

Reflections on Aging – a Time for Healing

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I want to reflect on the idea and reality of aging today as a seemingly “hot” topic in many minds and publications today. I can only speculate about the origin of this excitement about an event that has been with us humans as long as we can remember, but I think it has something to do with a renewed optimism about living longer and better lives, which has modified old age in certain ways and has introduced concerns about what to do with our extended expiration date. I do not speak from certified expertise in this area, but from my knowledge and passion as an observer of language, my own experiences as a surviving, aging, white male of the 20th century, and a student of a very long philosophical and literary tradition concerned with this topic.

So far my observations have led me to the discovery, that, although there is today a growing and diverse body of professional experts on aging who practice their craft diligently and honestly - and sometimes dishonestly – that certain, absolute fix eludes all of them. I further learned - and keep on learning - that the topic of aging is simultaneously a complex and a simple phenomenon. Jimmy Carter in his book on *The Virtues of Aging* speaks about the preferred simple life in old age: “Finding a way to lead the simple life is today’s most complicated problem.” Although there is much room for doom and gloom in a discussion like this, my mood is optimistic. I am of the opinion that in spite of the breakdowns that the process of aging entails, we can look at this phase of our journey with resolve, humor, reconciliation and healing. Besides this beloved prejudice I want to add that we also have certain responsibilities as aging people. It was Cicero who in reference to aging stated that “a person who lacks the means, within himself, to live a good and happy life will find any period of his (or her) existence

wearisome.” Any complaint about getting older is, therefore, arguing with nature’s plan and could be considered foolish indeed. Cicero also argues for a “philosophical calm”, a preferable attitude we can foster and spread around. God knows, we need it. But let’s fast-forward a couple of thousand years.

The demography of OUR civilization suggests that, at this time in our history, we live longer, but we generally have not dealt with the implications of this reality on a more comprehensive or holistic level with a new and challenging orientation toward health and happiness. With the exception of Andrew Weil and Jimmy Carter, most of the common and current conversations on aging are predominantly professional discourses in medicine, sociology, psychology and theology, which attempt to correct and manage the breakdowns in our experience of aging. There is even a new orientation in the sciences, called biogerontology, which specifically deals with the biology of aging. Yet, there is also a growing awareness within these professional endeavors that something is missing, and that there are new and growing concerns on the part of aging people that are not addressed. These concerns go beyond the discussions about limited capacities as part and result of the natural and the experience of abusive processes of growing old. The fact that so many people live longer is relatively new and even revolutionary in our history, and it challenges all the wisdom that has been accrued on this subject by thinkers from antiquity down to the scholars and experts of our time. When I consider the opinions, practices and theories on this subject, - all backed up with impressive, and sometimes depressive data, as well as professional jargon - I am struck by the polarity of the diverse range of observations. There are those who maintain that it is hopeless to change anything fundamental about the tragic hardship of aging while others, particularly trendy sociologists and plastic surgeons, are more generous with their optimism, encouragements and enthusiasm about the additional time assigned to us by virtue of intelligent

design or the forces of evolution. My assessment is that we simply live better lives now, and I think that we are generally better energized and educated about the choices we can make. We can have better food, more leisure and, perhaps, live with a less stressful regard for moral perfection. I suppose, that some of you may have other ideas about the latter.

If we consider only disease and death as predominant characteristics of aging, we usually react with either resistance or resignation. I am not a friend of extreme positions and suggest an emotional balance with a mood of acceptance and the consequent possibility of healing and peace. This can be the new frontier of the new threshold to what has been called a “second adulthood” in Gail Sheehy’s *New Passages*. Of course, we cannot deny death as a certainty, nor can we deny the possibility of sickness that may diminish our capacities. Yet, I perceive also our human capability to endure and persevere as long as we are alive in order to maximize health and happiness.

We all experience aging individually and differently, because by virtue of our biology, life-experiences and history, we are living in different moods in our lives, and this is well reflected in the way we approach our aging process individually and/or in partnership. Few, if any of us, can make a Faustian bargain where, at a late juncture of our lives, out of despair, we sell our soul to Mephistopheles, the agent from hell, in exchange for magical powers that lift us above the average potential of a human life with the help of magic and rejuvenation, the oldest dream of human kind and, probably, most cosmetic and pharmaceutical companies. But rejuvenation is NOT immortality, and the author of *Faust*, Goethe, knew this, of course. And so, Faust, in all his splendor and lust for life must, in the end also, succumb to death. But there is a catch, and as Mephistopheles reaches for his soul at the graveside, he is denied his price and Faust is saved by his human potential for good and concrete works, which will live on long after he has died. Of

course, in some of the more didactic versions of the *Faust* legend, the protagonist meets a terrible end. But Goethe's *Faust* represents the spirit of the 18th and the burgeoning 19th century.

In the new millennium, our attitudes on aging are changing along with a greater longevity and the growing awareness of the challenges of aging and retirement. The common suffering that still is part of aging for many is often caused by experiencing isolation, abandonment, loss of meaning, depression, and a vague sense of loss and uselessness. There is an overwhelming amount of information and treatment available on this subject, which usually addresses the breakdowns we associate with advanced age. We cannot afford to be blind to these breakdowns, but what is missing in most of the traditional and valid efforts of correcting these breakdowns is a consideration of a shift in the way we live toward the possibilities and challenges that the new way of aging presents, before we become mired in deep resignation over seemingly insurmountable problems.

Much of the personal experience of aging is still cradled in the moods and attitudes caused by our understanding of aging as an inexorable and increasingly pessimistic process that we must accept as human beings. And much of the degree of pessimism depends on whether you are a survivor of wars, and other foreign policy adventures, or if you are a victim of the traumatic experiences and cultural calamities available in our domestic battlefields.

Of course, we are aging our whole life from the moment we are born, and coming to terms with death, our ultimate and ever present destiny, is commonly dealt with in a communication process that does not always provide deep and assuring satisfaction for us. There are reasons for this dissatisfaction, and they have to do with the end of human existence as the end also of human communication based on experience. To be or not to be may indeed be the question, but what is the answer?

Our ultimate destiny has not changed over the millennia, but the prolonged process of aging can certainly present some optimism. Yet, there are also questions and realities that lurk in the background, bringing us a kind of existential discomfort. Many people of advanced age simply do not know how to create a satisfactory life in advanced age, and institutions are slow if not incapable and unwilling to facilitate this, and living in a culture obsessed with youth is not a supportive environment. The phenomenon and process of cultural aging, as Jean Amery writes about it in his book *On Aging*, seems particularly pertinent for our Western Civilization, where the experience of obsolescence is no longer restricted to consumer goods. In this process, we experience a loss of the ability to understand and deal with a world that is changing around us with blinding and accelerating speed.

Indeed, a deadly cultural contradiction seems to have gained the upper hand. It is a the cultural contradiction of the traditional leadership of the aging as pillars of wisdom and their currently perceived obsolescence by a new world that has overtaken and outpaced them, armed with computers, palm pilots, descending waistlines, baggy pants, firewalls and fancy cell phones. I am not saying that marketing is irrelevant and that wisdom is not problematic, but the current experience of alienation in language and thinking, intensified by political correctness, litigiousness, fashions and other proclivities, is a very serious matter and divides communities and generations. It compromises trust and intimacy in the human community, where solidarity is necessary for peaceful continuity.

As an older generation, we have lived and learned long enough to have seen human behavior go in several repetitive cycles from medieval armor to blue jeans, from battle axes to hydrogen bombs. But the more important questions might be: what can we do to achieve a deeper understanding, more peace and some practices to help us with our journey in the process of aging? I even invite the young and those of middle age in this

challenge. What I suggest most of all is the creation of a practical spirituality to guide us in our future endeavors. Of course, there is no certifiable “practical spirituality”. We must bring to this process all our creativity and good will to perform spiritual work.

As matured human beings we may also have come to a threshold where we finally summon the courage to embrace those values we always wanted to align with in our search for a more authentic way of being, based on the knowledge of our self that has been much compromised in our lives so far. This can create much uncertainty for us especially in the trusted roles we have played and are still playing in our lives, but we may have noticed that some things we once delighted in, which brought us much joy and grief, no longer have our passionate devotion. Such insights demand that we strive to reveal our true self even if we seem to float on the surface at times with unsure footing, reaching out for something unknown. In this spiritual quest we can:

- come to understand your spiritual self, learn acceptance and compassion.
- challenge the things that no longer work for us,
- be open to new passions and possibilities,
- learn to take better care of our often abused body.
- develop a sense of reverence and irreverence: know what is important, inconsequential, worthwhile.
- experience beauty to the fullest.
- speak and search for the truth.
- interact with nature.
- work on your legacy, our ethical will.
- be grateful for the gift of life.

Healing is a phenomenon of the body, the soul and the mind. These are not separate parts of who we are as human beings. They work together with us to maintain life as a quality existence. This is not intellectualism but the deep mystery of who we are as human beings. It takes wisdom and courage to defeat the emerging fear in all its manifestations. Let fear be a thing of the past for us. Replace it with a sense of awe. Let's look ahead with curiosity, without being riddled with arguments and doubts. I strongly suggest that advancing age does not mean disengagement, but a newer and more profound path of meaningful work. The challenge, therefore, is to create for ourselves, on a very personal and communal level, a story of reconciliation that represents us authentically and helps us to guide us to new realities that may reveal our ultimate destiny in a world we continuously create together with others, young and old.

I have asked my wife Michal to read a poem by the American poet Mary Oliver. It is one of the better texts that symbolizes both a mood of defiance and acceptance in the face of death.

The Black Snake
(Mary Oliver)

When the black snake
flashed unto the morning road,
and the truck could not swerve –
death, that is how it happens.

Now he lies looped and useless
as an old bicycle tire.
I stop the car
and carry him into the bushes.

He is as cool and gleaming
as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet
as a dead brother.

I leave him under the leaves

and drive on, thinking
about *death* : its suddenness,
its terrible weight,
its certain coming. Yet under

reason burns a brighter fire, which the bones
have always preferred.

It is the story of endless good fortune

It says to oblivion: not me!

It is the light at the center of every cell.

It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward
happily all spring through green leaves before
he came to the road.