

Conscious Aging

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What is life but the angle of vision? A man is measured by the angle at which he looks at objects. — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Our vision of old age is fraught with complexities and paradoxes: we talk about the body aging, but most of our cells are under the age of seven. And what could it possibly mean to our divine spirit, an infinite being, to grow old? What might growing old mean to the galaxy? To a star? Just as our faces have changed since infancy, imagine how the face of the earth has changed over its lifetime: volcanoes arising and continents moving around clashing into one another. We need to remind ourselves that our bodies are not what make us who we are.

Perhaps we could approach these paradoxes by developing an ironic imagination, as Robert Sardello suggests in *Facing the World with Soul*. This ability lets us hold contradictory truths in thought and imagination, without seeking to resolve their differences, until something new and perhaps unexpected is born. It's hard to hold that tension — for example, between the truths that we are getting old and that interiorly we are not aging one bit. It requires a radical acceptance of what is real and true on different planes at the same time — without resisting or negating or trying to change what's so, and without setting the mind to worrying and chewing on a solution.

The soul can embrace paradoxes and opposing truths just as the universe embraces unifying and repelling forces. Actually the soul, like the universe, exists *because* of opposing yet complementary energies.

Addressing the apparently contradictory natures of good and evil, H. P. Blavatsky wrote, “the operation of the two contraries produce harmony, like the centripetal and centrifugal forces, and *are necessary to each other*” (*Isis Unveiled* 2:480-1).

In that spirit, can we look unflinchingly at our worldly reality and also hold to infinite potential and possibility? Mind flinches too quickly, but by living soulfully we can embrace the paradox of both realities at the same time. Something inside easily recognizes the truth that we are not our bodies, but also that we are very much our bodies. Pain may not touch our immortal soul, but the person who calls itself *ME* gets affected right away. And if living our lives doesn't affect our souls in important and powerful ways, then why are we here? Maybe the pain that comes with the breakdown of bodily processes is especially tough on us as we age because we aren't going to physically heal from many of these changes. They're signs, reminders that we're rooted in a mortal vessel, and the more we identify with *it*, the more pain we'll experience.

Actually I've been in denial about even having a body for many years. I'll clothe it, feed it, exercise it, but often based only on the *idea* of what it needs rather than *listening* to what it needs. It's said that the mind-body separation is only a separation from the mind's point of view because the body has no doubts about oneness. Watch a horror movie and see how quickly your body keeps up with the action of the mind. The same with the heart: the only separation between heart and mind is in the mind itself, not in the heart. And one thing we can count on is that as we age, the mind slows down.

My husband has a way of thinking about the body that I like. It affirms that, yes, we are our bodies, but our bodies are not us. We are more than wrinkled bags of aches and pains. We are essentially immortal beings with a miraculous vehicle that houses countless evolving lives. Powerful energies and forces stream through us constantly. The outer symptoms of aging are clues to inner transformations and, rather than fearing all of the end-of-life issues — worrying about becoming dependent or hassling with wills; fearing loss of loved ones or being alone — we can remember to activate our imaginations to picture all this differently. What is the purpose of life anyway? Ram Dass suggests that one purpose is to learn to grow old well.

The trick, then, is to let go of our identification with body and identify more with spirit — for as the body gets weaker we get stronger spiritually, *if* we put our attention and intention there. Our culture, of course, pressures us to try to stay youthful, but “When we resist aging, we resist life itself, since aging is inherent in living. Suffering results when we push away what is real. Many of us fear growing older; . . . We heal by opening to the changes in life and allowing what is real to naturally evolve” (“[Aging with Awareness](http://www.awakeningonline.com/htms/consciousAging.htm),” www.awakeningonline.com/htms/consciousAging.htm). According to gerontologist Robert C. Atchely: Best-selling titles such as Deepak Chopra's . . . *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* . . . may offer valuable . . . ideas to their readers, but their inherent promise of rejuvenation also implies a denial of aging. . . .

Ultimately, though, the enterprise of conscious aging is about developing and maintaining integrity. This journey involves enlightening the mind, not tricking it into thinking there are shortcuts to becoming enlightened. It involves developing spiritual resources to adapt to aging, not to deny it.

. . . Aging with consciousness is neither quick nor easy. It requires that we come back over and over again to our intention to be awake as we age. It requires that we practice compassionate listening and look at the world from a long-term vantage point that transcends our purely personal desires and fears. With years of such practice, we may begin to see what will actually help. This message may not be easy to sell in a culture fixated on quick solutions. — www.wellnessgoods.com/consciousagingnurturing.asp

I've heard many people say that they are not afraid to die. I wonder, though, how many are afraid they'll get senile? I've heard friends say they'd rather die than have to live through the slow deterioration of Alzheimer's. But maybe that's only how we feel on THIS side of the divide. According to one study, people are generally poor predictors of how they will react to events, especially sad or negative ones. What we don't take into account is that living through the event transforms us; we are no longer the same person. The experiences challenge our ideas and rearrange our priorities.

Perhaps falling apart is just another way of letting go, of releasing our beliefs about ourselves and what we believe to be true. A main theme of the spiritual classic, the *Bhagavad Gita*, is the importance of learning to be unattached to the fruits of our labor, of emptying ourselves — to become teflon instead of velcro. Nature kindly assists us as we age, for as our mind and memories dim, it becomes a little easier to release the images we hold about who we are. Looking back at the tumultuous passions and desires of younger years, we can be a little pleased not to be seized by those storms so much. As hearing diminishes and taste-buds desert us, we can wish them good riddance. We miss an opportunity for transformation by tightly holding on to who we were — besides, we were never really who we thought we were anyway, so what are we holding on to?

Conscious aging is essentially spiritual practice, and spiritual practice is about finding and resting in that part of ourselves that is still and essentially timeless. “Go behind time,” suggests Ram Dass, * “find the part that is beyond time — you can't see it, you can't smell it, you can't hear it, you can't even think about it, and yet it is. You can only be it. You can't know it because the thinking mind knows objects, and objects are in time. It's like having a flashlight that you shine on a memory, on a plan, on a sensation, on a feeling, but when does the flashlight shine on itself? The flashlight is that part of us that we could call awareness. It has no time, no space, it doesn't die, it wasn't born, it's not going anywhere. We tend to be so fascinated with being aware of things that we forget to be aware of awareness itself. The spiritual journey is about going deeper and deeper to find that which does not change. In the midst of change, we are still rooted in the changeless.”

*Remarks edited from the *Aging and the Awakening Potential of Change* audiotape, a talk at The Omega Institute Conference on *Conscious Aging: A Creative and Spiritual Journey*.

We've an ingrained habit of identifying with our sensations, thoughts, and feelings, all temporary and fluctuating elements of our presumed reality. But rather than thinking “I hurt, I'm sick,” we can learn to take one step back and think, my *stomach* hurts, my *body* is ill. As we learn to disentangle our sense of self from our sense of body, we can also begin to step away from the personality. Even more than our body, we think of our personality as who we are, and disengaging from it takes practice. Rather than thinking “I'm impatient” or “I'm angry,” we could instead think “I am *conscious* of being impatient” or “I am *aware* of being angry.” This opens up some breathing room and allows us to reduce the confusion between who I “am” and how I'm “acting” or “feeling” at the moment. A good question to ask when disturbing thoughts or emotions arise is “Could I let them go?” Letting go helps make room for understanding and compassion to enter. Next time anger, depression, or other difficult states arise, try asking, “Can I let this go?” Truly, realizing that we are not our bodies or our thoughts isn't so difficult — but *remembering* it is.

As babies we had no control over our bodies, but we soon learned how to control them, and shortly after we wanted to control everything. My two-year-old grandson is very jealous of his independence and ability to do things for himself: “My do,” he says. “I do it *myself!*” It's appropriate for him to want to suck up life through a giant straw, to be curious and want to experience all life has to offer. Much of our own lives have been spent like that: being productive, being busy, being on time. But that's not the role of older age, and if we persist in clinging to how we were, how life was, we miss a transformative opportunity: we are being stretched in an inner way to become more soul-oriented.

Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi, founder of the Spiritual Eldering Institute, says that this is a time with special opportunities for forgiveness and spiritual intimacy. This is a time when we can act “as guide, mentor, and agent of healing and reconciliation on behalf of the planet, nation, tribe, clan, and family.” A time to become “wisdom keepers.” And this special time is not given to everyone. Can we pause for a moment to acknowledge the millions of people worldwide who will not grow old this lifetime?

Older age is a time for us to become lighter in the world, to *not* do so much, to allow others to be busy busy busy. As the body begins to decline, perhaps it's a time to learn more fully what interdependence means. It's hard to move from care-giver to care-receiver. “My do” is our mantra: “Let ME help *you*.” We may feel

that “living to benefit mankind is the first step” on our spiritual path, and not being a burden to others may seem a significant part of that message. How do we reorient our thinking when, in fact, we are likely to become a burden to others? I’m not sure, but facing the situation head on, with as much loving kindness as we can muster, must be part of the key. It’s not wicked to give others an opportunity to care for *us*. After all, the Buddha’s spiritual nature was re-awakened when he came face to face with an elderly sick person and a corpse. Accepting our situation and accepting with love the help we receive from others can turn the most mundane act into a kind of blessing.

As our bodies begin to limit our actions, we can’t do as much, and if we’ve been diagnosed with a terminal illness we can’t make plans too far into the future. Nor does our short-term memory work so well. Clearly life is telling us to pay attention to the present moment, to NOW. Imagine for a moment all the sad or difficult experiences that have been tied around your heart: ropes of sadness, strings of anger, lines of discord, threads of unhappiness. Now that we can’t remember their details so well, it’s easier to cut those old ropes and let our hearts expand. We can learn to spend more time *being* and less time becoming prolific and productive. This doesn’t mean we’re not still creative beings: just as the sun is setting in one place it is rising in another. With the loss of vitality on one level, there is an increase elsewhere. No matter how tired we feel, each of us is a micro-universe teeming with life, filled with infinitesimal evolving entities, “a well-spring of ‘creative’ activity, pouring forth . . . from the unfathomable depths of [our] own nature — which is the same as saying from the unfathomably deep womb of the Universe — a continuous and ceaselessly flowing stream of invisible lives . . .” (G. de Purucker, *The Esoteric Tradition* 1:266). Notice this doesn’t say we’re creative as long as we’re not lying in a hospital bed, or that everyone is creative except those who don’t feel well.

Some say that “conscious aging” is emerging as a cultural ideal for a new level of psychological functioning, but it’s more. In the U.S. this could be as revolutionary a time as the 1960s. The baby boomers are getting ready to retire, and many have the time and money to put their energy where their hearts are. Those in their 50s and early 60s are part of a generation that is healthier and better educated than previous seniors, and many are storming into social arenas to volunteer in all areas. Groups are forming with names like the Gray Panthers and the Raging Grannies. Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi proposed “a new model of later-life development called ‘sage-ing’” — a time to let go of all that we’ve outgrown and to re-imagine our future differently. His Spiritual Eldering Institute teaches seniors “how to expand their lives and consciousnesses to meet their extended life span.” If we’ve been putting it off due to obligations to our family, career, or other responsibilities, he suggests, now we can afford to act in the service of truth. Sadly, as we age, physical infirmities interfere with our activities, relatives make decisions that dismay us or “ruin our lives,” careers wane, certain opportunities diminish, and there arises a great longing to get our lives back on track. Wrong. Our lives are never off track. There is no other track to be on. Life is truly a mystery: we never know the whole story, even of the most intimate events of our own lives. There’s always more to what’s going on than we know, so we must keep acting from the highest and trusting to the principles and laws of the universe that the cycles will continue to change and the tracks will lead us to understanding and inner reconciliation. As Rachel Naomi Remen writes:

Much in life distracts us from our true nature, captures the Self in bonds of greed, desire, numbness, and unconsciousness. But every act of service is an evidence that the soul is stronger than all that and can draw us toward it despite all.

Perhaps our greatest service is simply to find ways to strengthen and live closer to our goodness. This . . . requires an everyday attention, an awareness of all that diminishes us, distracts us, and causes us to forget who we are. But every act of service bears witness to the possibility of freedom for us all. And every time anyone becomes more transparent to the light in them, they will restore the light in the world. — *My Grandfather’s Blessings*, p. 328

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The senses interfere everywhere, and mix their own structure with all they report of. Our first mistake is the belief that the circumstance gives the joy which we give to the circumstance. Life is an ecstasy. — Ralph Waldo Emerson