

Your money or your life!" demands the mugger in an old joke. "Take my life," replies his befuddled victim. "I'm saving my money for old age."

A crazy response? Yes. But a lot of us who are trying to live simply get panicky and confused when we think about growing old. How will we make ends meet? What if Social Security goes broke? Are we preparing adequately now?

With all the talk about IRAs and insurance policies and money-market funds, we can easily conclude that financial investments are the most important preparations to make for our later years.

So I was intrigued to learn of a different opinion expressed by none other than a former banker. Michael Phillips was once a vice-president of the Bank of California. Today he vigorously challenges the idea that accumulating money is the way to find happiness and security in old age. Instead he points to what he calls "simple-living investments." By this he means activities and habits which cost little or no money but which will pay handsome dividends when we mature.

Phillips's comments got me thinking about the elders I've known and admired. I asked myself what "simple-living investments" had made their later years lively and secure. Then, using Phillips's suggestions and my own observations, I began listing "investment" ideas that seem to have worked well in helping other people prepare for old age. Here are some that came to mind:

□ *Develop skills that will be useful to others.* How many times has your church or social-action

group wished for a retired person who could volunteer his or her bookkeeping skills? Or fix-it expertise? Every time you teach yourself such a skill now, you're investing in your future usefulness.

□ *Plant a garden.* Ralph is a regular fixture in our community garden. He gives away extra tomato plants in the spring and coaches the novices through their first season. A lifetime of gardening has rewarded him with friends, entertainment, and a practical skill for putting food on the table.

□ *Invest in good health habits.* Some people have gone overboard on this. But the rest of us could still afford to pay closer attention to nutrition, exercise, and stress levels. An IRA can't buy back your health.

□ *Memorize Bible verses and hymns.* If you've spent much time around the older generation of Christians, you know how many elders cherish the verses and hymns they memorized in their youth. Invest in some memory work now for a lifetime of sustenance.

□ *Learn to appreciate the present moment.* Robert Louis Stevenson put it well: "The best things are nearest. Breathe in your nostrils, light in your eyes, duties at your hand, the path of right just before you. Then do not grasp at the stars, but do life's plain, common work as it comes, certain that daily duties and daily bread are the sweetest things in life."

□ *Nurture a wide circle of friends.* Some health workers think a friendship support network is our most effective tool for wellness. But don't limit your circle to people your own age—you

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may outlive them and find yourself lonely.

□ *Cultivate flexibility.* You say you won't try new food? You won't listen to new music? You don't want to hear different points of view? Be careful! You may be training yourself to be an old grouch whom no one will want to be around!

□ *Develop spiritual disciplines.* You can't expect habits of prayer or meditation to emerge suddenly when you reach sixty-five. Far better to have settled into these habits over a lifetime of practice.

□ *Make a home for animals.* Living with a dog, cat, parakeet, or even a goldfish is good for us, say medical researchers these days. That's hardly news to all of us who have found animal friends a much more satisfying investment than television sets, VCRs, and other electronic gadgetry.

□ *Prepare for a simple funeral.* Some people's biggest investment is their own funeral. But with the spread of memorial societies and other alternative funeral options, you can arrange to avoid the high cost of dying.

□ *Work for a healthy environment and a*

peaceful world. Recently I read that jogging along busy roads and breathing exhaust fumes may do your lungs as much damage as smoking cigarettes. By themselves, even good personal health habits can't overcome an unhealthy environment. We need clean air, pure water—and a world safe from nuclear devastation.

My list of "simple-living investments" is just a beginning. I'm sure you can think of additions. But even these few ideas help me realize once again that our most important investments have little to do with how we spend our money and a lot to do with how we spend our lives.

Bulging bank accounts won't insure us a happy and secure retirement. In fact, if we concentrate completely on money matters, we can end up—like the befuddled victim in that old joke—throwing away our lives.

So when you start thinking about growing old don't think all dollars and no sense. Remember the old joke and ask yourself, "My money . . . or my life?"