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# Number Our Days: A Triumph Of Continuity And Culture Among Jewish Old People In An Urban Ghetto



## Synopsis

When noted anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff received a grant to explore the process of aging, she decided to study some elderly Jews from Venice, California, rather than to report on a more exotic people. The story of the rituals and lives of these remarkable old people is, as Bel Kaufman said, "one of those rare books that leave the reader somehow changed." Here Dr. Myerhoff records the stories of a culture that seems to give people the strength to face enormous daily problems -- poverty, neglect, loneliness, poor health, inadequate housing and physical danger. The tale is a poignant one, funny and often wise, with implications for all of us about the importance of ritual, the agonies of aging, and the indomitable human spirit.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Charles Silberman The New York Times Book Review Professor Myerhoff is that rarity, a social scientist who writes with a novelist's eye and ear....She teaches us more about "the proper way to live" than all the self-help books combined.  
Anne Sklar Los Angeles Times Book Review An invigorating celebration of courage and stamina...a rich tapestry of love, sorrow, and rituals remembered and continued.  
Maggie Kuhn Gray Panthers A compelling and compassionate account of elderly Jews who have much to teach us about surviving and aging with grace and wisdom.

The chairperson of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Southern California, Dr. Myerhoff collaborated on a film about her work while she was doing the research for *Number Our Days*. It won the 1977 Academy Award for best short documentary. Her last book, *Peyote Hunt*, was

nominated for a National Book Award.

I found this book amazing – truly life changing. It discusses many of life’s most important questions such as: Why do some people die young while others live to extreme old age? How can one cope with impending death? If God exists, why does he permit suffering? What must one do to feel a sense of integrity and completion in old age? This book distills the wisdom of dozens of very elderly people who have experienced extreme hardship and suffering. (Many are concentration camp survivors, and all lost close relatives in the Holocaust.) I am a middle-aged woman with a life-threatening illness, and this book was exactly what I needed: a crash course on the meaning of life. I also gained tremendous insight into my own Eastern European Jewish ancestors. In particular, my paternal grandmother, who was born around 1903 in Belarus, was affectionate when I was a child, but extremely harsh and critical when I became an adult. For decades after her death, I was convinced she just didn’t like me. This book has made me see her in a new light. I now believe her harsh, critical comments were simply an accepted way of communicating among adults in her culture, designed to help recipients improve themselves. I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants insights into life, mortality, and old age. In other words, I recommend this book to any person who gains insight through reading. This recommendation stands even though I disagree with some of Dr. Meyerhoff’s interpretations. For example, she saw the elders at the senior center as being very argumentative and angry. The interpretation I have now made of my own grandmother’s behavior – that she wasn’t angry, and instead just communicated according to the norms of her culture – is not one that Dr. Meyerhoff considered. But in fact, many cultures are more emotionally expressive than the United States, and far more direct in their criticism. People in these cultures sound angry to Americans, even during rewarding discussions with friends. I also did not see the elders as lonely and abandoned by their children. Instead, they seemed to prefer the company of their peers. One elderly woman was quoted as saying she wanted her children to focus on their careers, instead of visiting her. It’s possible that many of the other seniors felt the same way. When Dr. Meyerhoff said the seniors are neglected, she may actually have been projecting her own fears of old age onto them. I suggest ignoring the claims that the seniors felt angry and abandoned, because there is really no good evidence that this was true. Once one ignores those claims, this becomes an astonishingly uplifting book. The elders in the book lead rich, meaningful lives despite extreme old age, childhoods full of hardship and persecution, and the murders (by the Nazis) of many of their family members. As for readers who do not like the

sociological analysis, just skip those parts unless you are assigned this book for a college course. (And if you *are* reading this book for a college course, well, all of *Symbolic Interactionism* is pretty similar to the sociology in this book. )

Wonderful ethnography and worth the read. A little dense in the first chapter, so definitely academic, but don't let that put you off from reading it for enjoyment. Wonderful stories and perspective. This is not the type of dry ethnography you might have found in the earlier part of the last century. This is a collection of dialogue, stories, research, narration and introspection that highlights the contradictions of inherent in a subculture and in our own bias.

A classic cultural anthropological text. A must have for gerontological scholars.

An excellent read that just happens to be a classic ethnography. It's a timeless, well-written story about a vibrant community of Jewish elders at an urban day activity center, no doubt the work of an anthropologist who was a master at her craft. This is a must-read for any researcher interested in this method of inquiry - have recommended this as required reading for a qualitative research methods course, and will definitely watch the Academy Award-winning documentary tied to this book.

What a marvelous book. Barbara did an outstanding job of describing the characters. I would have loved to have met her. She was taken much too soon. She gives the Jewish residents dignity and respect

Such a sweet book! I read it for a class but would recommend this for anyone interested in Jewish culture, the elderly or anthropology in general. Super fun read!

Although this book is "old" by contemporary standards, it is by far the best book I have read about aging in our youth-oriented society. I heartily recommend it to everyone who is into the "Ageing to Sage-ing" movement.

Excellent from any perspective. Fascinating subject, well-written, interesting point of view, especially for people of my generation whose grandparents, had I known them, could have been just like the people in the book.

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