



## transitions

# The best is yet to be — maybe

By **NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG**

*Correspondent*

**T**he poet Robert Browning wrote, “The Best Is Yet to Be.” I have added the word “maybe.” Maybe the future will be wonderful, if we can figure out how to live well.

Ted Fishman, former member of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, essayist and author of the best-selling book “Shock of Gray” (2010), wrote:

“And while we will likely engineer ever-longer lives, can we figure out how to fill the extra years with vitality and joy?”

The first question to consider: How do people feel about these extra years,

about getting older?

The Pew Research Center Social & Demographic Trends report, *Growing Old in America: Expectations vs. Reality* (2009), found a sizable gap between the expectations that young and middle-aged adults have about old age and the actual experiences reported by older Americans themselves. In fact, on aspects of everyday life — from mental acuity to physical dexterity to sexual activity to financial security — getting old isn’t nearly as bad as people think it will be.

These disparities come into sharpest focus when survey respondents are asked about a series of negative benchmarks often associated with aging, such as illness, memory loss, inability to

drive, end to sexual activity, difficulty paying bills, and the struggle with loneliness and depression. In every instance, older adults report experiencing them at lower levels — often far lower — than younger adults expect to encounter them when they grow old.

It gets so confusing. We hear about the negative views of aging and then about 80- and 90-year-olds mountain climbing. It seems as though we have two or more different realities of aging.

As an example, Fishman shared his family story in a speech sponsored by The Institute for the Ages, a national organization in Sarasota focused on aging. His father was ill for 16 years. Ted rushed to his father’s deathbed repeatedly. On the other hand, his 83-year-old mother was about to take a major trip. Fishman suggests that misery, dying and death live alongside activity, productivity and engagement.

The bigger question to consider: What can we all do to make the most of this the time of our lives, even if we have two or more realities of aging living side by side?

To get a handle on the issue, I searched the Web for advice on how to make these extra years count. I found many sug-



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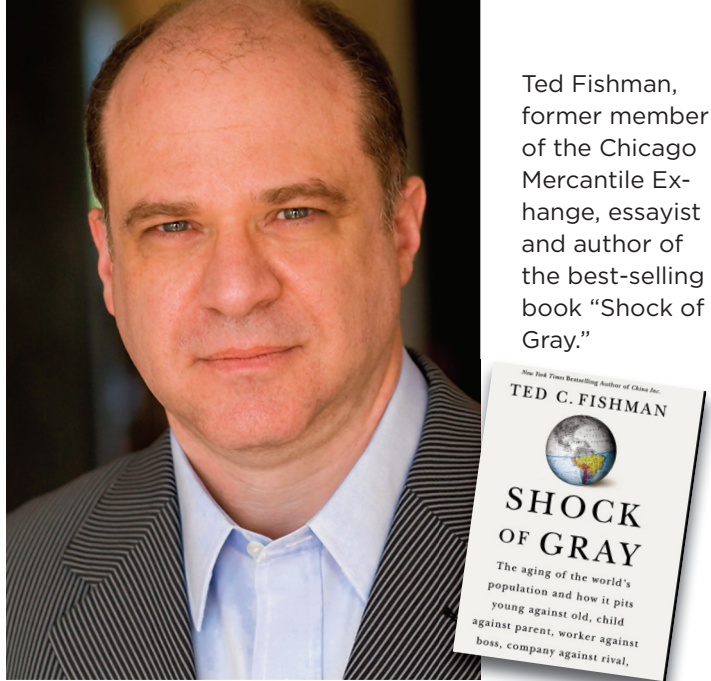
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Ted Fishman, former member of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, essayist and author of the best-selling book "Shock of Gray."

gestions: eat properly, exercise, meditate, balance competing demands, attend to your spiritual life. I learned that there is no single magic bullet. What it takes is flexibility — the ability to engage in periodic assessments of yourself and your environment and figure out what is working. Just as we meet with our financial advisers yearly and often have a yearly physical, we need to conduct our own "living longer, living well checkup."

Dr. George E. Vaillant's work is instructive. A psychiatrist, former professor at Harvard University Medical School and director of the Longitudinal Study of Adult Development at Harvard, he has uncovered what he thinks allows people to age well by following many groups from youth to old age: Harvard freshman over a 60-year period, inner-city non-delinquent youth and 90 women from the Stanford (Terman) study of gifted children. This extensive data provided the groundwork for his book "Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life" (2002).

"Positive aging means to love, to work, to learn something we did not know yesterday ... Successful aging means giving to others ... receiving from others, and ... employing elegant unconscious coping mechanisms that make lemonade out of lemons."

Based on Vaillant's work, our living longer, living well checkup can include tracking our answers to these questions:

Am I learning something new?

Am I giving to others?

Am I able to accept help from others?

Can I make lemonade out of lemons?

Am I able to work, love, and play?

Do I still have a passion that gets me going in the morning?

Revisit these questions periodically. If your answer is yes to all of them, then you clearly are living well. If your answer is no, think about some ways to make needed changes. That way we can eliminate the maybe!

Sarasota resident Nancy K. Schlossberg, a former professor of counseling at the University of Maryland, College Park, writes self-help books, blogs, lectures and runs workshops on coping with change. You can contact her through [www.transitionsthroughlife.com](http://www.transitionsthroughlife.com) or at [nancyks4@gmail.com](mailto:nancyks4@gmail.com).