Preface

I began work in research at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center as an interviewer on a study about childlessness. With an eye to Erikson's next to last psychosocial stage—generativity versus stagnation—the project explored how childless elders compensated for a lack of biological generativity. "Some trees bear fruit and some trees give shade," one woman explained her ease with the choices that she made in life and with circumstances that were thrust upon her. Although some men and women regretted being childless, most elders fought their regrets through introspection and an active decision to believe that the "products" of their lives were worthwhile.

Some time later, during research of elderly women's experiences of personal poverty, I understood that "objective" definitions of poverty had little to do with these ladies' subjective experiences. For most women, as long as basic needs were met, lack of finances did not mean poverty. Poverty was often interpreted as a state of mind that occurred through broken relationships or a lack of connection with significant others. To the women I interviewed, poverty was more of a personal lack than a financial one.

Sometime after that I explored the meaning of forgiveness to a sample of elderly men and women varied by race and religion. Elders did not talk about forgiveness as an abstract concept; they told complex and complicated stories of "wrongs" they had done to others or that had been done to them. Some elders thought that forgiveness might be construed as weakness and therefore rejected it. Other elders saw forgiveness as an act that was mandated by their religious beliefs, and struggled, sometimes with great resentment, to forgive.

As I looked back, the stream of research that I undertook followed a stream of life where experiences shape a life by the choices they offer and the sense of control they take away. The experiences I researched were often interpreted by elders as either dignity-giving or dignity-depriving, depending on, ultimately, the meaning each person gave to the experience. Older persons created meaning using a retrospective view of their entire lives. Childlessness, poverty and forgiveness held particular meanings in old age because each was set within the large frame of a long life. The metaphor of a shade-giving tree for childlessness

showed that this elder took into account, when choosing the metaphor, her words and deeds of many decades.

I explored the experience of suffering because I wondered how an individual incorporates the emotional and spiritual fractiousness of suffering into a life already laboring under the "work" of old age. I questioned how elders create meaning for suffering at a stage in life when personal resources are lessened and time seems to be "running out." I had no difficulty in recruiting respondents for this research. As with former projects, I was moved by elders' willingness to share their experiences with me as well as their need to do so. "No one," many said, "asked me these questions before." Elders seemed pleased to tell their life stories and stories of suffering to me—the intimate stranger.

As "popular" as the subject was with elders, it was as unpopular with editors. As data was analyzed and I sought publication, one journal editor, in rejecting an article about this subject that I had sent him, accused me of adding to ageism and ageist stereotypes by discussing "negative" aspects of old age, such as suffering. "Why didn't you," he asked, "write an article about happiness?" A kindly book editor rejected the manuscript saying, "Suffering is not a social problem; it is an ongoing human problem that will never go away."

I both agreed and disagreed. In respondents' definitions and descriptions, suffering was as social and political a problem as poverty, as revealing of destructive religious absolutes as forgiveness, and as "loaded" with culturally negative connotations as childlessness. Yet, elders' accounts of suffering hinted that even with social parity among all people, suffering would remain a human experience. This observation revealed my own bias concerning the experience of suffering. I define suffering as a visceral awareness of my own or another's vulnerability to be broken at any time and in many ways. In other words, human brokenness is the ground in which suffering takes root; negative events, incidents or time periods in life unearth both the clay and the humus. And I find suffering meaningful. I understood that my response to suffering flows from my ethnic and religious background, my life experience, and my age (I am not elderly). I also recognized that the older people I interviewed dwell in culture-bound and value-laden space. Their definitions of suffering, like mine, emerge from the uniqueness of their lives as well as the profundity of their experiences. I recognized that persons interviewed for this study may not share my definition of suffering or my perception of its value, so I did not define suffering or offer my opinion of its worth during interviews—unless asked.

In writing this book, my strongest sense of accountability was to the elders whose stories I tell. I protect their identity by using pseudonyms throughout the book, and I am faithful to their words and to the voices they used to share their lives and stories of suffering. I also acknowledge that respondents expressed their suffering non-verbally as well as with words. Their languages of suffering, such as silence, gestures, cries and stories, and their definitions, portraits, and theories about suffering were varied and unique. Respondents viewed suffering

as eminently human and part of the life course as well as a political outrage that thrives in "isms" that continue to exist—ageism, classism, racism, and sexism.

Literature on suffering suggests that the best way to know what suffering is or what it means to an individual is to ask. So, this book is about suffering in old age in the words of experts—elders who told me they had suffered. I could have written a book about happiness, but I chose to write about suffering. As the journal editor imagined, this book is sad in parts. But it is also humorous, hopeful, peculiar, and unpredictable. There are no stereotypes here.