

# I N T R O D U C T I O N

Many of us fear growing older. We assume that advanced age is a time of degeneration, when physical and mental qualities are in sharp decline. We fail to recognize the energy, vitality, wisdom, and deep beauty possible in these later years. My hope is that this book will help to dispel this negative attitude by portraying women whom age has enhanced, not hindered, whose lives can serve as positive role models for all of us.

*Wise Women* is my seventh book of photographs and by far the most consuming project of my career. I photographed and interviewed nearly three hundred women and traveled from Maine to California in an effort to discover what the third phase of life felt and looked like.

This book took enormous physical and organizational effort from everyone concerned. It involved seemingly unending travel, scheduling and rescheduling with busy celebrities, and constant coordination with the vast network of colleagues and friends who helped ferret out the extraordinary women from all walks of life who fill these pages. At a certain point, I was swept up by a hidden source of energy and fascination that was shared by everyone who became involved with the project. It was as if I had tapped a hidden well—a previously undiscovered source that became increasingly powerful as the faces, stories, and insights began to accumulate. As time went on, the book took on a life of its own. I felt I had been given a gift as well as a responsibility.

During our portrait sessions, these women shared not only their outer appearances but, more important, their inner lives—the heartaches as well as the triumphs. We talked about our families and the longings of our hearts. As we spoke, we discovered that the journeys we had taken toward our deeper selves, toward acceptance, love, and hopefully compassion for the frailties of the universe,

were basically the same. I came away from each new encounter exhilarated by what I had seen and learned, and with an urgent desire to share these stories.

All the portrait sessions were memorable in their own way. I photographed Julie Harris (pp. 128, 129) at her last performance of *The Belle of Amherst*, the renowned Emily Dickinson show she has done for audiences around the world for twenty-five years. As she walked off the stage she seemed completely imbued with Dickinson's spirit. I felt gifted to witness and capture the moment. I met Krista (p. 122) at a wedding and immediately asked if I could photograph her. She agreed to the photo session with one stipulation: that I photograph her partially nude. She wanted to show people that a mastectomy "doesn't look so bad" and that she still feels beautiful. Odetta arrived and immediately charmed everyone at my studio by playing her guitar and singing for us (p. 55). I saw Sister Elise and Sister Mary Christabel on the sidewalk of 120th Street and asked them to be part of the project (p. 63). Ann Richards (p. 92) walked to my studio from her hotel in Times Square and gave me notes from a workshop she had taken at age sixty-five that had helped her evaluate her goals and reinvent herself after being governor of Texas. She said she had never felt better. I waited six months to get a portrait session with Coretta Scott King (pp. 136, 137). Dame Judi Dench and Patricia Neal (pp. 116, 117 & 33) met for the first time at my studio and expressed a mutual and touching admiration for each other's work.

I took the train to Washington, D.C., one spring morning to photograph Sandra Day O'Connor at the Supreme Court (p. 88). I was charmed by her intelligence and passion for her grandchildren. I also went to Woodstock, N.Y., to meet with a group of retired women in the creative arts. They were all still working, helping write grants for arts funding, painting, playing music, or mentoring younger artists. I



Our society has repeatedly confronted and managed to change many negative stereotypes of women; aging is our final frontier. The fastest-growing segment of our population is over sixty-five. The lack of respect for and understanding of America's older population requires major reexamination. We need to forge a new image of older women, one more in keeping with ancient times, when they were revered for their special abilities and wisdom.

As the baby boom generation ages, our society will change dramatically. By 2010, one in four people in the United States will be over sixty-five. If our elders are able to channel their unique powers into social, political, and humanitarian action, they could potentially change the values of the world. By altering the negative stereotypes of aging, both men and women can be liberated from the myth that elders are useless or "over the hill." It is clear that our society is at a turning point in many ways. The pendulum has swung from championing materialistic forces of power and success to a collective yearning for connection. The ancient female values of compassion and relatedness could help usher in a new time, one with a new respect for the value of relationships.

When I began this project, I saw it as a culmination of my own journey as an artist interested in investigating, discovering, and recording the female life cycle. It became much more. It challenged me on every front: intellectually, emotionally, and physically. It made me question who I am and who we all may become. It caused me to ruminate on what a face or a portrait can reveal.

The photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson once said, "At a certain point, one gets the face one deserves." I believe this is true. My lifework has been studying faces, trying to make portraits that are penetrating and direct. I often feel like a spiritual midwife who facilitates an intimate connection between subject, photographer,





found Lola (p. 22) and her granddaughter in my apartment elevator. Their grace and spirit continue to enrich my life. Later, I took twenty of my students in Santa Fe to meet Angelita and Connie (p. 126) while I photographed them in the backyard of their pueblo. Their sense of connection with the earth and the fact that Connie has found new powers as a healer in the past few years were felt by all of us.

Many of these women had not been photographed in many years. Deirdre (frontispiece) was startled to see her current image. She said she saw something she hadn't seen for a long time—her inner self. Polly (p. 51), formerly a journalist for the *New York Post*, still lives by herself at ninety-eight, drives, and exercises every morning for an hour. She feels she has led many lives and is amused to find she has become a role model for others in their seventies and eighties.

While I was photographing my subjects, we talked. I was hoping to capture a brief thought or statement, unique to each of them, that would be a counterpoint to or illuminate their portrait. Each woman I met had something original or insightful to offer. I was struck by the fact that those who had led quieter, more anonymous lives were as perceptive as the famous and powerful. The experience of aging seems to be encouragingly evenhanded in its distribution of wisdom.

Almost without exception, these women presented themselves in a very direct, authentic manner. They spoke of a new sense of personal freedom and their relief at letting go of others' expectations and society's conventional definition of female beauty. As they had transformed themselves and their priorities, many felt compelled to make a difference in the world and give back some of the joys and insights they had received. Others felt a call and longing for a deeper inner life and spiritual path. Many said that their life experiences had made them more compassionate and had given them deeper wisdom or perception they wanted to share.



and viewer. I have also wanted to explore and bring the fruits of that journey into my life, my relationships, and my work.

A portrait can sometimes obscure the inner life of an individual, but we all have an inner face that, although often hidden, can be felt. This is particularly true as we age. While photographing these women in their sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties, I realized I was often looking into the secret center of their being. Most were no longer interested in hiding behind a mask. Those with great love in their hearts showed it in their eyes, those filled with bitterness or selfishness reflected coldness, those with mischievous spirits still summoned that playful vitality, and those with an abundance of spirit revealed that warmth and tranquillity.

A true portrait can never hide the inner life of its subject. It is interesting that in our culture we hide and cover the body, yet our faces are naked. Through a person's face we can potentially see everything—the history and depth of a person's life as well as the evidence of a primal universal presence. It is to penetrating that private world, to capturing these elusive but magic moments of revelation, that I have dedicated my life and talent.

I hope these photographs provide surprises as well as moments of recognition. I hope they will foster a new respect and understanding that could inspire us all to look at aging in a different way. I've learned so much from these wise women; they have given me more than I can say. Through their willingness to share, I feel I have touched upon the true meaning of life. I always photograph in the hope that the divine will show up and bless the work. I continue to do so.

Joyce Tenneson