

## ON AGING, ELDERING, AND DYING

Stephen Harrod Buhner

*We know so much about the outward world but so little about ourselves. Outward and upward takes all our time and, well, there's that lingering fear of going inward and descending, of looking inside, and discovering what we have hidden in the darkness inside our own hearts. Psychologists. Do they even understand what it means to be human? All that mentalness. They too often forget that the journey is an experiential one, not mental. And far too frequently we are urged to take this or that drug so as to avoid the darkness that has found us. We will ascend to the light then, where the good feelings are. A few psychologists will sometimes speak of the inner life. But, assuredly, it's life in the shallows, very rarely the deeps. The bravest among them may quietly point to the sea, to the place beyond the breaks, where the bottom drops, and the water turns dark, and all memory of land recedes. The place where, occasionally, people are lost. It's unlikely they have traveled there themselves. Rare that they have dropped, helpless, into that dark, cold, endlessly deepening place. The place where you must learn to swim . . . or die. They're shore walkers for the most part, afraid to turn their backs to the land and face only the sea. They urge us to swim this way or that in the shallows they know, coaches who have rarely themselves learned the art of swimming, much less the art of traveling into the depths. They don't understand that those of us who leave the safety of land must find our own way,*

*learn to swim, to descend, to breathe dark waters. That each of us who descend are being asked to face death and answer the most important question of all: What is the purpose of my life?*

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There is a threshold that lies between late middle age and old age. I know a lot about it; I have been going through it for awhile now. Actually, I know a lot about thresholds, far more than I ever wanted to learn. It turns out that they are inevitable transition points on the journey through life. I've made them a study ever since that time, long ago, when I fell, kicking and screaming, into the first one, the forbidding territory known as adolescence.

After all this time studying them, contemplating them, I no longer think it is accurate to say we cross them, as if the threshold is a static line and we are the ones traveling through time. I think it's more accurate to say that we encounter each other. As with much that happens in life, thresholds find us as much as we find them. And when we intersect? It's the moment the old life starts dying and a new one begins to emerge. It's the moment our world begins compressing around us, contracting, squeezing, insisting. The moment we began to be forced out of an old world and into a new one. The trouble is, the cervix has not yet dilated enough to permit egress. And really, when you truly get down to it, even if it had, few are willing to let go of that old life anyway – that safe, warm, protected world we have lived in for so long. And so the universe insists. It begins tearing apart the old life, one piece at a time. After awhile everything we do has some strange failure in it. It slowly, inexorably dismantles that old, safe, warm, protected world piece by piece by piece. Until we live among the shattered ruins of the old life. It keeps

demanding we let go of the old and enter the new. We *have* to move, yet we cannot. Nothing we do (and we try a lot of things) can force that cervix to dilate enough to allow our exit. The cervix, after all, is not under our control. Some force outside our self is in control of the dilation. And so, we encounter the truth of irresistible force, immovable object. Existential despair comes for us again – just as it did in the womb so very long ago.

*Biological realities always have their counterparts in the psychological . . . and the spiritual. You didn't think existential despair was merely a psychological phenomenon, did you? It is a feature of life, not a bug. It's built into the system for a reason. Despair, depression, and failure are some of the very few things that will force a person to examine their life.*

Among other things, thresholds are a *process* and we are not in charge of that process. This is one of the hardest threshold lessons to learn. There are others, of course, for thresholds are meant to teach us a great many things – not that many of us actually respond by learning them in this Year-of-Our-Avoidance-of-Reality-2022. Nevertheless, Earth has been generating these lessons – and the questions that are asked of us – for millions of years. And it never has been willing to take “I-don't-want-to” for an answer.

### **Thresholds Are a World Unto Themselves – It Takes Awhile to Learn This**

When we first enter the territory that the major thresholds of life are, the immediate tendency is to view it as a temporary problem. The first impulse is to think of what's happening as an

aberration, just a bad day or week or even month. The desire is to get through it as quickly as possible and to return to the old life and all those things you've planned. The truth is that at first you don't know that you are in a threshold. It takes while to realize that this is a long term visit to a new country, the I-Know-Where-You-Live-And-I've-Got-You-Now territory of insistent change.

Now that I think about it though, it makes more sense to describe thresholds as landscapes. And like all landscapes there are hills and valleys, forests and deserts, and days and nights. Most assuredly what you will meet in the dark is far different than what you find during the day. Sometimes you'll follow a new trail for a long time before it dead-ends in hostile territory. Other times the desert seems to go on forever. All that flatness. The eyes never find anything to rest themselves against. Because of that, sometimes sight will travel so far it circles back to rest on some ugly part of the self. And there it sticks, as if glued, until you just want to scream . . . and maybe you do, holding a pillow tight to your mouth to muffle the sound that your terror makes when you are alone, at night, in the dark.

Few of the natives are friendly, the plants are barbed, and food is rare, as are the comforts of home and fire and love. It's not a continent for the faint-hearted – yet the faint-hearted are destined to find it just as each and every other kind of person is. And sometimes . . . well, it's me who's faint-hearted. Nevertheless, the landscape have to be traversed whether I or anyone wishes to or not. They pull you into them, it's not as if any of us have a choice about it. (The only choice we have is how we handle it while we are there – and usually, at first anyway, we don't handle it very well.)

One of the most frightening things about the major thresholds of life is that none of the

well-trodden paths we have walked before are any longer to be found. The territory is *different*, insistently so. It is wilderness, an untraveled landscape of the self. And part of its function really is to be just that, to push/pull us out of the known, to force a shift into something different. Whether we want it or not. Usually, there's some bleakness to it. Depression and despair, too. There are so many days that I have awakened to find the ship of my life wrecked on an ocean reef, myself washed up on some deserted shore. Alone, more alone than I have ever been.

So, yes, now that you bring it up, it is possible to become lost in those landscapes. Some people do; we've all heard the tales. The ones who commit suicide or use drugs of one sort or another to stop the questions and the pain . . . the ones who just can't take it and give up. And, yes, it's true, that thoughts of suicide have occurred to me as well. Seriously so. They've gotten me through some really bad nights over the years.

*Thoughts of suicide help because it is the one choice that no one can take away from us, the one act of being in control that still remains. So . . . when we decide to not kill our self today . . . that means we are choosing to be in this horrible state of being, no longer at the effect of forces outside our control. And that makes all the difference you know. All the difference in the world. (And yes, few of those who have placed themselves in charge of how we live our lives, the fearful-of-death-people, will understand or agree with what I've just said.)*

These major thresholds, they are crucial. Because the one thing they do (each and every time) is force you to look at the most important question each and every one of us has to answer sooner

or later: what is the purpose of my life? Why go on? What is the meaning of my life?

### **There Are Major Thresholds and There Are Minor Ones**

To be more clear about them, thresholds occur every time we move from one stage of life into another. It's when the person we were is being supplanted by someone else. A different identity comes into being. (And yes, you can pretend you are the same person afterwards, but really, you aren't.)

Truthfully? Thresholds are the most normal of things; they are happening to the people around us every day of our lives. But like most of the miracles with which we are surrounded, people just take them for granted. They rarely understand how incredibly significant thresholds are or what they reveal about the human journey through life.

To be specific: when we are young we cross thresholds fairly often: from womb to world, from tiny infant to exploring infant . . . there are so many identities of the self. There is the nine month old and fourteen-month old, two year old and three year old, four year old and eight year old, and the pre-adolescent self just to name a few of the personalities/ego-states/identities/consciousness-nodules that come into being as we cross thresholds from one state of being to another. All parents can tell you that the nine month old and the two year old are not the same person. Neither are the two year old and the four year old, the eight year old and the twelve year old. And for sure the sixteen year old is *very* different than each and every one of the selves who have gone before. We are not the same person at sixteen that we were at four even though we inhabit the sort-of-same body and possess the same name. (Just to be clear, those earlier selves/identities/personalities are still in there and they can be accessed at any time. The

process is additive, not subtractive.) Some other identity has come into being at sixteen that was not there at twelve, and a different one as well at four that was not present at two. This is true for every threshold that is crossed.

There's a reason for this. It's an evolutionary innovation of long standing. To understand just how foundational this sort of thing is in life just look out at the world around you. You can see the same progression in most life forms if you look, even in plants. (You know, like ducks and kittens and puppies and, well, nearly every life form there is.) The reason that it is common in so many life forms is that a multiplicity of selves enhances survivability, adaptability, and functionality in the face of life's demands. The truth is that each identity/personality/developmental-stage/ego-state has different capabilities, different perceptual frames. Each one sees the world in a different way, has access to different behaviors, can innovate differently than any other state. It gives organisms a mechanism for perceiving different aspects of the incredibly complex and layered reality field in which they are embedded. It gives them, as well, different options for response to environmental perturbations, that is, the challenges that life brings to each and every species that is. (Everyone of us knows that the person we are when we are sitting at home in the evening with family is not the same personality that talks to the policeman who has pulled us over for speeding or the one who goes to work each morning. We are a complex assemblage of personalities/identities/ego-states/developmental-stages. We use different ones for different circumstances. Usually, we switch from one to the other without too much trouble or even thinking about it very much.)

Each succeeding personality is biologically encoded – all of us know that, too – but no one knows where in the body such encoding resides. Just that one day, all of a sudden, something

shifts. We, or our children, are pulled into a new landscape of the self, some other personality is coming into being. It happens about the same ages for most people. Two happens somewhere around age two. Middle age happens somewhere around forty-three. Old age begins someplace around sixty-three or so. And, yes, it is true that these can be off by a few months or a few years. Nevertheless, there is some trigger that initiates the change and suddenly we're in a new landscape of the self. (It's interesting to speculate about where the impulse comes from that begins the change. When we're in the womb it's the baby that sends the chemical signal that starts contractions, not the mother. And that brings up a whole lot of speculation, doesn't it? About a whole lot of things. Like: what is the source of the signals that tell the cervix to open wider?)

I hope that researchers never find what triggers the movement into a new developmental stage, though I am sure that some of them are looking for it even now. It frightens me to imagine what they would do with it should they have the power to alter things at that level. Nevertheless, these movements of the self *are* biologically encoded, they *are* real, and every parent knows it. Though, of course, they only learn the *reality* of it after the child is born. Knowing that the terrible twos exist is far different than living with a two year old who very insistently breaks the plate you love when he doesn't get what he wants. Knowing that sixteen is a tough time is far, far different than living with a sixteen year old who very insistently breaks your heart when she doesn't get what she wants. Parents learn as they go. It's a territory for the family as well as a landscape that leads to the emergence of a new personality/self/identity.

Most people just think of these succeeding developmental stages as maturing. Children go through stages they say. But this kind of thinking superficializes the process. The phrase



“developmental stages” is a big part of the reason why. People just think, well, we have to get through this one, three years old will be better than two. More seriously, having a label for the what is happening interferes with realizing that the process never ends, not until we die and maybe not even then. There are a lot of developmental stages awaiting us after we leave home but few people know it. (And few understand that this mid-life crisis they are in? It is in fact another developmental stage they are going through.) So, when the later thresholds find us, it tends to be a shock. They are each as hard as or harder than the first major one that happens after we are born: adolescence.

*Just a side note: birth is actually the first of the big ones and that is a whole story in and of itself, one which I don't really want to go into here. I am only going to talk in this piece about the major ones that happen after you are born and have some experience with the world and being alive.*

Adolescence is the first really difficult landscape to get across. It's the period of life when the child that we were is being supplanted by a *very* different personality. And there are a lot of reasons why this particular territory is so incredibly difficult. For one thing nearly all adolescents are incredibly sad. They are in fact grieving, though it's safe to say that neither they nor society at large knows it. (We tend to think of it as surly or angry, but actually it is grief that they are hiding under all that “fuck you.”) They are grieving their lost self, the child they once were not so very long ago. And they are grieving other things as well. They grieve the loneliness of the new world they are in, the loss of being *in* family, of knowing who they are and how they are oriented in

themselves and life in general. All that certitude . . . it's gone. Things no longer make sense. They grieve the lost *view*, the way the world looked before they were pulled into this new landscape of self. Point of view has fundamentally shifted and because of this they *see* a great deal more than they did before. And some of the things they see now are not all that pleasant. A crucial one is that they now see how much they've been lied to for most of their life.

Adults often say they are protecting their children from a too early loss of innocence. But really, they are just hiding behind a cliched way of thinking.

*They don't hide the world from the child for the child's sake but for their own. Most of the time they just don't want to lose the puppy that is so much fun most of the time to be around. The child that thinks the parents are wonderful, the child that loves them, the child with all that wonder and joy and playfulness in them. All that open intimacy and trust. The parents re-live that way of being through their children; they don't want it to end. And I have known people who just keep having children so they will have that kind of companionship as long as possible. So they won't be alone in the terrible landscape of their lost self. They are people who never want to grow up. And you know what, given that most people look like someone beat the shit out of their hearts Once Upon A Time, well, I don't blame them for wanting to hold onto something good as long as they can. It's not all that good for the child though . . . as the sixteen year old makes clear to them . . . sooner or later.*

The parents know they've been lying just as they themselves were lied to – but as most people do they find ways to justify it. They forget just how much they didn't like it when they realized as teenagers that they had been lied to, yet they pass the same lies on and into their own children. (It's for their own good, they say, or maybe: they aren't old enough to understand these things, or even: I want them to remain innocent as long as possible.) They lie about cuss words (actually there is no such thing as a “bad” word) and they lie about violence (like the subtle violence of the sharpened blades hidden inside “I love you” or “it's for your own good”) and they lie about human nature (even their own) and they lie about a lot of things. But most of all they lie about sex. They lie about the reality of penises and vaginas and that men put their penises in women's vaginas (or, to be more blunt, that women quite often take the man's penis and put in the vagina because they like sex just as much as men do), that it feels good, that rubbing genitals together, or even rubbing them with the hand, is just about one of the best things ever.

*All parents know that children “play with themselves” as they say. They do so because it feels good. But they also do it because each and everyone of us is a sexual being from the moment we begin forming in the womb. Sex is hardwired into us (no matter what the monotheists say – and just to be clear: monotheists like to play with their “private parts,” too – and quite often, those of other people, no matter what their age happens to be). And one of the really uncomfortable truths that upsets many parents is the moment they notice that tiny, infants (boys) have erections – just as they did and do in the womb. (You didn't know this, did you?) And it is not just the boys either, clitorises engorge, too. (You*

*did know that, didn't you?) Or, worse, that when the baby tweaks the nipple to stimulate milk flow (while playing with his penis) it quite often feels sexually stimulating to the mother. (Now we are in really difficult territory, aren't we?) Despite ridiculous beliefs to the contrary, women are highly sexed. They like to make love, they also like to fuck, and they get horny, too. A lot. There are times after puberty hits that just looking at an attractive guy makes them wet, engorges their clitoris, and things get so intense that the clitoris insists on some attention and I mean right now. So, they pull the car over and take care of business just so they can get through the day. (You didn't know that either, did you?) Women are definitely not divine beings who never silently fart in elevators. They are not all that different from men when you get right down to it. There is only one human species here, not two. There is no Homo sapiens, subspecies male and Homo sapiens subspecies female. All that stuff we have been told about women and sex, hint: it's not true. We inherited it from the Victorians. In truth? Females of most species on the planet have far more sex than the males of their species. Darwin was just too shy to say it out loud. In other words, he lied.*

In truth, nearly all parents are just too ashamed to talk about sex and because of this it is not uncommon for girls to suddenly begin menstruating while out and about one day and not understand what is happening to them. (Can you imagine how frightening this would be? Or do you perhaps know this from your own experience?) Boys suddenly get massive erections in school and some of them have no idea what is happening to them either. (You see, one of the

things I really, really hate are secrets. They do a great deal of harm. And secrets about our sexual nature are one of the worst secrets of all. All that sexual stuff in the news? It's because of the secrets. You can't make our sexual nature go away if you hide it or lie about it. It's just going to come out anyway but it's messy then when it does, and a lot of people get hurt and some people never get over that hurt.) And for sure, realistic knowledge about sex is nowhere to be found.

Or it wasn't until recently. And while porn is attacked from seemingly every direction, it is actually a very good thing that it exists. (Uh oh, I feel an attack of puritanitis coming on in some of my readers. Do you actually know where the thoughts you are thinking right now came from? Even worse, have you ever thought to examine them to see if they are true?) In actual fact, not that this will make a bit of difference in people's responses, rape goes down the more porn is available. (Oops! That can't be right.) And one of the really important things about porn is that adolescents get to see all the different shapes and sizes of sexual organs. Labia have hundreds of different shapes, so do penises. (You did know this, didn't you?) Bodies have a lot of different shapes and people are attracted to a lot of different shapes and sizes of them. Breasts are not generally symmetrical and no, they are not *just* for feeding babies. (Puhleeze!) The nipple (female) is directly connected to the clitoris in women and (male) to the penis in men. That is just the way it is and anyone who has had wonderful sex knows it.

Too, there are lots of different kinds of sex to engage in. (Though to be clear, the missionary position is generally the most pleasurable to women – according to porn actresses and my partners anyway.) Oral sex is very common and from what I have heard anal sex is as well. (Yes, between men and women and actually, women and women, too – strap-ons can do many things. You did know this, didn't you?) Generally, if it feels good people are going to do it and

after they experiment awhile they pretty much find out what works for them and tend to stick with it over the long run. Some things are really wonderful and others are not but you can only find this out after you try a lot of different things and find out what you yourself like and don't.

One of the really important things that porn does (and I can't stress this enough) is to answer the normal and important questions that every single child has: what do other people's sexual organs look like? Are mine normal? What do naked bodies look like? Is mine normal? (You see, when you start telling a young child, who sees nothing wrong in running around the yard naked, that they *have* to put clothes on so the neighbors won't see, well, after awhile they make up a reason for it. And nearly always it is that there is something wrong with their naked body, that there is something shameful in it. That is a wound that does not easily heal.)

Nevertheless, the child in us is always going to be curious about stuff like that, penises and vaginas and naked bodies and sex, especially if we are not allowed to see or talk openly about it. But I digress, I've done enough to upset you, let's move on.

Anyway, one way or another adolescents make it through the landscape (that is, the threshold) between childhood and young adulthood. Most of them carry trauma from the journey simply because of all the secrets and the lack of accurate information about human bodies and human beings who are also sexual beings, but, one way or another, they make it through. Most of them find some kind of balance. (Though later on, they may engage in a lot of surreptitious sexual activity simply from believing that their actual needs and wants are abnormal, which they generally aren't.) Most of them spend a lot of their twenties partying and fucking (as much as they possibly can). Because it feels really, really good to rub sexual organs together and besides there is this incredible drive to reproduce hardwired into their bodies and their hormones are

raging and for quite a while, on the list of the ten most important things in life, sex is numbers one through eight. So men and women dress in ways that show their sexual readiness to mate and . . . well . . . they do mate, as much as they possibly can. And they do this whether or not Jesus or some priest or minister says not to or you are too young or save it for marriage or just say no and aren't you ashamed of yourself and so on. It's like drugs, you can't just say no to a million years of evolutionary pressure (and yes, pretty much every species that is uses drugs – you did know that, didn't you?). And that is another secret that no one likes to talk about very much. But I digress. (I have a speech impediment that I have been unable to do anything about no matter how hard I try; I can't shut up, especially if secrets are involved.)

Anyway, off the young adult goes, into life, into the world, into work, into their future. And, over time, a new personality (the young adult) comes into being. It's very different than the sixteen year old and everybody can tell it *is* different even if the young adult still spends a lot of her time fucking as much as possible. And the young adult is not just a more mature sixteen year old, it's actually a different personality with different capabilities, different perceptions, different behaviors. And one of the things that the adolescent/young adult does over this period of time is to try on a wide range of attitudes and behaviors in order to find the most comfortable subgroup in which to be and around which to build a life. Once they do, things go along as things tend to do until suddenly another threshold finds them. It's called the mid-life crisis. But really it is just the threshold between mature young adulthood and middle age. (As we age, the time distance between shifts lengthens, on average to around 20-25 years. In other words, just as we get things figured out and they are going along swimmingly, another biologically encoded shift is forced upon us.)

Now everyone knows there is a middle age shift, though if it is a man going through it, there tend to be a lot of denigrating jokes about it. Women move into menopause, men into andropause (and yes, it exists, those comments to the contrary are tiring, stop it). Hormonal levels and relationships change once more. People begin to freak out as another of the secrets our culture so carefully conceals inside its gaggle of neuroses starts to make itself evident. (And no, hot flushes are not power surges, just an irritant that lasts far too long, ten years or more.) The truth is: we get old. Time is moving on, we are changing, our bodies are changing. And suddenly younger adults start looking at us funny. We are no longer part of their world even if we think we are. It just takes awhile for us to realize it. And here is how it happens . . .

The mid-life crisis begins the moment a man looks at a woman, his eyes saying you are pretty, and she looks back at him and her eyes say, you are old enough to be my father. And to be clear, this same thing happens to women, too, just the other way around. And so, grief finds us again. We are losing a part of ourselves that will never come again. Not ever. (Sadness always emerges when we lose something that matters to us. This is an axiom, a rule. It can't be escaped.) The young adult is still inside us, just as the four year old and the sixteen year old are. But the body it lived in, well, it is receding into the past and no, there is no way to reclaim it, to stop time, to be that young again.

*Yes, yes, I know all about telomeres and that freezing thing and keeping the body temperature low and eating only seaweed but you don't really think that is going to hold off death and aging, do you? Maybe you should think a bit about why you are so afraid about aging? I mean, how many thousand year old people have you*



*met anyway? There seems to be some sort of inevitability thing going on here and maybe life would be a lot easier and less scary if you came to terms with it, you know, before it comes to terms with you?*

In any event, while you are in the landscape of the shift from late young adult hood into middle age a new personality is coming into being. Like all the others, its been biologically encoded to emerge at a certain time, somewhere around age forty-three or so.

*Just a point of clarification. My experience is that the time spent in thresholds last on average five to seven years. That is, from the moment the change begins until the moment you are truly in the new self takes five to seven years. It is a way of life for awhile. And one of the better metaphors for it? Hermit crabs. Every so often they grow too large for the shell they are in. So they have to shed the old one and then, completely exposed and vulnerable, they have to walk around looking for a larger one. This takes time. And all the while their softness is exposed to life forms that may not have their best interests at heart. In their world, too, some of them don't survive the transition.*

To make the point once more (really, it's important): each and every one of these different developmental stages (or personalities if you wish) have different capabilities. They see differently than any other developmental stage. They have certain skills and thought processes and perceptual sensitivities that no other developmental stage has. Each one allows us to see

different aspects of the scenario in which we are embedded (and which we call reality); they enhance adaptability and innovation and perception.

As with adolescence, the majority of people experience a lot of instability when they enter the threshold territory that we call the mid-life crisis. And yes, grieving is a big part of it (though most people run from that truth as hard and fast as they can). But most people are also scared, truly and deeply frightened of what this shift is telling them. And because we are a nation of people who worship youth, who live in denial about some of the most important aspects of life (like sex and most especially aging and death) the emotional and mental instability which occurs for many people is truly intense. A lot of energy begins to go into “how can I stay young forever.” Another way of saying this is “I am fucking terrified of getting old and dying, of living in a biodegrading body, of my turn being over.” So, there is a lot of franticness about it all. Just as there was in adolescence. (As with adolescence, a new face is coming into being, this one is just a bit more wrinkled.) And, as with adolescence, people tend to be more depressed, have sleepless nights, are irritated for no reason, suddenly find that their job sucks (or their marriage or their house or their car or the state or city they live in). They may suddenly discover they have been lied to about a lot of things (like the soul damage that comes from the compromises they thought they had to make). And so, things get stirred up again, just like in adolescence. Truth? At every one of the major thresholds we go through after childhood (adolescence, middle age, old age, death) we repeat earlier stages. This is why the sixteen year old fuck you personality is so similar to the two year old fuck you I want it now personality (just to touch on the similarities briefly). And all of a sudden, once again, the lies we have been told and accepted as truth become intolerable.

*We get a do over* even if we're older when we get it. For one of the inescapable aspects of thresholds is that they force a re-examination of the life that is being lived. We have a chance to really change. And so, once more, one way or another, with grace or without, we make it through the threshold. We change some things and not others, re-calibrate our life, settle down, get our feet under us again, and stabilize. We find a new balance. (And yes, I know some people don't but I'm not talking about them.) We find our place, get strong in this new middle age self, enjoy the maturity and new capabilities of mind that come with it and then about twenty or twenty-five years later, oops, it starts to happen again. We are leaving late middle age and entering old age. And this time it really, really sucks.

At this point it is really difficult to pretend that things are not looking pretty grim. More hormonal shifts occur. Our faces begin to seriously change. We enter the land of Wrinkles-R-Us. Our bodies are *really* changing now. The process is escalating. The young people look at us, if they see us at all, as if we've failed in some fundamental way. (They are quite sure that such a thing will never happen to them.) And should the image of our wrinkled bodies slapping together in frenzied sex suddenly appear in their mind (as it just did for you), well, it's one of the most horrible things they can imagine. (The fact that in a few years they will find themselves in our same position is cold comfort. Still, *schadenfreude* does help pass the time.) Nevertheless, it is still true that women and men, no matter their age like to rub genitals together or to even use their hands or sometimes external aids, some of which have batteries. And while our culture likes to pretend otherwise, there is a lot of fucking going on at all ages of life. Sometimes, we even make love, it just depends on our mood. Basically, there are a lot of ways to have sex and after a half century most of us have explored a wide range of approaches to it, and as well, to orgasm.

The movement into old age though . . . it's a tough one. Like many people, I found it far harder than adolescence and that is saying something. (My adolescent shift was brutal.) And so, I thought I would spend a bit of time on this because I never hear anyone talk of it in or with any depth, never hear about any of the questions it asks of us, never hear about the difference between becoming old and becoming an elder (they are not the same thing). I never really hear anything about how hard the transition is (and yes, I have read all the books), how difficult that threshold is to cross, what the territory is like for those of use who spend a few years in that liminal zone between late middle age and old age.

To begin with there is tremendous grieving. And I mean *massive* grieving. At this point it is very hard to pretend that death is not coming closer. The denial muscle is just not strong enough to blind us to that truth anymore (despite a lifetime of exercising it). The body, in one way or another, is beginning to fail. Minor hurts that could be passed off when younger no longer can be. This, and so many other things, are constant reminders that our time is ending. In truth: *our time is almost over*. And that in and of itself is a source of almost unbearable grief. It is also a source of tremendous fear. This one fact is what makes this shift so much harder than adolescence and middle age.

With adolescence we had our whole life before us. Years and years and years of endless days and what ifs. And all that optimism, too. Even in middle age we had a lot of years ahead of us and we still had a lot of vitality, too. There *is* a life on the other side of middle age, decades of it. But with this shift? No. *It's almost over*. There are no longer years and years and years ahead of us. (And yes, I know about that guy who is still working at one hundred and three years of age. He was just born with good parts. Most of us aren't. Other than dying itself the shift into old age

makes that about as plain as anything ever will.)

One of the first indications of the shift we are now is that when adolescents and young adults look at us their eyes pass through us entirely. We no longer exist. There is something about this shift, about old age itself . . . I don't know, maybe we give off a signal, some kind of anti-pheromone or something, that is picked up subliminally. But they *know* and in this incredibly neurotic American culture in which we live, those of us who are old become invisible the moment they do. So, when the young see us sitting in a coffee shop or walking down the street their eyes tend to pass over, through, or around us. If they should actually happen, for whatever reason, to actually *see* us what they communicate is usually that we are out of touch, from the past, irrelevant. And yes, as well, always, that we failed in some horrible way. We smoked too much or didn't eat the right foods or didn't exercise enough or we sinned in some way or other and the Universe or God or something or other is really getting even with us for it, whatever it was. Because for sure, they are never going to look like we do now. It is *not* going to happen to them. (And yes, not *all* of them do this, but enough do so that we feel it and deeply so.)

For sure we are no longer sexual beings (and that communication brings with it its own grief). We still had sexual energy in middle age, we were just told by this glance or that one that it was inappropriate. (It wasn't, but then that's America for you.) At this age, having sex would not only be inappropriate but downright freaky. But really, underneath all this (in America anyway, people in some other countries actually do revere old people) is their fear. For when the young actually *see* us they can in fact perceive time eating our skin, eating our faces, eating our hands. And that is about the scariest thing there is for them. We are a reminder of what is going to happen to them in the not too distant future. And *that* really, really freaks them out.

But beyond all this stuff with the young – and more terrible still – are all the messages coming from our culture that we no longer matter. We are useless. We are useless to the economy, to America the Great, to the we-are-going-into-a-glorious-future-with-your-help America. We can no longer work as we once did, no longer contribute our bodies as we once did, and so, we are being discarded along with so many other things in our throw-away culture. In this country, we are merely a drag on economic resources that can be better used elsewhere. As one Republican said during the Covid-19 crisis, it is our duty to die and let the young get on with things.

And every old person (except the insanely rich I suppose) feels this every day of their lives. Unlike a number of other cultures, there is little to no reverence for the old in ours – as a general rule that is. Many members of the various hispanic-descended cultures and the Asian-descended cultures still have reverence for the old. But time eats away at that, too, the longer they are here, in this country of America-the-young.

The few times I have visited a culture where such reverence exists, places where I was treated with respect, called sir, honored simply for keeping my small boat afloat for so long . . . I was deeply moved. And the grief I have so often felt here in this country flowed to the surface and came out my eyes even as I tried as hard as I could to make it stop.

Unless you experience this yourself it is never quite possible to know how much we don't have that kind of reverence here. Some of the young know this but they don't truly *know* it. (Once you get to be this age, it is surprising how many of the articles written about aging or the old are patronizing. Worse, the writers seem incapable of understanding that what they are writing is patronizing. They actually think they are being caring and respectful. All you need to

do to know what I mean here is to ask yourself, “Would I be saying these things about a twenty-year-old?” Almost always the answer is: no you would not.)

There are a number of things that happen in that late middle age to old age threshold. 1) the thousands of tiny filaments that connect us to life in forward time begin to break, one by one by one; 2) we begin to sum up our life, to look at all the things we regret; 3) we begin to say goodbye, to look at our legacy, begin to spend more time in the company of death as a very real phenomenon; 4) we are being asked very specific questions; 5) we have another chance at a do over however short the time for it may be.

### **Filaments**

Although few people think of it this way, we are connected by thousands of tiny filaments to the world around us; to the time in which we were born, matured, and grew; to life itself. And most of those filaments are concerned with what is called *forward time*. That is, we make plans. We are going to do this and that and the other thing. If such and such occurs we will then do this or achieve that or maybe take a different direction than we have been taking. But as we move into old age, we are moving away from immersion in the mind-set most people have, that is, forward time. We are readying ourselves for departure (irrespective of how much we pretend we are not). There is no future the way there once was. There is no more what do I want to do or be when I grow up? A lot of time now is spent looking in the rear view mirror. A lot of time is spent on regrets, missed opportunities, on what we could have done or been. (And this occurs no matter how amazing a life it has been.)

This breaking of the filaments . . . every so often people mention it in books (though they

often tend to use other words for it). But what none of the stories convey is how it *feels* when one of those threads breaks. You see, each and every one of these filaments reflects back to us an aspect of self-identity. And that is a comforting thing.

The filaments that connect me to the world are an integral aspect of the reality in which I live. To some extent they *are* that reality; my internal assumptive world is built around them. They are mirrors really. But more than that, I can *feel* the living reality of them, the living reality of their connection from me to some important part of my world. There is a *feeling* aspect to them that I never suspected existed until they began to break. And so, each time one of those threads breaks, it hurts. I feel its loss. Keenly. Worse, some part of my identity is lost when one breaks, some part of the mirror I look into to see the comforting reality of my identity is gone. And so I have wept, whether or not I showed that weeping to anyone else. (And for men in our culture, those unwept tears inside the self build up until sooner or later the man breaks into that terrible weeping that only those who have been taught not to cry do.) I began then to carry a burden of grief that I had never known before. I was losing, one by one by one, connection to a great many of the things that deeply mattered to me. And ultimately to the self that I believed I was.

Before these filaments began to break . . . well, I did not know how much I lived in forward time, how many plans I had surrounded myself with, and, more importantly, I did not even know what forward time was. In our culture, we have an agreement to live in forward time. We are all going into the future as fast as we can get there. The past is well, past. It is old, it is yesterday. And the past, well, it is the time when older people (boomers, let's say) didn't know as much as we know now and that's why they made all the mistakes that we now have to live with.



*Now* is better and the future, where we are going? It is better still, and on the way we won't make any of the mistakes that they made before us. Because now, we know better, we are smarter.

This agreement? About forward time? It's a tether, a filament connecting us to the culture, to everyone who believes in forward time. It is a bond, a covert understanding or agreement, a hidden contract that nearly everyone in this country has made with each other – as well as the country itself. But very, very few of us consciously know that it even exists. Nevertheless, in the landscape between middle age and old age, that particular filament breaks. And suddenly we perceive one of the major forces in our life and the way we have lived it.

Worse . . . filaments? I have to tell you, they do not just snap! They fray, thin, unwind, and slowly come apart. It's agonizing. We lose connections but we lose them *s l o w l y*. The pain from their breaking does not happen all at once. We feel every agonizing moment of it. It goes on and on and on. And for whatever reason, it is only when we have grieved long enough that they finally, finally let us go. Truth? The grieving for some of them takes years to get through.

It's a strange thing to disconnect from forward time. It took years for me to finally disconnect. But once I had and began to look around me again, I noticed how afraid everyone in this country is – all the time. Everyone is hurrying, hurrying, hurrying, running from something they feel chasing them, running into the future as fast as they can go. And oddly enough, once that filament had broken, every single person I met could tell that it had the moment they set eyes on me. They knew that I was no longer part of the agreement. I was *other*, adrift, no longer part of the tribe. And I could feel that and deeply so. It is a lonely feeling. This ending of things.

There is a loneliness that accompanies this last stage of life. And that loneliness has to be encountered, acclimated to, come to terms with during the transition. One important reason for

the loneliness is simply that death is getting closer. Just because of that those of us who are moving into old age are being forced to disconnect from life, from forward time, from the future. We are stepping back, readying ourselves for the most difficult threshold of all.

Nevertheless, there is an added feature to it here in America-the-young. The loneliness exists in the way that it does here because there is no revered place for the old. There is no niche that we inhabit and no contribution we are understood to make. Simply, for us (at least from the perspective of our culture), life is over. We are no longer needed or wanted for who we are or what we bring. And so, the loneliness here takes on a different character, it is deeper, more painful. Harder. But . . . once acclimated to, life itself is very different. It's freer, less encumbered. And this is true no matter the culture.

Yet, I feel a pain every time I step out into the world. Very, very few people here have time to talk to the old, to the ancestors that surround them, or to the dead with whom they break bread every morning when they rise. And that is one thing that we who are old spend a lot of time doing. Talking to the dead, to the ancestors, to those we will be joining before too much more time goes by. For we have one foot in the land of the dead now and only one foot in the land of the living. It is part of our function to talk to the ancestors and the dead, part of our function to pass on what they are telling us to the culture, to younger generations. And one thing I have found is that a culture that has no use for its elders, well, it soon loses its connection with the ancestors, with the dead. And once that happens it truly does lose its way. Where else is wisdom stored but in the elders? Where else is understanding of the mistakes we make in earlier stages kept but in the elders, in the ancestors, in the dead? And without that corrective influence, that check on unbridled belief and action, well, we see the results of that around us every day of our

lives.

There are other filaments, of course. But all of them it seems are connections to the human world in one way or another. Ultimately, that is what filaments are, lines of connection to life, to my life, to the life I have lived for so long, and the culture in which I have lived it. They are connections to my liberal or conservative tribe. To my professional tribe – whatever it might be. To my friends. To family, extended and otherwise. To my country, to my species, to my body, to the young man I was not so long ago, to all the memories I have of those who raised and loved me, to so many elements of the human world. And each and every one of these began to fray, to thin, to break once I was in the landscape that lies between late middle and old age.

Some of them, a very few, I found, would indeed, in time, be re-forged. But only the most important ones. Specifically: the ones that connect me to those in my family with whom I am intimate and who are intimate with me. (And one of the difficult and incredibly painful truths is that there are some in every family who will have no interest in an older, weaker you, only the strong one they have known most of their life.)

The filaments that I re-forged on the other side of middle age emerged from a different self, a different identity than had existed before – and they connected to very different aspects of the world than they had before. They connected to *life* itself rather than the human world; they connected to the tasks that need to be completed in these last years of my life. And these new connections tended to be deeper, more intimate, more trusting.

I had shifted identity, a new self had come into being, and that self had a very different point of view than the old one. I could see/sense/perceive aspects of reality, of the world itself, of people, that I never been able to before. And the old connections to people that had meant so

much to me? They were not nearly so intimate or trustworthy than I had thought, even those which had lasted for decades. Some of them were in fact quite illusory. And that brought its own grief. A lot of it.

There is nothing quite like finding out that things which had meant so very much for so long were not as true as I had believed. That the Kathleen I had known for so long was not as much a friend as I had thought, that the love I had given was not reciprocated in kind but was instead being given instead to my public personality. That the David I had loved so deeply was not so much a friend as a road acquaintance. That the Susan who had meant so much to me was only interested in strong Stephen and not Stephen himself. That the Eric who I trusted with my vulnerable self was in fact not interested in the Stephen that the unconcealing of old age revealed to him. That so many of those I cared for could not deal with me going through the terrible landscape of loss and change that the old age shift entails. They just wanted me as I had been and maybe, I suspect, only then because I was so very good at taking care of them and making them feel better about being alive. There are a lot of unforeseen losses in this landscape.

Yet . . . I also found that a very few of my old friends turned out to be true. And there were a very few others who I did not realize wanted to be more intimate – for whatever reason I just could not see it before.

All these losses? They are incredibly difficult to come to terms with. They demand so much grieving, such unremitting weeping. They demand as well so much deep contemplation, so much travel into darkness, into loss and pain. It is heart rending and it takes many years to get through it. But it's important, all this grieving. Because it is not possible to elder without this deep and unremitting grieving. For it is only a fully integrated grief that will lead to the

emergence of that state of being we call elder. Nothing else will do it. Elders are those who have integrated loss and pain and grief and in the doing of it, not lost themselves but rather found the self they most centrally are.

### **Regrets**

I found that the moment I began disconnecting from forward time the past began to take its place. The heart it seems has its own memory. And one thing that this movement into old age reveals is that it has been storing up certain kinds of memories for a lifetime. Once the biologically encoded shift into old age is underway, a coming to terms with the life that has been lived is demanded. And it is these particular memories, the ones stored in the heart, that force it to occur.

Oddly, I have found that these memories are mostly those I had thought inconsequential when they occurred. They have turned out to be the ones with the sharpest edges, the ones that cut the deepest. The time I treated a date badly when I was fifteen. (I was unkind because I was so shy and didn't know what to do, but that look on her face, it burns now, as hot as a brand in my heart.) The time I failed to keep my agreement to give back a recipe for the one given to me. (The look on that young woman's face is as clear as these hands that type the words you read.) Nearly all of the most painful regrets are from unkindnesses of one sort or another. Some of them are truly, deeply unkind – mean spirited even. But most of them? Nearly all? They are what appeared to be the smallest of things when they occurred. The kinds of things that most of us pass off as minor, irrelevant even. But these minor events have a way of being stored in our hearts. There is in each of them some secret that only the heart knows as it lays them down. (Now, as I go through life, I can see them being stored away in the hearts of the young. Such

exquisite pain. And I know that later in their lives these memories will re-emerge, bite as sharply as anything they have ever known. But there is nothing I can do about it. All I can do is see with these new eyes that time has given me, then contemplate what I have seen and what it means as an inescapable truth of human life.)

In this landscape between middle and old age the memories release themselves one by one by one as the days and nights go by. I live not only in grief but in agony for acts done a half century ago. And it's in the night, when I wake at 3 a.m., when my soul is at its lowest ebb, that they cut me the most. They stab into me, these acts that were committed in narcissistic innocence by my younger self. And each and every one of them are trying to tell me something. Until I understand what it is, they are not going to let me go.

It's funny. So many of us spend so much time looking for spiritual teachers when all the while they've been in front of us each and every day of our lives. The blade of grass dragging its cloak of shadow behind it. The puppy that only wants to love us and for us to love them. The young woman whose heart we damaged with that unkind word or look or failure to be kind.

Some of the greatest teachings are in those simple things. All of them involve pain of one sort or another. And all of them demand rigorous self-examination. The kind that comes from seeking out (or being found by) mirrors that we have actively avoided looking into. Sometimes that comes from turning toward and accepting the forceful insistences of people you know who have been trying to tell you something about your self that you do not want to hear. But far too often it turns out the most powerful of the mirrors have been there all along. Right in front of you. But they have had a cloak of invisibility around them. One that you yourself created.

The puppy that only wants to love you and for you to love it? Why is it that you do not

approach the people you love with the same quality of trust that you do the puppy? (Oh, that strikes deep, doesn't it?) And why is it that the ones you have decided to love don't have the same behavioral responses to you that the puppy does? Why is it that they don't direct toward you that same degree of trust? Of innocence? Of love? Of belief in your goodness? And even more, why is it that you have never asked yourself these questions? In that puppy and her response to you are teachings that the greatest teachers on this planet could not convey as well. Just so with the look in that young woman's eye. Just so in that blade of grass. It is not in the grandiose moments that the most important teachings (and stories) are hidden but in the simplest. And they are far harder to see.

Each and everyone of the people I know who have entered this landscape of the self have spoken to me of these sorts of simple yet incredibly painful memories. Yet the books and commentaries about the regrets we have as we enter old age are so fucking superficial. They give you a topic line (regrets) and some platitudes about dealing with them (make amends if you can or realize that all people make mistakes, you are only human) but as with most things that are concerned with the inner world, they don't go very deep. In fact, they take shallow to new levels of superficiality.

Here is what is true: when you enter the early stages of old age, your heart will begin releasing these kinds of memories. Quite often they will be ones you have not thought about in decades, even half a century. They will come to you vividly. As if you are *in* the event once more. You will feel the pain of it with every nerve ending in your heart. And you will want more than anything to be able to go back in time and fix it. But you will not be able to.

*This is the truth that Charles Dickens captured in his book A Christmas Carol. Read the scene when the ghost of Marley comes to Scrooge and pay close attention to the moment when the bedroom window opens and Scrooge looks out and sees all those ghosts crying out in agony from their inability to help those in need. That is how it is when these memories come upon you. Dickens knew what he was speaking of. For in the night he too had awakened with these kinds of memories. He, too, had found himself helpless to fix the past, just as we all do.*

These kinds of memories demands days of attention. Months. Years. Each will take time and thought. They will replay themselves endlessly. The memory will come to you of a sudden, seemingly of its own accord, at any time of the day or night. When it does, it will catch you up. It will replay itself one excruciatingly slow moment at a time. Over and over and over again. And you will *feel* each tiny movement of the memory, each element of the unkindness that you have done. Endlessly.

This is what is involved in coming to terms with this sort of thing. We did not come to terms with it when it happened. And all those years in between? The memory has been building up energy all these years, gathering grief to itself so that when we begin working with it, we find in it the weeping of centuries. And maybe it is also true that as we age the heart grows more sensitive to these kinds of slights. So that when we finally turn to face the memories we feel the exquisite cruelty in even their tiniest of aspect in a way we never would have had we dealt with them decades earlier.

The memories are replayed so many times. They keep coming until you just want to



scream. *And this is crucial to the resolution.* What is not generally understood is that every time we replay the memory, although it feels the same, it is in fact slightly different than the time before. Minutely so. And that tiny difference? It is the mark of our movement through this landscape we are traversing (not that this makes it easier). We are coming to terms – not only with what we have done but with what we became (and are) because of it. We are being forced to come to terms with our own cruelty, our own callousness, with the predator in us, the killer, the one who, whether we meant to or not, shuttered the light in that long ago glance into our eyes, the glance that was filled with trust. It takes years to go through these kinds of memories. And the process reforms us; it changes who we are.

In this process, who we are is being *re-formed*, made anew. Some new identity is coming into being and *grief* is integral to the new self that is coming into being. For one of the things that is essential to elderring (not that I am quite there yet in the story I am telling you) is the incorporation of grief into every cell of the self. Into every aspect of who you are. You are being forced through the replaying of these memories to come to terms with the terrible tragedy of the human condition . . . and your particular expression of it.

These old memories? They reveal that we are not who we thought we were. They hold up a mirror that shows us true aspects of who we are, ones that we passed over because they were too painful to see. But this biologically encoded shift forces a seeing of what was not seen then. And so, through this constant replaying the reality of who we are slowly seeps in. The constant exposure reveals us to our true self. And over time, through all this remembering, all the contemplation that the remembering forces upon us, we acclimate to what is actually in the memory. The deep meanings that we refused, or were too young, to see before. We come to

terms with our reflection. With the reality of our self. And as we do, the memory begins to let go of us . . . and the next one takes its place.

For a while an integral aspect of this transition is the immersion in such reflections. It's miserable. There's a lot of *if only*. And, again, we want to but cannot go back in time to rectify what we have done. So, we watch (and feel) helplessly as the memory plays itself over and over again. After awhile we begin to feel that we are only the bad, the unkind, the cruelty that we have done. That is just the way this part of the process works. But . . . but . . . but, it does pass. We do eventually come to terms. And yes, it takes years. But it does, in the end, pass. The memories do, after awhile, get reworked, each and every one of them. And so, over time, we learn one of the most important truths a human being can know: that all of us are very much the same. That the capacity for evil (or at the very least serious unkindness) is in each one of us. That there are not good people and bad people but only people. That we are not morally superior to anyone else. And that those who believe themselves to be morally superior to others are in fact dangerous. For they do not know, cannot see, the evil or the unkindnesses they do in even the simplest of things. The most important teaching of this part of the process is humility. (Which is itself an essential aspect of eldering.) And one of the things that emerges from the process is the ability to feel compassion, something far different than sympathy, or empathy, or pity.

We learn through this process to live in the midst of the human tragedy as it expresses itself in us and in others. And to come to terms with the fact that there is nothing we can do about it. That particular tragedy has been playing itself out ever since human beings have been. It is doing so now and it will do so as long as our species exists.

I found there to be tremendous sadness in this, tremendous grief, and tremendous pain.

And that is what I had to spend so long coming to terms with, that pain, that grief, that tragedy. I had to learn to stand in the midst of it and continue on. And somehow in learning this I began to take on the elder state of being that each and every culture on this planet needs to have in its midst to endure.

The look in our eyes, the nature of our stance, the way we speak, the movement of our hands and feet, our breathing even . . . something is in all those things that no other developmental stage contains. And it can only be developed at this stage of life. It has deep and powerful effects on whatever developmental stage is most prominent in the people we meet: childhood, the adolescent, the young adult, the middle aged, and even the old, for not all those who enter old age elder. Some choose to become, well, not elder. Merely old.

The only way to *elder* instead of merely growing old, is to become so deeply immersed in grief that it becomes a part of you, irremovably so in each and every cell of who you are. And this, over time, begins to bring forth as an aspect of personality, a *gravitas* that was not present before. It's an aspect of wisdom, the wisdom that emerges and can only emerge from a soil soaked in grief, in weeping, and in loss.

Eventually, what you might call the goodness of us has its turn. It must be reclaimed as well. And this, in America, is often far harder to do. Despite the agony of it, our puritan inheritance makes it far easier to see our failings than our goodness. But this reclamation of the self? Of our goodness? It is a very different thing than you might think. Before this transition, I have noticed that in me and in others, the sense of goodness always had some sort of defensiveness in it. I think that's because underneath it there was an awareness that we were hiding some defect in our character. Some cruelty of nature that we would not face. And the

cowardice that comes from that kind of refusal. Only after those “defects” have been faced through this processing of memory can what is truly good about the self be seen. For our goodness is then seen in context of the actual life that has been lived. We begin to see how brave we were, or how kind, or how hard we tried to do the right thing. And it is often true that those things are seen in the places where they previously seemed absent.

Somewhere in this process I found that all unknowing I began to truly forgive my failings; I extended compassion to my self. And so, when I finally began to reclaim my goodness, it was from a very different perspective. Somehow in the process the good in me and the bad in me became *good/bad*. They merged into each other as a single unitary truth. I became neither good nor bad. I became *good/bad, bad/good*. Human. And the bipolar life I led before? Going from feeling good to feeling bad and back again, endlessly? It’s done with. Yes, there are still bad days, and yes, there are still good days. But it’s different now.

### **Saying Goodbye, Legacy, Thinking about Death**

I have carried a lot of things inside me, many of them for decades or more, that are important to me. They are things that I have taken responsibility for, that I love, that I made agreements to and with and about. And one of the really, really hard things is that at this age, as I grow nearer to death, as I weaken and infirmity moves its terrible fingers through every part of me, I realize that I will no longer be able to fulfill those agreements, hold these things I love, or fulfill the responsibilities I have taken on. I am losing the ability to do so. And at death that failure will be complete, I will fail each and every one of them. It’s not my fault that I die; death is built into the system. (It’s a feature, not a bug.) Time is forcing me to my knees and I can carry the load of my

life no further and I feel these failures so very deeply.

There are many things I carry and which I have taken responsibility for: The memories of my beloved extended family, of all the times I spent with them during the early years of my life. I see/feel/hear so clearly my paternal great-grandfather and great-grandmother, my paternal grandmother and grandfather. Though you cannot see or hear or feel them, they are still alive inside me. During the years we spent together, they passed something of themselves into me and I carry it still. When I die, the last living memory of them will pass from this world. My siblings for reasons I have never understood carry no responsibility for the ancestors that lie within them. They do not say prayers for them during the days of their lives, have no altar at home, set aside just for them, to honor them and the love and caring they gave during their lives. Nor do they pass on the stories of those lives, those moments of touch when we moved beyond these bodies and were two hearts, two souls, meeting.

So, all the more keenly do I feel the loss that will come with my death. For the memory of these beloved ancestors will pass from the world when I die. I think that this is true for many people, that they carry those they have loved and who have loved them inside their hearts and memories as they travel in this life. And that they feel a responsibility for them.

Now, suddenly, I know that they will die again as I die. The safe haven I have made for them in the interior of my heart will be lost. And once it is they are set loose. There will be no one left who carries their living memory in this world, who praises them and what they have given to the world, who speaks to them as I have, as I do, every day of my life. I feel them being set loose even as I write these words. Like the filaments that are breaking between me and the world, this loosening is a slow thing, an agonizing thing. It is an exquisitely painful dying of

what has been a living reality each and every day of my life. And so I find myself grieving their passing once more, just as keenly as I did then, maybe even more so. For I am older now and I know what this passing means far more than did all those long years ago.

I carry, too, material possessions they gave me, heirlooms passed into my hands in which their memories reside. Some of them they set aside on the day I was born to mark this first grandchild, this first great-grandchild. Many of them still contain the notes they wrote for me, notes I could only understand much later in life. I take them out every so often and read the words written by those beloved hands, telling me of their love and about this thing they wanted me to have. When I do, I hear those beloved voices once more.

At my death, every one of these things will be submerged into the great flow of possessions once owned by the dead. They will live then in other people's homes, become part of other people's lives. But none of those people will have memory of these ancestors who once owned them – or of me, the one they passed them on to. They won't know of the years I have loved them, cared for them, or carried this responsibility that was passed into me as I took them in my hands.

I have traveled with these things, this mirror, that silver service, the antique clock, those nineteenth century plates, that ancient music box and so many more, for decades, half a century some of them. They, too, are mirrors, reflecting back to me who I am, that I was loved and wanted, that I meant something to those people whose faces are still so clear in my mind's eye, in this heart's feelings. In each and every one of them there are memories, memories by the hundreds, by the thousands. And so much love, too, that it nearly breaks my heart to know I can carry them no more.

My conservatorship is coming to an end. I can't but help feel that I have let my ancestors down by my dying, inevitable though it is. We who are leaving grieve so many things that are never talked of. This is one of them. (Here is where someone will often offer a platitude of one sort or another. As if platitudes can soothe deep grief, erase truth, end pain. I have heard too many of them the past few years. I have watched them being offered, contemplated the tone of voice in which they are delivered, the movements of body, of hand, expression of face of those who have done so. And I have come to understand that platitudes are things offered because they themselves do not want to face this truth I am speaking of, the fact that such a thing is true of their own life and death as well.)

The stories I have told of these beloved relatives (in my books, in my talks), I know now, are insufficient to the reality of their lives. My words and stories will never quite capture those beloved faces, that loving touch, or what they truly meant to me. I wish they could. But no writer, howsoever gifted they are, can do so. No matter how hard I have worked, they will die once more and this time the dying will be permanent. As long as I have been alive, some living essence has come through me into this world that is *them*. They have passed through me into the world and into you only because of my living presence and these memories I carry. But I am reaching the end now and I have to set them down. I can pass the possessions they gave me on to others responsibly or I can leave it to those of my family who remain (and do so irresponsibly). But no matter how I go about it I grieve and I weep. I say goodbye to them all over again. And it hurts, it hurts awful bad.

There are so many things to say goodbye to now. My beloveds, the ones who love me and whom I love so very much. For I am going first – as someone must always do. And these

beloveds of mine, they will remain after I have gone. They will face my loss alone. I will not be there to hold them, to ease their pain, to help carry the burdens they carry after I am gone. I will not be here to companion them in the difficult times that life brings to each and every one of us. I will not be here to share their triumphs, their journey, the simple days in which we sit together and feel the sun on our faces.

And in this leaving . . . I feel, too, as if I am letting them down. If I could change it, remain, be the last to go, I would. For I do not want them to have to suffer my loss (for I know the impact it will have), I do not want them to go through the days of their lives, turning toward me to share some thought or feeling and realize anew that I am gone. I do not want to leave them but rather to companion them all the days of their lives. For that is one of the primary meanings of my life, to companion those I love as we journey through life. And it hurts me, it hurts me to leave them. It hurts awful, awful bad.

So . . . late in the night I awaken and feel all these things. I feel myself moving ever more completely into the land of the dead as each day passes. I feel my slowly growing distance from the living and I feel, so poignantly do I feel it, the loss, the leaving, the grieving. It's a pain in the heart that's so very difficult to bear. And as I do with so many things now, I replay it inside me over and over again, this leaving. I talk to the dead about it sometimes and sometimes they offer some help, other times they don't. But it is maybe the hardest thing of all, this leaving behind those I love.

Then, there is the loss of my body. This body that has been such a good friend to me, that has its own intelligence, that I have played with and lived with and have called upon to work so hard for me in this life. It is growing old. It is weakening. Becoming less than it was. And it



hurts, too, this body of mine. It hurts all the time. It still does the best it can but it is biodegrading as each and every body that is must do sooner or later.

I love my body and its caring of me. And I hate to see what is happening to it. But there is nothing I can do to help it now. It knows this (and it's not very happy about it). Sometimes we argue about all this but time, as always, has the last word. And so I grieve. I grieve my lost youth, my lost strength, my unwrinkled skin, my easy laughter and lightness. I grieve the death of this friend that I have loved so very much.

This is a filament that takes a very long time to break. It frays slowly, day by day. I am reminded every day, every week, every month, of what is being lost. There is no stable state for the loss occurs each and every day bit by bit. I have to learn myself anew each and every day. This is what death is like from a chronic disease. It means saying goodbye again as each change happens. That is one of the hardest things about it, the losing never stops. And neither does the grieving.

It's important to understand this, *the body loses functions slowly, one function at a time*. You will get used to one loss, adapt to it, then soon, there's another. You get used to that one, then there's another. You find work arounds to what is lost, continue on with life, then you lose even more. And soon, those places where you once ran, full of strength and life, you now have to walk. The walking grows slower over time. Eventually, there is the need for help to do merely walk. Eventually there will be only the bed, no walking at all. And so you grieve.

Most people have some awareness of the body losing function but very few are aware that the psychological body frays and degrades as well. And while people do not tend to know of or make formal relationship with what I call the Inner Council, it falls apart, too. (The Inner Council

is formed from the consciously developed relationship between each and every one of our developmental stages/ego-states/personalities. And this includes a great many more aspects of the self than the developmental stages themselves.)

Most people are aware that when they are making a decision they quite often have a number of different opinions about whether they should do this or that or the other thing. Usually, they compromise. I learned long ago that this kind of compromise always has to be paid for eventually. There was always some part of me that was unhappy with it, sometimes more than one part. So, whenever I made a decision, especially an important one, I would take it to my Inner Council and let every part of me talk about the decision until we came to a consensus.

*There's a small stone house in a forest; it is just one large room. Inside it is a big oval table and around that table are many chairs. The various parts of me sit in those chairs, some stand around the walls. Some of the chairs are empty (in the beginning anyway) ready for the ones who will show up later . . . once they know I am serious, that my word is good, that I will be responsible to them . . . and to myself. Anyone or anything may show up in the council, there is no right or wrong person or being or thing. When you begin there is always an old man and an old woman. There is the four year old and the baby, too. The part of the self that always says no is there. There is the part of you that you hate, the part that you think is ugly, and each and every part of yourself that you have cast off and denied. There are ancient ancestors who still live inside my genetic code that have come as well. There are the teachers I found in life and plants and animals, too.*

*There is no one form to who comes and those that do? Not all of them will be human. But all of them are important. And each and every one of them needs to be heard. It took years for some of them to trust me enough to show up. Even longer to be willing to speak to me. The damage we do to ourselves during our lifetime is immense. To become trustworthy to your own self is often one of the hardest things of all. When you are, when each and every part is heard, every decision you make is far more potent, powerful, and committed than those you made before. There is no part of you holding back.*

During the biodegrading process that dying is, the psychological balance that has been achieved, often at great cost and through so many years of focused work, begins to be lost. There is just not enough energy to do the work needed to maintain balance. (For the psychological body, like the physical body, needs constant attention and nurturing to remain healthy.) There is a devolution that occurs, as if you are going back in time. The oldest psychological patterns are the deepest and most ingrained, the newest are far less strongly imprinted. Old patterns of thought and behavior start to emerge. Some of them from very early childhood. They are like some sort of default setting on a computer. There is a reset and all the later adaptations begin to be lost. One by one by one. As the days pass it takes more focus of mind and energy to maintain integrity of behavior and interaction. It becomes harder to die with grace and honor and kindness – toward the self and others, even those you love more than you know how to say. It's unsettling. And the grieving of these slowly degrading capacities of self, well, it doesn't stop either. For like the body, the loss is endless.

The same process occurs with mental function as well. Mental flexibility, memory, articulation, word complexity, mental analysis, computational capacity . . . all of that begins to devolve. (And as it does, some of those around you will begin to engage their patronizing identity, to begin to speak to you as if you are a little child and they are grown – though they are not – and most of them will not be able to see you in there looking back at them. For they, like so many Americans, have contented themselves with surfaces for so long that they can no longer tell the deep from the shallow. And none of them will know, until it is their turn, how much grieving this causes in those they say they love.)

This happens as well with spiritual capacity and orientation. The contemplative work of decades begins to fray, to be lost. It takes ever more energy, of which there is too little anyway, to maintain the self that you have spent a lifetime birthing into the world. And so, backward in time you go. S l o w l y.

### **I Guess I Need To Talk about the Ego For A Bit**

The part of the self that people erroneously name *ego* is not what they think it is, Nor is it what been portrayed in so many books or even in all those badly translated religious tracts (no matter the spiritual or religious tradition). It has a function, it's important, and unless you have worked with this part of you during life, it can become difficult while dying. The “ego” builds up a lot of resentment during a lifetime of being ignored, denigrated, talked down to. It never forgets and it finds forgiveness very difficult. It has an ecological function and it is coded into every living being as part of the genetic structure of the self, just as the lungs, heart, and all parts of the physical and psychological bodies are. The “ego” is not a “choice,” it is an aspect of the

organism, as real and important as the bones that give us structure and strength. It cannot be removed and it responds to repression with rage. It cannot be forced to anything . . . though it can be bargained with. But only if you understand what it is, why it is, and come to love and respect it.

When we are born (and this is true of every organism that emerges out of the great ocean of being) there is an integral part of the self that is born right along with us. Again, it is coded in, irremovable, integral and important. It is one of the most primary of our personalities/ego-states/selves/consciousness-nodules. It has a very strong sense of our exterior membrane, the boundary between us and the external world. Its function is to protect the integrity of the organism that is us. It is a *force*, a *drive*, and it is very basic. It's foundational. It's not usually very sophisticated despite its strength and commitment to its function and our continued existence. This part of the self is so strong and so focused in fact that making relationship with it is very difficult and it takes, if you are dedicated to doing so, a very long time to accomplish.

It doesn't care about integrity or honor or grace or kindness. It cares about our (your) survival. It gets frightened quite easily. And when it does it has the capacity to take over behavior, thought, and all decision making. How much it does depends on the degree of fear it is experiencing. Over time, beginning very early in life, it begins to make decisions about what will promote your survival and what will not. (The nature of your early years has tremendous effects on this). Some of the things it decides are crucial and make no real sense from any kind of rational perspective. It may decide that you should only eat elk (as Robert Bly once put it) or stay away from elevators. Often, because of the relationship between money and survival, it may decide that you should get as much money as you can no matter what you do to get it. Then there

are things like: Trust no one, hoard as much as possible, get many advanced degrees, buy guns and a lot of survival food, clean all home surfaces obsessively, never forget anything, always be exquisitely aware of your surroundings. The list is endless. It makes the majority of these associations and decisions between birth and perhaps age 25. Others are made in response to painful circumstances that occur later in life (*never* trust women [or men] and no matter what you do, DO NOT get married, never invest in bitcoin). This part of the self is the source of paranoia (which is just survival fears run amok). It easily becomes hysterical (or testicular as the case may be) and tends to make hasty decisions when it does. It is not generally given to contemplation or reflection.

So . . . because this part of the self is so strong, so deep, so foundational to our very identity, it is very hard to get it to make relationship or accommodation with other parts of the self. This is because so many people tend to be so incredibly stupid. Like this . . .

*Once Upon A Time there were two very good hypnotherapists. They were teaching a workshop on inducing trance states. Right at the beginning of the class one of the participants said, "Well, I can't be hypnotized." This was, of course a challenge the teachers could not ignore. So, the two workshop leaders called the man up and used him to demonstrate trance induction. They began the induction while the man is talking to them.*

*"See the thing is that hypnotists have tried to put me into . . ."*

*And here the man goes into a deep hypnotic state, his head falling to the side. The men talk to the class a bit about what they have been doing and why and*

*then they bring the man out of the trance state.*

*“... trance but they have never been able to. It’s impossible. So, I don’t think either of you will be able to put me into a hypnotic state.”*

*The two men, and the class participants as well, tell the man that yes, indeed, he was put into trance but the man refuses to believe them. So, the workshop leaders get out a video camera and recorder and tape the entire exchange. They put the man into trance and again, the same thing happens. So, they tell him they are going to show him the tape so he can see that it really is true, he is going into trance.*

*The two leaders rewind the tape, the press play, and watch the screen as the man goes into trance. They turn to him, ready to say, “See, you went into trance.” But when they do, they see his head is laying to the side and the guy is deep in trance again. No matter what they do, or how they try to record it, he keeps going into trance. Finally, they put him into trance again, and ask to speak to the part of the man who will not let him see that he is going into trance. They ask it why it won’t let Bob see himself going into trance. And the part replies, in a shrill voice, **Because he is so fucking stupid!** And no matter what they did it would not agree to let the man know that he was actually being hypnotized. The man had treated this foundational and very strong part of himself so badly for so long that he no longer had any ability to affect its behavior.*

This is the way it is with the ego. And the truth is that we human beings are pretty stupid when

you come right down to it. And few of us really understand the complexity of our internal psychological world. Nor do most of us understand how much damage is done by concentrating on the conscious “I” who lives up here in daylight while ignoring all the other parts that make up the complexity of who we are. (This is a foundational reason that addiction of any sort is so hard to break, why damaging behaviors tend to emerge at the worst of times, and why people keep marrying the worst possible person over and over again.) This story is a very good metaphor for the power of the part called the ego and why it is not sensible to treat it badly or piss it off.

Because this part of the self is so often ignored and denigrated it is very hard to get it to *listen*. It simply does not and will not trust the “I” that lives up there in daylight to be honorable or a good parent to the self.

*What would it be like if you treated yourself the way you do someone you love and who needs help? What would it be like to engage in the sacred act of breaking bread with yourself? What would it be like to stop having unkind thoughts about yourself? If you talked to a friend the way you talk to yourself, how do you think they would respond?*

Because so few people spend time making relationship with this part of the self (developing character is not much in fashion now) the closer they come to a survival situation the more likely it is that this part will take over. (It tends to be highly active in mobs, whether left or right.) When it does, the so-called “higher function” is lost. As in: “All this love and light stuff is fine but we’re talking about survival here!” The muscle that is built when character of self is built



over time is weak in so many people now. Developing strength of character necessitates being *in* frightening, challenging circumstances over and over again and learning to deal with them. Nearly all people, when these kinds of situations are first experienced are scared shitless and run away – or they appeal to authorities to make the frightening situation stop – or they just sort of stop doing anything and become helpless. Development of character means not letting fear control the decisions you make. You're still scared, yes, but you keep *thinking* and generating solutions and possible responses and then making them. But this capacity, this kind of integrity can only be learned over time by being in those kinds of challenging and frightening situations on a regular basis.

It takes both a confrontation with frightening and challenging situations as a habit of life (yes, children really should walk to school, take the subway on their own, and play unsupervised) and a specific kind of kindness (the one that comes out of a strong and caring sense of self) to produce a healthy balance in this part of the self. Few people get that from the outside world either in childhood or later.

But. You can always decide to provide it to yourself. (This does not mean doing it alone, it means finding a way to *provide* what you need by first determining what you need, then arranging your life so that it happens for you, internally *and* externally. Truly, it is never too late to have a happy childhood. It is never too late to have a kind, strong, loving parent. Most of all though, it means meeting this part of the self and making relationship with it. And that means coming to terms with what and who you are – without denigration or shaming).

It took me ten years of focused, continual work to make relationship with this part of myself. And the only thing I could come up with that made sense to it such that it would be a

supportive member of my Inner Council was asking it, over and over again, “How many million year old people have you met?” and “How many hundred and twenty year old people have you met?” and then telling it: “It is inevitable that we are going to die, therefore it makes the most sense that we create the happiest life together that we can. I will not abandon you, I will take your wants and drives into account but you must also recognize that sooner or later we are going to die and that you are going to fail in your function. Rather than becoming testicular about this, how about if we do this thing that we are going to have to do eventually as partners?”

In truth the ego is one of the most important members of the inner council. If you do not make relationship with it, it will make your life increasingly difficult, usually at the most inopportune of times.

Unfortunately, actually dying is different than theoretical dying. And so, when it begins to occur for real, this part of the self becomes afraid. It activates again. It will have to have constant reassurance about the agreement that has been made; it needs to know that I am still present. But the thing is, I am not capable of being as present as I once was. And it knows it. So, I have to have that same old conversation again about the built-in limits to our life span. I have to reassure it that no matter how weak I now am compared to how I once was that the time is upon us and that we will be doing this together. (Truth? This part of the self is the last to die for many people, it will often hang on long after every other part has left.)

The one way I have found to most effectively maintain a functional relationship with this part of the self is to curtail the focus of consciousness.

All of us learn as a habit of self to look outward toward the world. (This is part of forward time.) It works pretty well until we begin to weaken in old age or during severe chronic disease

or when dying escalates. If you take the time to look at photographs of some of the famous people who have died, Sean Connery or Omar Sharif, for instance, you can see what I am talking about. The photos taken of them just before death, in their eyes you can see the loss of the confident self that for so long looked out at the world. What is there now is a kind of bewilderment, a lostness. And that look? It grows ever stronger as death approaches. It is accompanied by a growing fearfulness, loss of balance, uncertainty, hesitancy. The loss of the self that can deal with the exterior world (that so long present charismatic, intelligent and forceful self) has become so extreme that only the lost, bewildered child is left looking out of the eyes. Fear escalates because there is no longer a strong identity to take care of the self.

The solution is to keep the eyes close to the self. To train the self to not look outward at the external world in the way that the strong and functional self once did. (This takes some effort, the habituation of the other behavior is strong.) In other words, instead of sending that energy of the self outward, send it inward as a nurturing, caretaking of the self – an embracing, a caring, a companionship. This is particularly difficult to do because one of the reasons that people look through their eyes in the way they do during most of their adult life is to monitor for threats. The problem now is that you can't, there is neither the energy nor the facility to do so.

Here is another way to understand this. There comes a time when the neurological system degrades. This affects the habituated analysis of sensory input data that has been developed over the years. It's compromised. Because of this you startle more easily. For instance, because of the way that sunlight and leaf patterns interact on a mildly windy day, shadows will flash on the wall inside the house – as they have always done. Normally, below the level of conscious awareness, your system will analyze and filter out those shadow movements as a threat. But now what is

experienced is a dark movement in peripheral vision. Something seems to be coming at you from the side. The startle reflex is stimulated. And you jump. (This alteration of automatic analysis of sensory inputs is what leads to many elderly people to have trouble driving.) When the startle reflex is stimulated, fear is activated, and the “ego” becomes active in order to keep you safe. Over time, it can become very activated, especially if you have not come to terms with it. The solution is to train yourself to not respond to this kind of alteration in sensory analysis. (And yes, this has its own problems but they are far less than the ones that occur if you are continually hyper-reactive.) To do this, you need to just sit and slowly replay the event until you can identify what is happening and the hyper-reaction minimizes.

The truth is that the brain can no longer process or analyze incoming inputs unconsciously as it once did. So they reach the conscious mind which they didn't used to do. In essence you have to create a work around just as you are doing with your loss of physical flexibility and strength, endurance and vitality. This same process occurs with every sensory modality: hearing (what's that sound?), smell (is that gas?), taste (Is this food bad?), and kinesthetic touch (both interior and exterior – there are a lot of aches and pains now because the brain can no longer deal with minor inputs below conscious awareness). You are forced deal with sensory inputs in an entirely new way. It takes time to figure out how to do it.

*I believe that it is crucial to live our dying, just as each of us live our living.* And the only way to do that is to be present with it, to be aware. This takes focus and practice and time. And those of us who are old? If there is one thing we have during the days we are now living it's time.

### **The Truth is: My Time is Almost Over**

I am losing my life, the life that I loved. And I am forced to say goodbye to that as well, to life itself. To my time. And so I grieve.

I am disappearing from the world. Eventually I will disappear from people's memories as well. *No more me*. That doesn't feel very good, does it? Believe me, you *will* think about this. The fact that we who are old have become invisible to the young makes it hard not to. When they look at me, at us, their eyes say we are already part of the past. We have no relevance. They reflect back to us that we are disappearing, that our time is over. That death is approaching.

I feel death coming closer to me each and every day. It is not some distant land or event now, not at all. The river upon which I have kept my small boat afloat is nearing the rapids and the rocks. Beyond those rapids is something far harder to describe. There's a *feel* to it and somewhere deep inside me it is recognized for what it is. After all, there have been billions of years of dying already. And in my body are organisms, genes, cells that carry within them the memories of that dying. It's something they have experienced before. For there is no part of me that has not been part of other organisms, other beings, other lives. Inside me are multitudes and they are signaling the approach of this thing they understand far better than the conscious "I" who calls himself Stephen Harrod Buhner. They are like elephants who feel the approaching tsunami or earthquake long before it arrives.

I was afraid when I first sensed this. Terrified even. But as the days and months and years have gone by I have gotten ever more used to it. Sometimes, the boundary between life and death has grown very thin. And so, every so often, I've been able to see into the landscape that awaits me. It's very different than any description of it I have read or heard about. Sometimes those that

have gone before do come to speak with me (though of course rationalists say this is impossible), for the dead who once knew and loved us always come to help those of us that are moving into this last stage of life. I think elders have always done for those they love. And they do so most easily to those most open to their presence.

*There are tribal peoples all throughout the world who know this. They have been telling rationalists and christians about it throughout their colonization. And it's been denigrated as long as colonization has been happening. And so people in the "civilized" nations keep their experiences to themselves. But we are all the poorer for it. As one African tribal elder once put it, "No, we don't pray to god, god is very far away and very busy. We pray to our ancestors for they are the closest of all spirit beings to us; they still remember what it is like to be a human being. And they are the most likely to help when we are in need."*

I have sat in contemplation with the death I feel coming toward me for years now. Its long slow approach has allowed me to gain familiarity with its touch, get a feel for the reality of it in my life. And so the fear has lessened over time.

I was of the first generation in this country that had little to no exposure to death and the dying. The dying were already being hidden in hospitals and nursing homes when I was young. They no longer died in the bedroom upstairs. Nor did the children any longer make that frightening trip up the stairway and into the room of their dying relatives. They no longer smelled the sickness in the room, no longer held the hands of the dying, no longer shared those last

stories, no longer watched as the final moments of life were lived, no longer sat by the side of the dead. There was no longer the washing of the body, no longer the wailing of those who grieved, no longer the handmade coffin, no longer the wake in the living room. And no longer did the family take that long journey to the cemetery where those who had known the dead for all the years of their life lowered them into the ground. No longer did each person place dirt in the grave or say a prayer as they did or hold hands as they gathered around the resting place of those they had loved and known since they were born. Death had been banished from its interweaving in human life, been hidden, has become a stranger. And so a kind of fear that few peoples have ever known has become common in our lives. It been common in mine.

Those things that are alien to us are quite often feared simply because of their strangeness. Unfamiliarity always bring some fear with it. This is one of the great axioms of life. And there is no culture on Earth more fearful of growing old, of dying, or of death than this one. We have become terrible because of it. Inside ourselves and outside of ourselves. Would we visit so much death on the rest of the world were we less terrified of death? Perhaps not.

So, I have spent a lot of time *feeling* into death itself. In the night sometimes, I let my sense of it grow strong, then stronger still, until it is all that I feel. Then I look into it, invite it into me. I sense its textures, its presence, and allow myself through this process to get used to it.

I invite it in as I would a friend coming to visit. I gather my fear in my hands then, lift them outward to death, let the two touch. Then I breathe into the experience. Slowly in, slowly out. Just being with it. Sometimes I call my ancestors to my side. Other times I call those spirits who have seen me through this life. And always I call the plants who have been my companions and teachers for so long. I am not alone in this journey . . . at least I don't have to be. Others have

gone this way before me. So many of the ones I respect most, my teachers and elders, those who taught me what it is to be a human being . . . they have gone before me.

They journeyed into death and so I guess I can as well. Like so many of them I have chosen to do so with my eyes wide open, my heart wide open, my hands reaching out for what comes next. As it has been throughout my life with everything I have done and learned, I am curious about it. Some of what happens will be a surprise. But not all. Death is such a fundamental part of life here that it's not all that surprising that some knowledge of the territory is woven into Earth and life itself. It's just that so few people have really wanted to know. You have to talk to death a long time before you can get out of the way enough to hear what it's telling you. And it will tell you about what is on the other side. After all, as George Washington Carver once said, *Anything* will give up its secrets if you love it enough.

### **The Questions We are Being Asked**

We are being asked a number of difficult questions as we move into old age. (For those of us who develop a chronic illness as we do, some of the questions of necessity involve death. It's never very far from the mind.) Who are you going to be now? What are you going to do with the time left you? Where do you want all your stuff to go once you die? Actually, *how* are you going to die? You do have choices about this you know. And once you do, what is going to happen to your body?

One of the strangest things that happened to me in that landscape of transition into old age was that I began to take on a series of behaviors that were odd to me. For an entire week, I found myself becoming curmudgeonly and not in a good way. I sat around talking about how



stupid the young were, how it wasn't like that when I was young. And I really got into it. It was who I was for awhile. But after a bit I started wondering where that behavior had come from. I stopped its automatic emergence and moved back into myself.

Then not long afterwards I started to get really forgetful, senile even. I wandered around the house without much of a clue to what I was doing. But after awhile I started to wonder what the hell I was doing, where this behavior had suddenly come from. I stopped its emergence and moved back into myself.

Not long after that, I found myself sitting with some old guys at the coffee shop talking about who had died recently, the various aches and pains that had come lately, the organs that were failing. I started telling old people jokes (most not all that funny really). And talking about politics and the past and how stupid the young were and we weren't like that when we were young. And again, after awhile I started to wonder what the hell I was doing, where this behavior had come from. I stopped its emergence and moved back into myself.

I started thinking about just sitting on the porch and becoming hopeless about everything. Then I started thinking about playing golf or moving to florida or into a "retirement" community, or maybe even a nursing home. And all these thoughts were really alien to me. What the hell was going on?

I began to think more deeply about these things that just were sort of popping up into my mind and affecting my behavior. And I finally realized that each and every one of them were caricatures of what old people are like in this country. What their life is supposed to be, what they are supposed to do. How people are supposed to be when they get old. I found myself becoming a caricature of an old man. I was automatically answering the question of "who do you

want to be now?” without actually having thought it through. And because I was unconscious about it, I was letting something else make the decision for me.

After months of contemplation I finally realized that the one option that was most important to me did not automatically emerge, that is, becoming an elder. And that is when I made the decision to turn in that direction and so consciously choose who I wanted to be now.

Eldering in this country has to be a choice; simply because there are so few models it cannot be a default state of being. Because we have so few experiences of elders here, there is no internal model that has been internalized. And so the tendency is to just become something that *has* been internalized.

In this, I was lucky, I had actually known elders in my life. I had internalized them but not sufficiently for it to be a default choice. So I had to consciously choose it, to begin to reform myself, to look more deeply into what an elder is, and to do the work to bring it into being into being.

The secret to eldery is grieving, coming to terms with it, and finally incorporating it into every cell of the self. Only those who have lived for lengthy periods in the land of sorrow, who have descended, who have made their peace with that landscape will be able to elder. For one of the essential qualities of elders is wisdom and wisdom only grows in soil watered by tears.

It takes time to get to that place because it takes years of grieving before it is possible to come to terms with it. It necessitates submersion and contemplation and ultimately surrender to grief itself. It takes finally understanding that just as fear and anger are two sides of the same coin, sorrow and joy are two sides of another coin. It takes even longer to find that there is a power, an energy, that comes from incorporated grief just as there is from joy and fear and anger.

But the energy, the power, that comes from grief is a slower, more foundational form of power. Unlike the others, incorporated grief cannot be moved from its course. It is as patient as water on stone.

### **Dying and the New Life**

While I did get to the end of the transition between late middle age and early old age, regrettably in that landscape I became seriously ill. This has been common for me all my life.

During birth I was two months premature and nearly died. They kept me in an “isolet” for weeks until they could take me home. During adolescence I nearly died again. And again as I moved into middle age from young adulthood. I was able to survive it the first three times but not this last time; it was just more than my body could take.

I did see how I would be in old age, the work that my elder self could do in this elder time. It would have been fun. But I don't have the years I need, or the health, to do it. And so, I die.

I have been ill now for nine years (my prognosis was three) with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (and no, it did not come from smoking). I have spent a great deal of time feeling into dying and death and coming to terms with both. And in that time I decided to live my dying just as I lived my living. To immerse myself deep inside it and explore every aspect of it that I could. The things I have talked about in this monograph are some of what I have found in doing so.

As part of this my beloveds and I are going through all these many possessions, passing a few on to favored students and listing others on ebay (if I can ever get it set up) so that people who would love having those things can fold them into their lives and perhaps love them as I

have loved them. Many of the books are going to United Plant Savers for their herbal library in Ohio, others to a local bookstore, and many to Julie for her library and to companion her in the years to come. The will and all those dreary documents are completed. The houses as repaired and stable as I can make them. But most of all my beloveds and I have had the time to grieve together. We have spent the past few years getting as used to my departure as we can. We have said all the things we can think of to say, all the things that needed to be said. We have wept together and we will weep together many more times before we are done.

I have written more about all this in my book *Earth Grief*. That material was supposed to be part of *Becoming Vegetalista* but it insisted on its own book and so I spent a few years writing it all down. In this piece I have put many of the things that did not fit in *Earth Grief*, mostly because I was irritated. I understand Mary Midgley when she said, “Well, I did not intend to write another book but the rationalists kept saying things that made me angry and so I had to.” There is so much richness in these transition landscapes and so much in the dying each and everyone of us must face at the end. And very little of what I have read has matched my experience and after awhile I just got pissed off about it. I did not want to leave these things unsaid.

I decided long ago to live in such a way that at the end I would not be lying on my death bed thinking, “I could have . . .” And to be sure, there is little that I regret. Only that I am the first to go of those that I love. That is a bitter pill indeed.

It is a good feeling, having so few regrets, knowing that my life has been lived fully, that I threw myself into it and did not hold back, that I faced all those fears, including my two world class phobias (debilitating as they were): speaking before a crowd and singing in public. Funny

that I would become a traveling lecturer and workshop teacher. The Universe has an abysmal sense of humor.

And of course all the death plans have been made. I will be wrapped in a winding cloth (handmade of beautiful cloth and embroidered with love) and buried in a biodegradable coffin six feet deep in the soil of the Gila. I will not be embalmed nor cosmetically enhanced nor contained in some idiotically fancy box. There will be no marker and only two people will know the place where this Earth that I love takes me into its loving arms.

There is life after death, of course. Many types of life. One of them is this: The Earth and its creatures will feed on my body just as I have fed on the bodies of plants and animals throughout my time here. They will carry me with them as they go, using me to forward their life into the future, just as I used so many others. I will be rewoven back into the web of life from which I came so long ago. And this is as it should be. For I am of Earth, in fact I am Earth in human form, Earth looking out of human eyes. And I have been that for a very long time – though of course it took a long time to become that. It takes a lot of work to decolonize the self, to reinhabit interbeing with this Earth, to become what at root all human beings are.

I feel myself being pulled deep into the root of life as so many of those I have loved and learned from have been. It comforts me to know that. Soon, I will go to my rest and I wonder as it approaches if the Elder of Earth who came to me long ago, the one who set me on this journey and this work will stop by before I do. I have heard that at the end they sometimes do.

And so, I will end this monograph here. I am growing fatigued writing it. If you look you will most likely notice that the energy of the piece has flagged a bit since page 40 or so. That is much like my days now. They start off full of life and energy but it goes quickly then just sort of

limps along for a bit until I fall asleep early in the evening. Regrettably there are three or four articles I need to finish and post at the website; I keep hoping I will have the energy to finish them or finally do the editing or have enough energy to make them congruent throughout their length but I think I should go ahead and post them, as I will post this one.

Green Blessings to all of you. Be well and travel safe. Follow your individual genius and know that there is help on the way if only you will reach out and ask for it. Though, of course, it will often not look like anything you expected. As I mentioned, the Universe has an abysmal sense of humor.