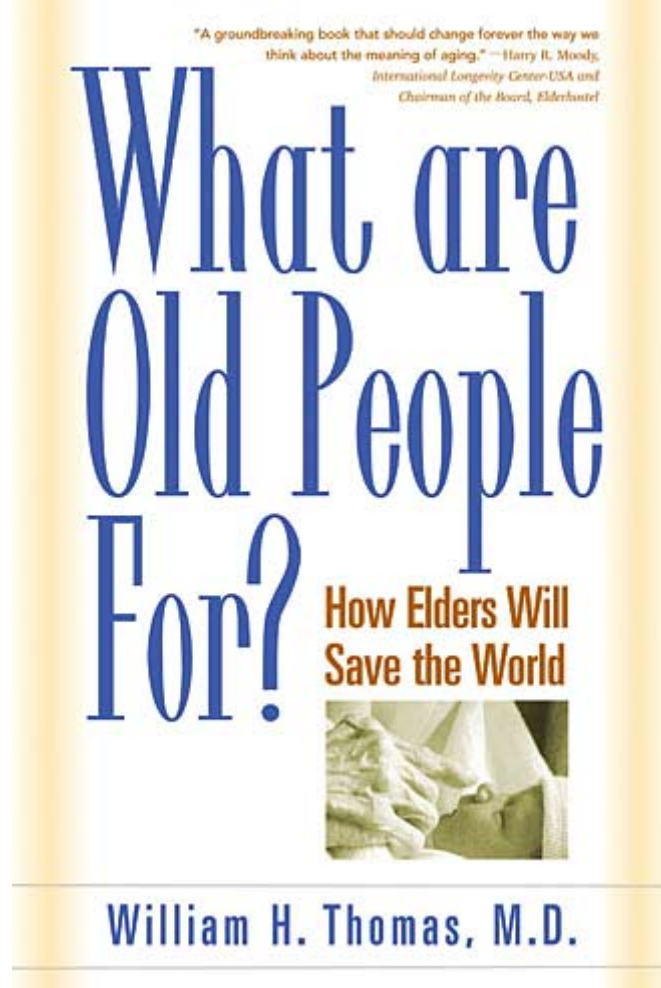


What Are Old People For?
by William H. Thomas, M.D.

**Physician and Author William H. Thomas, M.D.
Challenges America's Obsession with Youth
and Offers a Radical Vision of Aging
In New Book Titled *What Are Old People For?***



“It is time to enjoy what aging has to offer us, and actually welcome it into our lives.”

— In the 1950's, Dr. Benjamin Spock began to speak out against popular but harmful child rearing practices. He offered anxious new parents sensible, compassionate advice. His book sold 40 million copies, and changed child rearing forever.

— When the boomers grew up and started having children of their

own, they rejected the conventional clinical approach to childbirth and searched for another way. They found Dr. Lamaze and brought his radical ideas about childbirth into the mainstream. Lamaze classes became a generational rite of passage.

Now as boomers tiptoe into their 50s and 60s, Dr. William H. Thomas, world famous in the field of long-term care, is offering a clear-eyed view of aging and radical ideas about why baby boomers should embrace it. "The old way of seeing old age, as a time of relentless decline, ignores the value of the last half of life: He adds, "Old age may be difficult but there is plenty of good in it as well."

In his provocative new book entitled ***What Are Old People For?***, the 44-year-old, Harvard-trained physician explains why we age and shows that our mastery of aging is one of the most human things about us. He explores how the obsession with youth harms young and old alike and argues that aging boomers will change our society --- one more time. **"Creating a new old age will be the baby boomers' last act on the public stage,"** says Thomas.

The American tendency to equate being old with being sick, mirrors the view of pregnancy and childbirth that held sway when the boomers were born. Obstetricians treated childbearing as an illness and drained almost every drop of humanity from the experience of childbirth. Lamaze and others countered with a focus on women and their families and a recognition of the joyful aspect of birthing. Empowering the mother and strengthening her emotional support turned out to be a terrific way of reducing the very real pain of childbirth.

Dr. Thomas shows that this approach succeeded because it embraced both traditional ideas about birthing and clinical obstetrics. He writes that the Lamaze method did not ... "seek to restore the birthing practices of long ago. Few would ever have accepted such a dangerous step backward. Instead it became a hybrid of old and new, different from anything that had come before. We are now preparing for a similar revolution that will transform old age and the lives of elders the world over."

Drawing from popular culture, history, science and literature to explore what aging really is, Thomas presents elderhood as a developmental stage of life that is an essential part of a healthy society, as important in its own way as childhood and active adulthood. He maintains that seeing old age solely in terms of disease, disability and decline, damages our society.

At the heart of the fear of aging that grips so many adults is the dilemma of dependence and independence. Being independent requires you to live in your own home, no matter how dangerous and lonely that might become. Becoming dependent can easily lead to the loss of one's home and a terrifying move into a nursing home. These institutions are famous for stripping people of choice, freedom and self-determination.

In *What Are Old People For?*, Dr. Thomas introduces a new vision of "intentional communities," of up to 10 elders who chose to live together with the help of several younger adults and strive to become

a true community. **"Baby boomers are the ideal generation to create this new model," says Thomas. "With a higher level of education than any previous generation, a higher level of wealth, and the well-established habit of re-inventing social norms, I think baby boomers are going to find the concepts of intentional communities and the approach to old age as a development stage instead of decline appealing and consistent with their values. I just don't see boomers accepting the fate of a nursing home."**

— The "Eldertopia" that Dr. Thomas imagines is encouraged by evidence from a number of extremely successful intentional communities, called Green Houses, that Thomas has created in collaboration with partners around the country. "The idea that only large-scale nursing homes can be cost-effective and provide adequate medical care is false. It is time to liberate elders from institutionalization that saps their dignity and breeds helplessness," says Thomas.

— In their place, Thomas advocates small group homes for the aged mainstreamed into residential neighborhoods where elders can maintain their status as part of the community, share a meal and a story with familiar companions, and relish the simple pleasures and satisfaction of being old. With this new model, elders will be able to share their wisdom and their legacy with the children and adults who surround them, restoring them to an important place in our society.

What Are Old People For? How Elders Will Save the World

William H. Thomas, M.D.

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Bio: Dr. William H. Thomas

Dr. William H. Thomas is an international authority on geriatric medicine and eldercare. He currently serves as president of The Center for Growing and Becoming, Inc., a not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting and developing constructive, holistic approaches to aging and the care of our elders. He is also president of The Eden Alternative, a research, consulting, and advocacy group committed to improving the care received by people who live in institutions everywhere.

Board certified in family medicine and geriatrics, Dr. Thomas lives in upstate New York where he serves as Medical Director for the Loretto Nursing Facility and is Assistant Clinical Professor in Family Medicine

for Upstate Medical Center.

As a consultant for AARP, Dr. Thomas travels the country addressing academics, healthcare professionals, and researchers. His lectures confront the issues of aging and the aged, as well as the wise use of pharmaceuticals. In recent years, for example, he has addressed the national conventions of the American Society on Aging, the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, and the Alzheimer's Association, among many other organizations related to the field of aging. Dr. Thomas just returned from a six-city speaking tour in Japan and will be lecturing in Europe in Winter 2005.

What Are Old People For? How Elders Will Save the World is the third book by Dr. Thomas. It was written under a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which is actively supporting his work in this area. *Life Worth Living*, which was published in 1996, was named Book of the Year by the American Journal of Nursing. His second book, *Learning from Hannah*, was published in 1999. It was recognized as a finalist in visionary fiction by Independent Publisher.

In conjunction with his earlier books and projects, Dr. Thomas has been interviewed by a broad range of television, radio and print media including CNN, *48 Hours*, NPR, *Fast Company* and the *Washington Post*.

The innovative quality of Dr. Thomas' work and ideas has been recognized by a number of distinguished awards. He is the recipient of a three-year fellowship from the global nonprofit organization Ashoka, which searches the world for individuals with unprecedented ideas for community change. In 1997, he won the America's Award, established by Norman Vincent Peale and sometimes called "The Nobel Prize for Goodness." Dr. Thomas has also been honored by the Giraffe Project, which gives awards to people who "stick their neck out" to advance the common good.

Dr. Thomas graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1986, and he was selected by the Mead Johnson Foundation as one of the top Family Medicine residents in the country during his three-year residency at the University of Rochester. Dr. Thomas lives with his wife and five children on a 250-acre working farm that employs draft horses and solar and wind power.

**Excerpts from *WHAT ARE OLD PEOPLE FOR?*
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Dr. William Thomas writes

On society's view of aging as a disease

“Dermatologist Nicholas Perricone opens his *New York Times* best-selling book *The Wrinkle Cure* by claiming, ‘Wrinkled, sagging skin is *not* the inevitable result of growing older. It’s a disease and you can fight it.’ If that is true, wrinkles represent a most unusual form of illness....Diseases need treatment and treatments cost money. Aided and abetted by hundreds of millions of dollars in marketing, the antiwrinkle business sows fear and reaps a rich financial harvest.”

Page 7

On the need for a new perspective on what aging is

“The development of a new perspective on age and aging is both necessary and possible. Given the importance of aging in our lives, and the impact of aging on our families and society, a new openness and even curiosity about human aging would seem more than warranted. The time has come for our wondrous longevity to emerge from the long shadow cast by the vigor and virtues of youth.” **Page 36**

On the role of grandparents

“The human impulse to share food, energy, resources, and risk across the generations (summarized in the grandmother hypothesis) outranks all other human developments in its importance. ...A million years ago the first grandmother attended to the cries of a hungry grandchild. In doing so she increased the reproductive success of her own daughter. Over time, those families that were blessed with older females who were inclined to give this kind of assistance grew in number and power. Families that could not master this strategy were overwhelmed. They became evolutionary dead ends. We take the constellation of traits that define our humanity for granted, little realizing that they are, in fact, the gifts of perhaps sixty thousand generations of elders.” **Page 57**

On the traditional model of elder care

“Society has traditionally assigned responsibility for the support and protection of the aged to the family. This ethic grew out of long experience with the high birth rates, stable extended family structures, and small numbers of older people that characterized early agricultural and pastoral societies...To grow old in a traditional society that “takes care of its own” is to rely almost exclusively on a stable network of family relations and a deep reservoir of unpaid female caregiving....Those who come to depend on their families are expected to minimize the burden they place on those who love and care for them. There is a deep-seated belief that to complain is to make oneself into a burden, and to become a burden is a terrible thing.” **Page 75**

On the pitfall of defining the needs of the elderly in financial terms alone

“[Social Security and Medicare] have indeed done immeasurable good for older people and their families. Far less obvious is the way that publicly provided resources and services have gradually replaced the idea that the bonds that unite young and old must also include important non-economic dimensions. We have created, and continue to maintain, a massive bureaucracy that serves the financial needs of the elderly. The fact that it does so completely without affection or tenderness is seen as beside the point.” **Page 87**

On the institutionalization of the elderly

“People are placed in nursing homes, often against their will, because they no longer display the behaviors expected of independent adults. The decision to surrender a loved one to a nursing home is emotionally traumatic and is usually made only after all other options have been exhausted. That alternatives are few (relative to demand) and underfunded (relative to what is spent on institutionalization) is rarely acknowledged.” **Page 159**

On the often dehumanizing impact of nursing homes

“Because nursing homes are operated as therapeutic institutions, machinelike efficiency is their ideal. The best facilities are thought to be those that deviate to the minimum extent possible from predetermined schedules and routines...This approach to daily life has a deadening effect on all who must live and work under its sway. Everyone needs to feel the fresh breeze of the unexpected, even if it does not blow every day. Spontaneous events and happenings are the source of interesting conversation. Conversations grow into stories that can be told and retold. Stories become memories. To live in a typical nursing home is to endure a famine of new memories.” **Page 183**

On the need to act now

“People often say to me, ‘Hey, Dr. Thomas, you’d better get this all fixed before I get old.’ I laugh and tell them that I will do my best. People like to imagine that such problems all lie in the future and, if they are lucky, might be sorted out before they enter their own old age. What they do not realize is that the fault lies not in our aging, but in the denial of aging.” **Page 200**

