

Aging with Grace

<Author name>

<Institutional affiliation>

<Course number and name>

<Instructor name>

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“Yet I also hope that on the day before I leave this earth, I will still have a mind that can communicate with my limbs, allow me to feel elation or regret...and the love of family and friends” (Snowdon, 2001, p. 9). With this sentiment, David Snowden sets the stage for his work *Aging with Grace*, an examination of the case of the School Sisters of Notre Dame and associated Alzheimer’s disease that strikes some of the order’s population. The author is an epidemiologist and professor of neurology at the University of Kentucky and, as he recounts in the book, a lifelong admirer of the Order he chooses to study in his work. These qualifications make him uniquely positioned to both study Alzheimer’s and the pathways the disease takes as it ravages certain members of a community while sparing others who seemingly live identical lives. His education and expertise make him an appropriate authority to write on the topic of aging and related events as he strives to find answers to one of the most debilitating diseases associated with aging.

The book is a study of members of the order of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, an order of Catholic Nuns living in seven convents throughout the United States. His book is told as a first-person account of his history with the nuns, his development of friendships with them through the course of his study, and the emergence of Alzheimer’s as some of the Sisters succumbed while others continued to thrive with their mental faculties intact late into their lives. Some of the nuns in the book lived past 100 years of age, bright and able to use their cognitive abilities while others slowly lost the ability to think and interact with others as the disease first stole their minds and then their lives. The format of the book, written as this first person account, is highly effective as it adds a personal dimension to the study of a disease that robs individuals of the essence of their personalities and leaves them in a state of dependence on others. Snowden

artfully intertwines his research with the personal stories he tells about his friends in the convents and the sadness he feels as he realizes that each visit holds the potential of losing another friend. The overall purpose of the book is to explore Alzheimer's from the perspective of those who live closely with it.

Five key points of the book, or insights, come mainly from Snowden's interactions with the nuns themselves. The first insight is that Alzheimer's is an indiscriminate disease, sparing no individual and following no logical progression. Secondly, the book points out the temporary nature of human existence and the need to appreciate what we have. A third point comes in the meticulous nature of the nun's existence and their dedication to Snowden's work, demonstrating to the reader that Alzheimer's is a disease that requires meticulous recordkeeping if we are to find a solution. Another takeaway thought is that we should live our lives in the moment, always recognizing the potential for losing our ability to function on our own. Lastly, and likely most importantly, the book teaches us to care for one another as though we are caring for ourselves.

This book has impacted the way I will practice clinically as an Audiologist, particularly with the elderly, because it has given me a new perspective on the challenges faced by an older population. I now understand the severity of Alzheimers and the vulnerability my clients may face if they are living with the disease. While there may be no cure for Alzheimers, I now understand my role in being compassionate and supportive of those who struggle, whether they personally have the disease or even if they are living with a loved one being lost to the progression of Alzheimers and dementia.

Reference

Snowdon, D. (2001). *Aging with Grace*. Penguin Random House.



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