



Writing Works

A Baker's Dozen

by Ann Elizabeth Carson



I spent many magical summers on a magical island, an hour and a half by ferry from the Maine shore. Columbus marked it "backed like a whale" on his navigation charts, and the arrowheads the native inhabitants left behind can still be found. This wondrous place nourished me in body and soul, brought me through tough times, inspired me as a writer. I met amazing people there, made lifelong friends. It didn't occur to me until much later that most of them were much older than I was then. These elders didn't act like how old people were "supposed" to act — inactive, forgetful, falling apart, useless.

As I grew older, I realized they had become models for me, just like the people I taught in seniors' centres, and the older women in my own family. Research on aging and the popular press go on and on about health and aging, sex and aging, memory loss, the burden of an aging population, and stressed-out caregivers. I wanted to give a voice we too seldom hear to people's experiences of memory and what it is like to be old.

"***We All Become Stories***" distills decades-long conversations with 12 teachers, blue-collar workers, clerks, artists, musicians, a librarian, a housewife, and a furniture maker, all of European descent. None of them is famous; only a few were known outside their own communities. In their eighties, they harbour few illusions: life, aging, and old age are tough, more difficult for those not used to "looking within." They coped with serious aches and fears, ever-increasing emotional and social, as well as physical, losses, and

very negative beliefs about aging in societies that seldom respect or welcome old age. But what interested me — and them — most was how they continually made difficult changes throughout their lives, uncovering remarkable restorative powers in continually reshaping themselves, balancing threats to the independence they cherished with increasing demands to act "old" to be acceptable. Perhaps most crucial, they tapped into their senses and the awareness that flows through them, which opened doors they had not known existed.

As a result, when they faced the even-greater challenges of serious illness and frailty, they were able to adapt and live a satisfying old age. These insights led to the book's two major themes: how memory changes at every stage of life, and how the senses ground and shape our understanding, our experience, and, ultimately, our enjoyment of aging.

Listening for four decades to their adventures in aging, and now recounting them, have transformed my own life. These

12 wise elders showed me that "aging" doesn't happen just to the already old, but is a lifelong evolution — a journey of self-discovery open to everyone. I'm the lucky 13th — it's as if these 12 elders showed me the route to the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

For more information about these 12 elders, go to:

<http://www.anncarson.com/stories>

