

SUBWAY LINE, No. 9

Philosophical Thinking is Yoga for the Mind®

Also by Wilhelm Schmid

High on Low: Harnessing the Power of Unhappiness



Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc. provides a
publication venue for original philosophical
thinking steeped in lived life, in line with our
motto: *philosophical living & lived philosophy.*

WHAT WE
GAIN AS
WE GROW
OLDER

On Gelassenheit

Translated from the German
by Michael Eskin

WILHELM SCHMID

Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc. ✎ New York

Published by Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc.
P. O. Box 250645, New York, NY 10025, USA
www.westside-philosophers.com / www.yogaforthemind.us

English translation copyright © 2015 by Upper West Side
Philosophers, Inc. First edition published in 2016.
Originally published as: *Gelassenheit: was wir gewinnen, wenn wir
älter werden*, Copyright © Insel Verlag Berlin 2014



Cover Image: Peter Paul Rubens, “Old Woman and Boy With
Candles,” c. 1616–1617, used by permission of The Royal Pic-
ture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, Netherlands
The colophon is a registered trademark of
Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be repro-
duced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, record-
ing, or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the
publisher. For all inquiries concerning permission to reuse mate-
rial from any of our titles, please contact the publisher in writing,
or contact the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc. (CCC), 222
Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, USA (www.copyright.
com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schmid, Wilhelm, 1953-
[Gelassenheit. English]
What we gain as we grow older : on Gelassenheit / translated
from the German by Michael Eskin.
pages cm
ISBN 978-1-935830-31-3 (alk. paper)
1. Aging--Psychological aspects. 2. Calmness. I. Title.
BF724.55.A35S36 2016
155.67--dc23

2015010038

Typesetting & design: UWSP, Inc.

CONTENTS



Translator's Note on 'Gelassenheit' / 7

Preface / 13

1. Thoughts on the Stages of Life / 25
2. Understanding the Idiosyncrasies
of Aging / 35
3. Habits Make Life Easier / 49
4. Enjoying Bodily Pleasures
and Happiness / 57
5. Dealing with Pain and Tragedy / 69

6. Experiencing Intimacy through
Touch / 81
 7. Love and Friendship, Being Part
of a Community / 91
 8. Gelassenheit and Serenity through
Mindfulness / 103
 9. Relating to Death, and Living
with It / 113
 10. Thoughts on a Possible Life after
Death / 125
- Acknowledgments* / 137
- About the Author and Translator* / 139

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE ON 'GELASSENHEIT'

(pronounced: 'gue-láh-sen-hite')



The common German noun 'gelassenheit' carries an array of interrelated meanings that it would be virtually impossible to render with any one of its possible English equivalents – such as 'tranquility', 'equanimity', 'serenity', 'mellowness', 'laidbackness', 'placidity', 'relaxedness', 'coolness', 'calmness',

What We Gain As We Grow Older

‘impassibility’ or ‘unperturbedness’ – without forfeiting its semantic and stylistic richness and breadth, and occluding its panoply of shades and nuances in favor of one or the other, depending on context. Just think of the differences in meaning, style, connotation and cultural purview between ‘laidback’ and ‘serene’, ‘relaxed’ and ‘equanimous’, ‘cool’ and ‘unperturbed’, ‘mellow’ and ‘placid’, ‘calm’ and ‘impassible’. Yet all of these meanings (and more) are contained and always in play in the single word ‘gelassenheit’, whose semantic and stylistic gestalt by far exceeds the sum of its parts. That is why, following the example of other foreign terms that have entered the English language in the original (e.g. ‘schadenfreude’, ‘zeitgeist’, ‘uber’, ‘sitzfleisch’, ‘frisson’, ‘chutpah’ or ‘chi’), I have decided to retain ‘gelassenheit’ (and its cognate adjective ‘gelassen’) in the original, in the hope that introducing this term into the English idiom will not only do justice to the word and its meanings, but also broaden and en-

On Gelassenheit

rich our understanding of and perspective on the real-life phenomena it signifies.*

* In English translations of the works of twentieth-century German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger, 'gelassenheit' is often rendered as 'releasement' – an inelegant neologism that, in my view, captures neither the mundane, everyday character of 'gelassenheit' (which Heidegger intentionally valorizes), nor the specific human trait(s) that 'gelassenheit' and its adjectival cognate 'gelassen' denote and connote. Just imagine saying: "John approached this problem with *releasement*," or "You gotta be *released*, bro!" or "You ought to take it with a little more *releasement* – look at Buddha, and how *released* he was!" Yet in all of these instances you would use 'gelassenheit' or 'gelassen' in German.





ON GELASSENHEIT





PREFACE



At first, it was merely a phenomenon that baffled me, an observation I couldn't help coming back to. Then, as my fiftieth birthday was approaching, I was invited to give my first public lecture on the issue that wouldn't leave me alone: aging. After I had finished, several elderly members of the audience came up to me and said: "Nice lecture, young man, but you cannot yet possibly know about these things!" Indeed, my reflections were not rooted in my own experience of growing

What We Gain As We Grow Older

older so much as my mother's. I admired her for the *gelassenheit* with which she embraced it – so remarkably different from so many others – and I looked over her shoulder in order to learn as much as I could from her in the event that some day it might come in handy. Where did her *gelassenheit* stem from? How could I, too, attain it one day, in the distant future?

In that lecture I made fun of the very notion of 'growing older': isn't 'older' the comparative form of 'old'? Does this mean that we would rather be 'older' than 'old'? When I am sixty, I boasted, I will certainly not refer to myself as 'older'; being 'old' will be enough for me. And, anyway, I went on – as though I were among the very last to have the privilege of experiencing it – the question of how to deal with aging would soon be but a distant memory of 'old age' at the very point of its disappearance, on which researchers around the globe were busy working. I, for one, was happy to take it in stride and devote all my energy to living with it as

On Gelassenheit

gelassen as I possibly could – accepting it without resistance, neither sugarcoating nor vilifying it but, rather, embracing the entire gamut of its comforts and discomforts, its attractive and not-so-attractive aspects, viewing it neither through rose-colored nor tinted glasses but, preferably, through a clear pair. After all, isn't a sober view of things the true privilege of aging?

In the meantime, I, too, have made it: I am sixty now – and that means old. The truth is: it is not easy for me. Gelassen I am not. On my sixtieth birthday, I was overcome by a profound sadness about having to bid farewell to my fifties, a wonderful decade that I wouldn't ever be able to experience again. Ten years earlier, I had already been downcast about saying good-bye to my forties (which had been really intense), especially since I did not expect much from the years to come. Sure, these are only numbers; but they do signify realities that gradually creep up on you, until you are suddenly hit by the realization that the past stretches out,

What We Gain As We Grow Older

the future contracts and death closes in. No amount of mental preparation can anticipate what it actually feels like when things start getting serious. Catchy one-liners aiming to downplay the severity of aging only go so far: “You are as old as you feel”? Really? Come on, let’s face it, usually you’re older. And how you feel will change nothing about it – on the contrary, it will only lead you to deceive yourself. True, not all deception is bad, but in this case you will end up doubly disappointed when you realize that all the hip talk notwithstanding the truth will have its way.

For a long time I imagined old age as life spent placidly on a sunny patio, reclining in a deck chair, looking out onto the landscape, at peace with myself and the world. What I am still missing, though, is the patio – and consequently all the rest. Only one thing is certain: I never want to be one of those old geezers who will do anything to stay young, to the point of ridicule. I don’t want to become the irate old guy who releases his

On Gelassenheit

anger and frustration about his dwindling life upon anything that flourishes. I don't want to set out clad in the armor of self-righteousness, wasting whatever strength I may have left on geriatric attacks on the young, who presumably get everything wrong. In fact, the young, I am convinced, are always right; and even when they are not, they are still right, which is to say: they have all the right in the world to gather their own experiences – good or bad, they will learn from them.

We can only be *gelassen* about what we accept as true; otherwise, we risk squandering our resources in the futile attempt at denying the reality of what is allegedly untrue, which will remain completely unaffected by it. One aspect of the truth of aging is that more than any other form of becoming it is confronted with transience. It has always been that way, but in the modern world it has become a real nuisance: for if technology can make virtually anything happen, why not eternal youth as well? I, too, would like to have it, but what kind of life would that

What We Gain As We Grow Older

be? I, too, would like it if life were all rainbows and butterflies, but wouldn't this actually exacerbate the negative and disagreeable? So, rather than wasting my grapes on fighting aging, I prefer wearing the life etched into my every crease and wrinkle with confidence.

Learning to live with one's own aging is the new task: making an art of what once was a given – growing older; turning our society's *anti-aging bias* into a true *art of aging* that will enable us to live *with* rather than *against* the inevitable. Such an *art of living with aging* can help us to meet the particular challenges of this life stage in a way that will ensure that even as we get on in years we continue appreciating the beauty and the very gift of life.

The *art of living* has long been my main philosophical topic, not because I have mastered it, but because I need it. The concept of the art of living goes back to antiquity – *techne tou biou* or *techne peri bion* in Greek, *ars vitae* or *ars vivendi* in Latin – and it implies a

On Gelassenheit

life consciously and purposefully lived. Often, 'art of living' is taken to mean a kind of footloose and fancy-free existence. Certainly, that is an option for anyone who wishes to pursue it; but it is not an endeavor that deserves to be called an 'art'. A quite different, more sophisticated approach consists in consciously steering and, if need be, creatively redirecting one's life. This kind of awareness is not always possible, nor is it always necessary. For it is enough to stop and reflect from time to time – as, for instance, right now – on the fact that we are all headed for old age. But what does that mean? How does it happen? Where am I at this particular juncture in my life? What am I to expect? How can I prepare myself for it? What lies within my power, and what does not? This is where the art of living comes in, understood as a certain awareness that will allow us to find meaning in this life stage as well, to live consciously and meaningfully, lest the temptation to aimlessly drift along gets the better of us.

What We Gain As We Grow Older

The problem with aging in the modern world is that it has, for the most part, been viewed as meaningless, as a ‘disease’ even, which must be detected early and treated aggressively before it can be surgically removed. This negative view of aging as devoid of meaning and requiring massive intervention could be one of the side effects of the modern *Me-ism* epidemic, which preaches the ever-youthful *Me: Me*, forever and ever – a longing that is most pointedly articulated in the much-covered 1984 pop anthem-cum-battle cry *Forever Young* by Alphaville. However, as soon as one view begins to dominate, competing views are called for, for interpretive monopolies threaten life itself by putting it to sleep. Contradiction alone can revive it. A different approach, then – one that could become the hallmark of a modified, alternative modernity – conceives of aging as rife with meaning. But what exactly is it?

A *natural* sense of aging might consist in the fact that our initiation into the inexorable

On Gelassenheit

truth that life is forever on the wane occurs gradually, as though nature itself were intent on being extra careful with its creature, that hypersensitive tyrant called ‘human being’. Nature, too, is familiar with the *forever-young-principle*, of course – only in nature this principle operates in a completely different way from modern culture, for it is nature itself that remains forever young in letting old life pass on and new life emerge. Nature could also end each life with a swift cut – the kind of death many dream of, but one destined to elude most, for nature prefers the slow process of senescence. This way sufficient time remains to tend to young, budding life, to share one’s experiences and continue gathering new ones. Living by this *natural* sense of aging means, metaphorically speaking, going on flourishing for one’s own and others’ sake for as long as it may be given to a more or less indestructible plant, and consenting to the inevitable onset of wilting. It means celebrating life – all life, including one’s own – for as long as it lasts, and beyond; it means

What We Gain As We Grow Older

experiencing life's plenitude and accepting its temporal limits with *gelassenheit*. Are we capable of that?

A *cultural* sense of aging might consist in the discovery of resources that will enrich and alleviate our life in this stage in particular. *Gelassenheit* is one such resource. There seems to be a shortage of it these days. The modern world makes us restless, casting our lives in such turmoil as to make us long for *gelassenheit*. An important topic in Western philosophy and Christian theology going back to Epicurus' (341-270 B.C.E.) notion of *ataraxia* and Meister Eckhart's (c.1260-c.1328) concept of *gelazenheit*, it has been forgotten in modern times, having fallen prey to militant activism and scientific-technological optimism. Its gentle reserve is no longer rated a virtue; yet, the would-be *coolness* that has come to replace it still retains the memory of its human warmth. For centuries, one life stage in particular appeared to have been made for *gelassenheit*: old age. But it, too, has now become a time of up-

On Gelassenheit

heaval – gelassenheit doesn't seem to be able to succeed as easily anymore. How can it be regained? Can a society that is growing increasingly older grow more gelassen as well?

I don't possess gelassenheit, but for me it is something I ought to aspire to if I wish to live a beautiful life. It is certainly a gift in any life stage, but it is particularly beneficial as we get on in years, as life gets harder and more scant. It may actually be the case that gelassenheit only becomes possible as we grow older. After all, it is easier to be gelassen when no longer everything is at stake, when our hormones are no longer raging, when we have a lifetime's worth of experience, a broadened outlook and a time-tested sense for people and things to rely on.

This book outlines ten steps to gelassenheit based on observation, experience and reflection. It is about the kind of gelassenheit that is itself gelassen, and not at all boastful and provocative (“Look at me and how gelassen I am!”). And it is about staking out, together with the reader, a sensible and practi-



AVAILABLE FROM UWSP

- ✧ *November Rose: A Speech on Death*
by Kathrin Stengel
(2008 Independent Publisher Book Award)
- ✧ *November-Rose: Eine Rede über den Tod*
by Kathrin Stengel
- ✧ *Philosophical Fragments of a Contemporary Life*
by Julien David
- ✧ *17 Vorurteile, die wir Deutschen gegen Amerika
und die Amerikaner haben und die so nicht ganz
stimmen können* by Misha Waiman
- ✧ *The DNA of Prejudice: On the One and the Many*
by Michael Eskin
(2010 Next Generation Indie Book Award
for Social Change)
- ✧ *Descartes' Devil: Three Meditations*
by Durs Grünbein
- ✧ *Fatal Numbers: Why Count on Chance*
by Hans Magnus Enzensberger
- ✧ *The Vocation of Poetry* by Durs Grünbein
(2011 Independent Publisher Book Award)
- ✧ *The Waiting Game: An Essay on the Gift of Time*
by Andrea Köhler
- ✧ *Mortal Diamond: Poems* by Durs Grünbein

- ☞ *Yoga for the Mind: A New Ethic for Thinking and Being & Meridians of Thought*
by Michael Eskin & Kathrin Stengel
- ☞ *Health Is in Your Hands: Jin Shin Jyutsu – Practicing the Art of Self-Healing (With 51 Flash Cards for the Hands-on Practice of Jin Shin Jyutsu)*
by Waltraud Riegger-Krause
- ☞ *The Wisdom of Parenthood: An Essay*
by Michael Eskin
- ☞ *A Moment More Sublime: A Novel*
by Stephen Grant
- ☞ *High on Low: Harnessing the Power of Unhappiness*
by Wilhelm Schmid
- ☞ *Become a Message: Poems* by Lajos Walder
- ☞ *What We Gain As We Grow Older: On Gelassenheit*
by Wilhelm Schmid
- ☞ *On Dialogic Speech* by L. P. Yakubinsky
- ☞ *Potentially Harmless: A Philosopher's Manhattan*
by Kathrin Stengel (forthcoming)
- ☞ *In Praise of Weakness* by Alexandre Jollien
(forthcoming)