



COME, LET US AGE!

An invitation to grow old boldly

Wanda Nash

Edited by Poppy Nash and Debbie Thrower

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

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Wanda Nash

Edited by **Poppy Nash** and **Debbie Thrower**



NOT GETTING OLDER,

but

BEING OLD

– and my take on it

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Foreword

I guess that, having enjoyed a friendship with Wanda for many years, I should not be surprised, in being asked to write this Foreword, that what follows is rather a ‘lastword’ from Wanda; or rather, a host of ‘last words’ from her deeply spiritual nature, still fizzing with life and excitement to the end.

Not that Wanda had much time for ‘the end’ as a useful way of describing this part of her journey. Despite the pain and grief of dying, she was always a joy to be with and an inspiration to others. I remember one clear example of her attitude quite near the end of her life, when we were sharing together in prayer. ‘Think how much more effectively I will be able to pray for the peace of the world from the perspective of heaven’ was her indefatigable response to her shortening earthly perspective, as pain and weariness closed in upon her.

Thank you, Wanda. You have now passed through the condition of ‘Being Old’ and used the experience to give us these wonderful insights to help us on our own journeys into God.

Your old friend,
Tim

Revd Tim Selwood, Winchester team ministry



Introduction

I was scanning the shelves of my local Christian bookshop for ideas. I wanted a speaker for a series of talks I was planning, and a Grove booklet on ‘Stillness’ caught my eye. It was just such simple tools for stillness that I thought busy people could do with.¹ As I approached the cash desk, for some reason, I asked the assistant whether the author of the book was local. ‘Don’t you know Wanda?’ he replied, suggesting that *everyone* knows Wanda.

I hope this book will enable even more people to feel they know her and can benefit from her wisdom. During her life, she offered so much to many people in all sorts of walks of life—not least in stress management and inter-faith relations—and her final efforts were put into dealing with what it is to be old.

Being Old was the working title she gave this book, which was to be her final one (published posthumously now, after her death in 2015), together with excerpts from her personal journals. ‘Being’ rather than ‘doing’ was a perennial theme of hers.

Wanda wrote many books over her long lifetime and was still writing in her eighties: on combating stress (she had been a foremost stress counsellor), on faith, silence and interfaith relations, and on playfulness and prayer.

The title chosen for this, her last, book has deliberate echoes of her 1999 book *Come, Let Us Play!* because she brought the same infectious enthusiasm and curiosity to bear on her own ageing as she had done to the subject of having a spirit of playfulness when it comes to prayer. ‘Our picture of God is so solemn,’ she wrote. If we could be more childlike in our prayers, then our conversations with God—growing out of a certain ‘playfulness which Jesus so enjoyed’—would be characterised by ‘trust, abandonment, delight, gaiety and laughter’. Enjoy this book, she entreated.

Enjoyment is, partly, what I hope you will derive from these ‘last words’ of someone making regular entries in her journals—in small, neat handwriting and doodling diagrams—knowing that she had little time left. Yet, despite a terminal diagnosis, she maintained her *joie de vivre* to the last; she surprised us with a pink Mohican one day, even as she lost her lustrous white hair, and was determined to send me her manuscript, urging me to think whether it might be ‘useful’. It is not only useful; it is pure gold for anyone coming to terms with the vicissitudes of ageing, who is wrestling with their own sense of God and, perhaps, apprehensive about how their own faith would weather a devastating blow like the news of a life-changing illness.

It is a *memento mori*, yes—a reminder that we must all die—but from someone who refused to be in any way morbid about her own impending death. She undoubtedly felt her time running out, but wanted to make sure she documented her thoughts and feelings in order to process it all herself, and to be helpful to others.

She wrote her more considered thoughts on the ageing process before the death knell of cancer, while she was still feeling reasonably fit and well. Her motivation was to capture all she wished she had

known in advance, borne out of rich experience and laced with pithy, witty observations.

A friend of Wanda's told me one of his abiding memories is of visiting her at home in those last months and finding her perched on her prayer stool 'like a teenager'. 'There was a sense in which she was youthful right up to when she was very ill,' said Paul Newman, a former prison chaplain, who had met Wanda first when she went to visit prisoners at Winchester Prison. 'The moment I met her I felt I was in tune with her. She was always compassionate, wanting to be with prisoners who were among the most mentally disturbed.'

As a former broadcaster and now a chaplain myself—specifically to older people²—Wanda had a hunch I would both resonate with and find an audience for what she'd found to be true about this latter part of our lives: that it is a stage during which any masks we have come off; it is a time for honesty, and a seeking after what is true and what will last.

She was right. Every page rings with authenticity. It isn't a saccharine account of what it is like to lose the ability to do things we used to take for granted. I remember how Wanda would bemoan the fact her energy levels were decreasing, that she had to pace herself because, if she did too much, she'd pay for it later. She recognised her physical resources were finite, but spiritually she was only just beginning to hit her stride.

Her musings and jottings are a mixture of original thoughts and quotations from others whose writing she admired. You will find fellow authors who extol the virtues of contemplative prayer, of nurturing silence, quietening the body the better to be in tune with God.

After I had bought that original booklet of hers on 'Stillness', I tracked her down to one of her sessions in Winchester Cathedral. At the end, as others were leaving, I plucked up the courage to ask if she

might come and give a talk for me (for free!). She paused, looked me straight in the eye and said, 'I shall make it *a priority*.'

I could have hugged her. As it turned out, she became a firm friend and we always greeted one another with a warm hug. Wanda left a wide and varied circle of friends. She was skilled at getting on to other people's wavelengths.

Wanda also loved riddles, puns and wordplay, parables and paradox. She was a walking paradox herself. She was one of the most action-packed women you could meet, yet ardently devoted to stillness. Someone once quipped: 'Wanda—the still small voice of calm—yet always “rushed off her feet”?' She was a familiar sight on her bicycle dodging through the streets of Winchester on her way to early morning cathedral 'Stillness'. She was both 'super Martha and super Mary'.

Silence energised her for a busy life as a wife to Trevor (parish priest, then archdeacon) and as a mother, a trainer in the management of stress, a writer and a course leader on spirituality. Until latterly, she was still conducting many a course or retreat for those in need of spiritual refreshment and recreation.

It was a privilege to know her in the most active period of her life, and as she wound down. Never let it be said she wound down mentally or indeed spiritually, though. On the contrary, despite the ravages of her illness, she seemed more and more 'on fire' for God; always asking questions, puzzling. 'What on earth is he doing?' she'd cry in frustration, on occasion.

Like a dozen or so other friends, I received a handwritten letter from Wanda in her last few months summoning us to join her for silent prayer. She had been inspired profoundly by a poem from the Chilean poet and politician Pablo Neruda, entitled 'Keeping Quiet' (see p. 86). She sensed an urgency to pass the baton on to others. For, what the world needed most, she believed, was stillness and a greater appreciation of God in the silence.

A handful of times, in those last few weeks, the group we called ‘Count to Twelve’ (after a phrase from the poem) gathered around her bed, now in the sitting room for ease of access for nurses and oxygen tanks, and they were very precious times. She would garner every ounce of her strength to dress, kneel and direct us in prayer: prayer of the heart. These were master classes in the art of slowing down, stilling the mind, focusing on regular breathing and on paying full attention.

Wanda had always argued that stillness was ‘a letting go of my need to impress myself or others, or God; a letting go of my need to strive and excel; a letting go of my need to constantly justify myself; a letting go of what drives me; a letting go of thinking about myself at all!’³

Of course, letting go is what each of us has to learn to do as we get older, a little at a time unclenching our fists from everything we hang on to (for grim death). Every time we succeed and let our grasp relax a little, we are rehearsing for the final letting go of our death, which Wanda firmly believed was the gateway to new life.

I have a definite sense of Wanda forging a way ahead for the rest of us who follow in her wake. Fearless in her approach, there was nevertheless a quality of innocence about Wanda, which never left her. It was not naivety in terms of human experience. She was raised in the Caribbean, in Antigua and in Fiji, among many other exotic locations, and trained as a nurse, working with Dame Cicely Saunders at St Christopher’s Hospice, South London. This was a woman who travelled to Rwanda four times in the aftermath of the genocide there. She wrote *A Fable For Our Time* in 2002, an account of the brutality and torture, but also the resilience and capacity for mercy of so many of those (women, particularly) who’d witnessed the murders of their families and friends.

Transformation was her goal. Nothing less. So ageing was, for her, another part of the grand adventure of living, and her daughter Poppy and I feel she would have approved, heartily, of the defiant invitation—*Come, Let Us Age! An invitation to grow old boldly.*

Wanda is a worthy guide to a part of life—old age—which many of us remain afraid of, viscerally fearful of all that inevitable physical diminishments will bring, and its losses.

Test your mettle, though, against the confidence of a woman for whom death held no terrors. She was spared none of the side effects of the cancer, and lived with the disappointment of abandoned projects. Nevertheless, she once told me in a filmed interview, ‘I can’t wait to go over to the other side!’ and she never demurred, however much discomfort the symptoms caused. ‘I can’t wait!’

Despite her fervency, there is a gentleness, a tenderness too, in her writing which permits a childlike trust. Even as she, herself, struggles (and nothing is held back in her search to be truthful, and to understand better), her words are reassuring, that none of us need, really, be afraid of the dark, the unknown.

As we share her joys and pangs, we may come to trust the silence and appreciate it as a natural, comforting medium in which to cultivate our understanding of what it is to be a truly human ‘being’... even unto death.

Be still and know that I am *God*...⁴

Be still and know that I *am*...

Be still and *know*...

Be *still*...

Be...

Debbie Thrower, founder and team leader of The Gift of Years

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Some of the consequences of being old

'Gather the pieces... let nothing be wasted' (John 6:12)
becoming rooted
... bearing fruit

Of course, there is some Inevitable Weakening of my being, of my own familiar self. Gradually we each have to come to terms with a myriad of losses. Losing friends and relatives becomes a practical necessity as circumstances change and people I love move. Keeping contact through cards is a great asset, even though it has become so commercialised. Such exchanges reassure me I am not forgotten, and relevant 'lists' keep me from totally forgetting!

As others, now more capable than I am, take over the financial, legal, organisational sides of living, there is a great awareness that I can no longer be 'In Control'. Whether we are ever, or can be ever, 'In Control' is a debatable matter, but certainly the feeling of losing control is extremely debilitating, and can feel humiliating. So let's *give control away*, rather than fretting that it is being snatched from us. Such a relief, not having to bother with all that responsibility.

Probably bodily pain will increase in some way or other. An old friend—'old' in both senses of the word!—wrote to me she was 'aching, but still here'. So she's counting her blessings. Pain is extraordinarily powerful in reducing our mobility, and worsening our tempers. These are among the new learning curves we have to deal with, without, if possible, becoming too much of a drag on others. Some people find

that they can 'offer' their pain to God; it can be part of the currency for the redemption of others, as indeed Jesus Christ offered his suffering for our own redemption. This is a high, high calling, filled with mystery and outside of logic, but it certainly works for many.

Loss of memory is a dread and a reality for most of us as we grow older. We have this in common, and can grow into a communal sense of comedy. Self-pride has to be thrown out of the window, so perhaps humility and sharing can grow in its place. Specially, I'm grateful to friends who make a point of collecting jokes about the comedic mishaps that occur—share the fun! It can help to soften the hurt; but there's no denying the hurt, too. At the beginning, any reduction in power, capacity, control is mixed up with my own sense of what makes me worthwhile to my community. The training, experiences, responsibilities I have gathered over the years: maybe these were factors in my prime, but now it is important that I learn to hand them over; to '*give over*' to those around me, to the community, to God who originally *lent* them to me. To hand them back to where they came from. Such prime qualities were not deserved, nor bought, nor endowed, but *lent*. Now I must make place for others, to contribute their ideas and conclusions, and get myself out of their way. It's my job to set about doing this with thanksgiving for what I have experienced, and hand it over, without rancour.

Some suggestions

Physical limitations

Yes, indeed, and this is always hard to take. But it would be even harder if I happened to live in a country—and there are so many of them—where wheelchairs, stairlifts, walking poles, amanuenses, ambulances, therapies of all kinds, medical and nursing and physiotherapy skills, occupational therapists, therapists and carers and counsellors of all sorts and sizes were not available. Only those who have been lucky enough to visit places in underdeveloped

societies can really imagine something of the life to be endured without these resources. We do well to think on these things too, as well as the beauties that lie around us, and which don't actually depend on our own physical management.

A water-carrier was hired by a wise and kindly gentleman to fetch water for his daily needs from the river which was over a mile away.

The water-carrier duly hitched two large pottery pitchers to a yoke over his shoulders, and trotted back and forth each day until his master's household was equipped with the proper amount of water.

After a little while the water-carrier became increasingly distressed, because each trip he made delivered less water, and each day he had to increase the number of journeys he made between the house and the river.

With great apologies and much self-searching, he approached his master with the problem: with loud lamenting he cried out, 'The harder I try, the less I bring you.'

'Look,' said the master, 'have you noticed what has happened on the path you have taken?' The water-carrier turned around and looked at the way he had come. The master said, 'One of your pitchers is cracked and has been leaking: on that side of your return journey see what has happened.' The water-carrier looked, and see! One side of the path way was dry and cracked; on the other, there were beautiful and multicoloured flowers growing, and butterflies and bees were feeding on them.

And all because of a simple crack.

Holy Spirit, impassion my heart that I may give so that others have energy to spread gladness, respect and honour to those around them.

Whatever our limitation, it can give us a bit of a lift to give the muscles that do function the pleasure of exercise. Simply doing ‘isometric’ exercises—stretching and tensing muscles just where I am—can be re-energising. I find it fun to squeeze different sets of muscles in different patterns—they relax better and become less stiff. So instead of setting myself such goals as running or walking or swimming, as I used to do, I simply concentrate on a particular part of my body and tighten it; there is little actual movement involved and I can stay sitting or lying or standing. When, after a few seconds, they are released, the blood moves around a bit more, so I’m warmer. The same can happen with a different set of muscles. This focus and these stretches don’t threaten my balance or movement, but they do strengthen and make the most of those muscles of which I still have control. Whether it’s in a chair, or on the bed, or—best of all!—in a hot bath, the place doesn’t matter very much; it’s what I choose to do with my available muscle-power that matters.

Cerebral limitations

Depression

Fading memory,
lost memories

Simple stupidity!

Remorse, particularly about my earlier mismanagement,
ineptness, in dealing
with *anger*—mine, and that of others coming at me.

Yes, I can beat myself up quite a lot about my past mistakes, mismanagement, misreading of tricky situations. Not a lot to be done about them now, not a lot of time or energy left. But for this moment, this now, the sense of these mistakes has mellowed a bit, along with that of my peers. So, some of the bones I used to chew on like a dog can be let go of, and left behind: they don’t have to be gone over and over as they used to be; they can simply be left behind, hopefully. They don’t have to be continually rehearsed, as if there was a hidden secret ability to change things.

When I'm *really* convinced I've turned out a total no-gooder, I try to remember that in Jesus' teaching and practice (which is even more pertinent) the dogs under the table were fed; and that those with blocked ears, tied tongues, those who were unwashed, lacking faith and with neither material goods nor intellectual prowess were attended to by the Son of God; they were healed, refreshed, remotivated by him; warmed, held, loved by him; called 'little children' and 'friends' by him. So there's hope for every one of us, including me, after all.

Sometimes, when thinking on these things, I can get an unannounced picture. A Jungian dream? Where it comes from, and who sends it, is not an issue here. For instance, today, during a time of Stillness,

*I was a large, ripe, juicy apple.
And God came along and took a huge bite out of the apple.
I think he found it quite tasty and pleasurable, because another
bite was taken, and then another.
Soon nothing was left but the core.
BUT within the core lay the seeds of the apple:
the cause for which the apple had been grown.
And the seeds couldn't get out and be spread and germinated
for others
unless the apple had been eaten or rotted! Then I knew what made
it worth it.*

And I've found a special prayer:

*Lord, bearing in mind all the things I've neglected;
All those things of which I am ignorant;
All the things I've forgotten;
All the things I've lost
I place them into your hands where they will be warmed and cared for
so much better than if I had done so for myself.*

In this unique book, Wanda Nash, a well-established writer on spirituality in her late seventies, reflects on growing old with faith and a positive spirit. This compelling invitation to grow old boldly—full of her own experiences and insights—includes Wanda’s reflection on her encounter later in life with terminal cancer, and her thoughts on coping with the daily challenges of living a Christian life in her illness and in ageing. Demonstrating a profound sense of the value and purposefulness of ‘old age’, the author’s indomitable spirit is matched only by her fresh vision of the love of God in Jesus Christ.



Until her death in June 2015, **Wanda Nash** was an author and speaker on a range of subjects including stress and spirituality. Having been the UK Chair of the International Stress

Management Association, she authored a number of significant books, including, *Christ, Stress and Glory*, *At Ease with Stress*, *Come, Let us Play!*, *Simple Tools for Stillness* and *Silence as a Meeting Place*.

These reflections have been lovingly edited by Wanda’s daughter, Poppy, and her friend, Debbie Thrower, bringing to life the wisdom, faith and humour of old age for future generations.

