

Book Review:

If I live to be 100: Lessons from the centenarians.

Neenah Ellis. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004

Neenah Ellis interviewed centenarians for the National Public Radio series **One Hundred Years of Stories**. She presents these engaging interviews (stories about the past and comments on the present) intertwined with her own impressions of personality, circumstance, and ways of adjusting. She began seeking the history but soon shifted to a personal search for the meaning of long life and lessons for her/our own old age.

We hear how Ellis changed her style of interviewing for this special project.

I realized I wouldn't get my answers by asking questions, I would get them by waiting.

I've put aside the whole week to be with Ruth, finally having gotten it through my head that I need to spend more time with people and let these interviews unfold at their pace and not mine.

This is my story about learning to listen.

Even though most of these centenarians had difficulties hearing, seeing, and getting around, a number of them lived on their own or with a spouse. Anna lives alone, plans to give up her car soon, and rows her boat each morning in good weather. Harry, a retired law professor, goes to the office regularly to tutor students and prepare briefs for colleagues. Margaret, a dyslexia expert, makes plans to travel to the next annual conference.

At the beginning of her visit with 103-year-old Ruth, Ellis drove her to Michigan State to speak, as she often does, to students. Celebrated centenarian (there's a film about her), Ruth speaks with authority about life as African American, lesbian, woman, and centenarian. Befriended by a loving group of decades-younger white women more than 20 years before, Ruth now relies on this group to manage the level she chooses for public appearances, on the one hand, and being taken care of, on the other hand.

Ellis absorbs a diverse set of lessons. She interviewed Sadie and Gilbert, married for 80 years, noticing how tenderly he focuses his life on her, whose cancer is in remission. Ellis asks:

What can I possibly do to make the years my husband and I have left together mean more?

Social psychological research has shown that successful aging is associated with a positive sense of the future. When asked about the future, participants offered intriguing responses:

Helen, of her life with Bill, writes: *The chief joy of the future is that it stretches ahead filled with things to do together (Bill is 84).*

Harry, an artists, says to himself: *Another four or five years, I gotta produce some good painting.*

Anna, seen again at age 105, is only rowing her boat on good days and is making plans to get some live-in help in case the arthritis gets worse: *I'm not gonna wait until it happens.*

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