

Preparation for Aging

Aging is a part of the life cycle with its own joys and problems. In some parts of the world, such as China and Japan, aging is viewed with high status and great respect. In the United States, on the other hand, aging generally invokes a negative attitude. Although none of us looks forward to aging, it is inevitable and a major task in our lives – a task that can bring surprising satisfaction and peace.

Bill Plotkin, *Crossing Into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*, speaks of the first half of life as doing our “survival dance.” The second half of life can then become our “sacred dance.” Another way to view the stages of life is through the metaphor of light. Whereas the first half of life uses light (order, meaning, clarity, explanations), the second half of life uses the descent into darkness, “the unknown or undeveloped aspects of our nature,” says Angeles Arrien in *The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom*. Elder years focus on bringing meaning to our lives, which draws on some new skills.

Our aging bodies force us to rethink our ways of eating, exercising and life style. Author Judith Viorst reminds us, “At several points in our life we will have to relinquish a former self-image and move on.” The losses we experience will require us to confront our mortality and become acquainted with the many “letting goes” demanded of us daily. Athletes past their prime sometimes complain that it’s the legs that go first.

Billy Collins suggests another loss of aging in this poem, *Forgetfulness*:

... as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain ...

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

This is a time of renewed interest in spiritual growth and coming to terms with our lives. Author Stephanie Marston talks about this as a time of taking stock, where we have been and where we hope to be. She says, “It’s not uncommon for a woman to feel that she wants to step free of the scripted life and roles she has been living and search for who she is in the depth of her being.” Another task may be to develop an elder calling with a focus on service and contribution to the world now. This may be a continuation of the same skills and talents in a different form, such as tutoring children once a week rather than a full-time teaching job, or an exploration into another area such as painting.

The older one gets, the more one is conscious of aging. We can barely remember childhood innocence and exuberance. We are surprised by the youthful vitality and unmarked face when we see earlier photos of ourselves. When we look in the mirror, we reluctantly acknowledge the aging mask. It seems that there is no escaping the marks of life. *Deng Ming-Dao*

Old age was growing inside me. It kept catching my eye from the depths of the mirror. I was paralyzed sometimes as I saw it making its way toward me so steadily when nothing inside me was ready for it. *Simone de Beauvoir*

To know how to grow old is the masterwork of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living. *Henri Frederic Amiel*

The whiter my hair becomes, the more ready people are to believe what I say. *Bertrand Russell*

A man's age is something impressive, it sums up his life: maturity reached slowly and against many obstacles, illnesses cured, griefs and despairs overcome, and unconscious risks taken; maturity formed through so many desires, hopes, regrets, forgotten things, loves. A man's age represents a fine cargo of experiences and memories. *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

The afternoon knows what the morning never suspected. *Swedish proverb*

So often has it been displayed to us, the hourglass with its grains of sand drifting down, not as an object in our world but as a sign, a symbol, our lives drifting down grain by grain, sifting away – I'm sure everyone must see this emblem somewhere in the mind. Yet not only our lives drift down. The stuff of ego with which we began, the mass in the upper chamber, filters away as love accumulates below. Now I am almost entirely love. *Haydn Carruth*

Questions to Ponder

1. What about aging concerns you? Make a list of losses (this won't be shared with others).
2. What signs of aging affect your right now? List some of your losses in the past few years, such as beauty, career, strength, money, loved ones, or mental sharpness.
3. Bill Plotkins speaks of moving from "survival dance" to sacred dance." What might your "sacred dance" look like?
4. What strategies do you use now and hope to use to "get through the rough places" as you grow older ... courage, acceptance, flexibility, humor? How do they work for you?
5. Who has been a model for you in terms of aging ... a parent, an acquaintance? Think about a story of that person.
6. As your parents aged, how did that affect your relationship with them?
7. What in your life has become easier, better, more fulfilling in the past few years?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the gathering, think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe ways you experience aging. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "I am aware of aging when I ..."