

Growing Into Old Age

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AN HASIDIC TALE

Rabbi Hanock heard an old tune and said, "Even melodies that grow old lose their savor. Once this tune made our hearts leap, now it has lost its savor. This is like old age, for when we grow old we lose our savor. Sometimes this is a good thing. Then I see that after all I have done I am nothing at all; I must start my work over again. And it is said of God, 'God renews creation every day continually.'"

Adapted from Martin Buber's, *Tales of the Hasidim*.

This story can either give us despair or a sense of new purpose as we feel the effects of old age move through our being. The main point is that old age is a time of choice, to embrace the tasks proper to old age, to renew ourselves and in a sense, to start over again. I suggest that the choice made upon entering old age is the most important choice of our life.

Helen Luke in her book, *Old Age* describes this choice, "It may be painful, requiring (should we choose to continue to grow old, instead of merely sinking into the aging process) that we let go of much that has been central even to our inner lives." My hunch is that when we choose to grow old in the above sense then we enter the true "golden years."

What does this step entail? There will come a moment when the spirit of accomplishment and success must go away. When this moment happens, all too often it may itself be refused and unrecognized and the possibility of growing into old age recedes. There may follow a desperate effort to hold on to youth and the past, toward a repetition of our life's triumphs, to arrest the flow of the river of life as it approaches the ocean of eternity. Then old age becomes decay, not in the natural sense of the cycle of life and death, but in the negative and horrible sense of disintegration and despair.

For those who recognize the moment the choice is either to let go, to embrace the tasks reserved for old age or, a flight into the past that is both futile and self-defeating. It might be true that we can negotiate all the other stages of psychological and spiritual development successfully and disorder our entire human development by failing to negotiate this last step. The reverse might also be true in that we can stumble our way through incomplete and distorted stages of development and with the final stage, growing into old age, we can redeem the entire lot.

It is also interesting to note that this critical choice has a profound effect on others. I have learned to observe older Jesuits in my religious communities and how they are entering old age. Their lives give an important clue as to the spiritual and emotional well being of the entire community. If they are men who are accepting the tasks of old age, then that community has a solid basis for spiritual and emotional health. If they are refusing the tasks of old age and disintegrating into decay then that community is in trouble.

How these Jesuits were in their younger lives is not always indicative of their role in old age. Some successful Jesuits in their life of ministry have been terrible grouches in old age. The reverse is true in that I have known some who were disasters in their ministries and now have become the bed rock of the spiritual and emotional life of their communities in old age.

There are adequate descriptions in psychological literature of growing into old age and the tasks of this growth. However, a profound and wise expression of growing into old age is offered in classical literature. It speaks of all that psychological literature does, but with a flair and depth not found in scientific writing. Interestingly enough this description from Shakespeare antedates much of the psychological literature. The growing into old age is given through the words of King Lear:

"Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, ...
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies: ..."

This rich imagery of King Lear describes growing into old age. The prison is not a walled prison but rather, the effects of old age. King Lear willingly embraces the prison of old age when his body weakens, his mental powers fail, his sight becomes dimmed, his hearing fades and his strength to move about is curtailed. The choice is either to accept this imprisonment or to deny this limiting process. He chose to embrace it, even with eagerness.

The two refers to Lear and Cordelia, his inner child that has been discovered and embraced as a result of life's suffering. Now in old age the inner self that Lear so brutally rejected in younger life returns as a friend and companion. It is interesting how many people want to know how to befriend and be at peace with their inner child and Shakespeare tells us the psychological truth that this reconciliation is only brought about through suffering.

The next lines concern blessing and forgiveness. In old age King Lear feels the need to ask for forgiveness from the young, which is one of the gifts of reflective old age. In turn, youth seeks a blessing from the elderly. The truth is that this kneeling before the young and seeking forgiveness is the blessing that the elderly give and youth seek.

King Lear then tells us the four activities of old age: to pray, to sing, to tell old tales and to laugh at gilded butterflies. All of these activities are without purpose in the sense that they must be freed from the preoccupation of the goals of the ego.

Prayer is to contact the very core of our being. Song is the expression of spontaneous joy in the face of chaos and unresolved issues of life. As we shall see, this is the result of having spied the mystery of God even in chaos and the unresolved. Telling of tales is one of the richest functions of old age. The keepers of the wisdom of the ages is passed on to the young by this sharing. Laughter is the expression of pure delight in beauty, beauty of which the golden butterfly is the perfect symbol, reborn again and again symbolizing the fragile and beautiful present moment.

The final responsibility of each person's life is not to explain or to analyze, but to penetrate into the very mystery of things, like God's spy. Explanations make clear only partial truths and the danger is to mistake partial truths for the total truth. Old age looks again and sees the mystery of things that reveal the whole, not just the part. And the mystery that the elderly spy out is that God is at the heart and core of every manifestation of life.

For those who choose growing into old age they may embrace the gifts reserved for old age. In the words of Helen Luke, "Old age becomes freedom, becomes the dance into which we may enter if we have passed through ... the purging flame of integration of these strange gifts."