

Age of Wonder©
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We just heard Simon and Garfunkel sing “Old Friends.” Paul Simon wrote it as a young man from a young man’s perspective about old age and what it looks like. It is mostly pastoral. The string arrangement is bittersweet. The men are on a park bench in overcoats that are too big, presumably because their bodies have shrunk. There they are, sitting on a park bench on a windy day with an old friend sharing a view of the light as it shines over the park, enjoying memories of life lived. The song contains both stereotypes and gifts of old age.

First it may be very nice to think about old people sitting on a park bench with plenty of time to reflect and savor the moment, living outside the jaws of a strict time table. Actually having and taking time to reflect on the world and their lives. And even more important, even more valuable, to have a dear old friend to share the time with. As I get older and as I observe family members and members of congregations I’ve served get older, I have become more and more aware of how precious, how immeasurably valuable it is, to have an old friend to share the experiences of old age with.

Yet, the song contains stereotypes. The men are not depicted as living vibrant vigorous lives but perhaps as being passive - almost victims of old age. Being old, having the privilege of being present for the final stage of life, is a gift that can be embraced not just for one’s own good, but for the good of us all.

Each section of our life involves a transition, a change, a climb and a landing. The last time of human growth, what we call the final life stage, has its own summit and is in fact the summit of one’s life.

There is early life from birth to say 21. There are many tasks associated with this stage of life. The child learns many physical skills: how to walk, run, swim, play. How to do summersaults and tie shoes. How to read and think. How to engage with computers and smart phones. How to work cooperatively and how to survive in the world once they have achieved the siren song of independence, and leave the home nest.

Then comes the early middle period often consumed with family life and work life, and the striving to succeed, even when confronted by failures and setbacks.

After this comes the late middle period that begins somewhere in the five-year arc of 50 years of age either 45 to 55. At this point people begin to reevaluate what they know to be true in the ways in which they have been successful and in the ways in which they feel that something is missing. Many people call this midlife crisis. Some seemingly happy couples get divorced, some seemingly content people go back to school, some uptight people become looser and some irresponsible people grab at a

second chance to make a commitment and go deeper in their lives. At this point, in these years folks know themselves pretty well. They know what they have achieved. They know patterns of behavior that have worked and that have been, either personally or professionally rewarding, or they know patterns that don't or haven't worked. We are all familiar with those patterns. There comes a point usually between 45 and 55 when there is a new awareness of what is missing. Often, all the skill that one has honed to create just the life that one wants becomes, sometimes suddenly, not satisfying. Thus begins a healthy stage of reevaluation and the learning of new skills and ways of being. It is a time to reassess, recalibrate, and retool. Some people call this the midlife crisis; some people call it the second wind, but often this is a period of change.

Then comes the last stage of life: what I call the age of wonder. Some people say there are three stages of old in our society. There are the young old - ages 65 to 74; the 75 to 84 years of age; and the oldest old coming in at 85 years and over. All of these stages have some things in common and each of them faces specific issues.

This age of wonder is a very special time of life, perhaps the most special of all. Think about it. This age stage contains all the fears and hopes of a lifetime. To live these years well, we need to look at every one of the fears and hopes that we have had honestly. Life ultimately is neither about the length of years that we live, nor about the age that we attain, rather, it is about living into the values we hold and uncover in this last stage of life. This final stage of life is not a holding pen. It is life! And if it is, or has become a holding pen or a waiting room it is time to break open those walls. It is a time to let go of our fantasies of an eternal life that will somehow be better, as well as our fears of getting older and to embrace the opportunities embedded in this life cycle. The task is not simply to endure the coming of the end of time. It is to come alive in ways we have not been alive before.

Lived with spiritual attentiveness, old age enlightens not just ourselves, but those around us.

Each of our lives is not just one singular life. It is a series of lives, each of them with their own tasks, their own flavor, their own errors, their own despairs, their own glories, their own possibilities, all available to lead us to a sense of happiness, wholeness and fulfillment. Our lives are perhaps best described as a mosaic: each joy, each sorrow, each bit of brokenness, can be shaped into the beautiful picture that is our life fired in the kiln of passion, thought, forgiveness, compassion, contemplation, and wisdom.

Ancient Roman philosopher Cicero wrote, "it is not by muscle, speed, or physical dexterity that great things are achieved, but by reflection, force of character, and judgment." In these qualities, old age is, usually, not only NOT poorer, but is even richer.

Think about our world today. We live in a world that judges its achievements by speed and busyness. We are smothered in data both from our community and the whole world with instant messaging, live chat and the 24-hour news cycle and the relentless

avalanches of Facebook (“the source of all knowledge”). Each Tweet seems to confirm that time and thought seem to have very little currency now. They have gone down the drain like the dregs of tea from a party that just won’t end. It becomes harder, day by day, to find time to think. We can be so busy making things happen that we don’t have time to think about the value of what is happening. We urgently need people in our world who concentrate on the meaning of life, rather than simply the speed, mechanization, and computerization of it. More and more often our humanity, our hopes, our dreams, our desires are compacted into numbers and trends. It is easy to feel like a pawn in a game or a cog in a machine. The message seems to be that we are what we do, not what we are inside of ourselves.

So the question then becomes, what happens when your life is no longer about what you do ... but who you are?

What are we when we pass from doing into being? What am I when I am not what I used to do: When the job ends or the position disappears or the role outlives itself. What am I when I’m not a moneymaker or the boss or the parent or the teacher - what does it mean now for me to be alive? What am I when I am no longer young enough to strive for a position, to reach for another trophy, to get another raise, to race off in the morning? Who am I when the job ends and I find myself with barely enough money to pay the rent? What has my transition from being a core member, somebody that does something, to being nothing in a social system in which positions and functions and recognition mean everything? Even if we define ourselves as retired that still puts - in the central place of purpose - the work we used to do.

The world that we live in is upside down. It’s almost impossible to believe that the meaning of life is not about doing. The notion that it is about being-- being caring, being interested, being honest, being truthful, being available, being spiritual, being involved with the important things of life, of living -- is so rare. Do we even know what meaning means anymore? For us to be meaningful to the world around us, we need to provide something more than numbers. We are obliged to offer important ideas, sacred reflections, a serious review of options, and a suggestion of better ideas than the ones the world is running on now. It means that we prod the people around us to reflect on what they themselves are doing - while they can still change it. It is about reminding people to align what they do and how they spend their time with their highest ideals.

Although these next questions can and should be asked at any stages of life, it is now both easier and more crucial to ask them in the final stage of life. Now that my doing has changed, what are the ways I go about BEING?

Being caring ... being interested ...being honest ... being available ... being involved

Being alive ... being attentive ... being appreciative? Being full of wonder.

Important questions that emerge spiritually in this stage include:

How has my concept of what is meaningful changed?

How do I share my understanding of wisdom in the world?

What's left of me when I have lost so much? Everything is gone: the positions, the power, the status, the job, the goal, the role, the partner, the impact and the money and all the relationships built up and woven around those things? One thing that is left is the wisdom that comes from reflection. One of the most important things we have to offer a world devoid of reflection is that quality of being that comes from taking time to reflect on humanity.

Being older means we have a great deal to give the world, but first we must come to value it ourselves. Part of valuing it often means examining, challenging and turning stereotypes of old people upside down and inside out. There are a lot of negative stereotypes in the world, especially the United States, when it comes to ageing. The myths of ageism are rampant.

How are old people portrayed on television, in newspaper articles and in commercials? Are seniors portrayed as philosophers, or as bumblers, and forgetters? Are they a danger on the road? Who in fact causes more accidents; drivers between the ages of 15-25 or drivers over 65? Yes, it is the younger drivers that cause more accidents.

How often do we see old people who look old on TV? How often do advertisers try to make us uncomfortable with the bodies naturally ageing look by trying to sell us cosmetics to cover or hide our naturally ageing bodies? All of these messages from these mediums can infect us with these stereotypes. That it is wrong or a failure to look - be- or feel old. It is not a failure to look, feel or be old. It is a gift. It is a privileged to be old. How often are old people portrayed as wisdom figures, as sages, or better yet as committed unapologetic activists?

Maggie Kuhn was born in 1905. In 1970 after she retired, she gathered a group of five other retired friends together. Some of these folks were retired from work in national religious organizations while others came from a social work background. They began to look at problems faced by retirees: like loss of income and loss of networks of connection. In addition, they grabbed ahold of the freedom to speak out passionately about liberal causes that they believed in beginning with their outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War. They called themselves the Grey Panthers.

This one woman and her five friends (all seniors) created a national organization that, to this day, works for health care, reproductive choice, family security in relation to home foreclosure, tax reform, expanding affordable housing. They are also involved deeply in issues related to peace like working for a comprehensive test ban treaty, civil rights work, political integrity and economic justice with both jobs and workers' rights. In addition they work on issues related to the care of the environment. Grey panthers are cool. They rock! They are old, unapologetic and deeply committed to the future, just like Mother Jones.

Remember her? Mother Jones was a 19th century Irish immigrant to the United States who worked in the sweatshops of New York for years. In her 60's, she stood up and organized the Knights of Labor, and led strikes and rallies for the welfare of the

working class through her entire old age. "That woman," a congressman is said to have shouted in frustration, "is the most dangerous woman in America!"

May we all become more dangerous to the greed, selfishness and ignorance that propagate the upward spiral of poverty and hunger in our time.

The future that folks like Mother Jones and Maggie Kuhn believed in and worked for needs us and needs the senior power here in the room and in our community. These times that we live in sorely test our ability to hope for, to work for, to even envision a different more peaceful and healthy way of living in this world and on this planet.

Sometimes we get stuck and feel trapped by our changing circumstances. We may even begin to ask ourselves what our own legacy will be. I was reminded of all of this recently when I saw the movie *The Last Word* starring Shirley McLain. She plays Harriet, an old, perhaps bitter woman, who is reading the obituary page of the small paper in the small town where she lives. The obituaries talk about people as if they were saints and she knew some of these people and realized that perhaps the woman writing the obituaries was more talented than people might give her credit for as she seemed able to find the strands of gold amongst the stuff of these deceased folks.

Harriet then began to wonder about her legacy and what would be said about her and that wondering turned her whole life upside down. She hired the women who wrote the obituaries to do some research on her and then write an obit that she, Shirley, would approve of. Well, it turned out to be a challenge as no one had anything nice to say about this controlling woman. And finally the journalist had to break this to her. So Harriet set out to engage the world in a new way and in the process create some new connections. She did change her life and her relationships with people while still retaining the core of who she was.

We need a place to talk about the challenges and gifts of old age in a safe and supportive environment. The adult religious education class I am offering in October, called *Coming of Sage* will be doing just that. It will almost be like a mini retreat with lots of time and space and generative questions to facilitate making the most out of this final stage of growth and releasing our "soul power" to inspire the world around us.

We need soul power and we need our seniors to lead us with their wisdom. It is because of this need that I am offering this seminar on unleashing the spiritual power of aging. It will not be a class in the traditional sense because we will be learning from each other about how to sift through our lives and turn our stuff into a gold, a currency, that has meaning for the wider world.

The Quaker theologian Parker Palmer writes,

I can't think of a sadder way to die than with the knowledge that I never showed up in the world as who I really am. I can't think of a more graced way to die than with the knowledge that, as best I know how, I showed up

here as my true self; able to engage the world in freedom and with love because I had become fierce with reality.

I want us to become fierce with reality. Our world needs people who have wisdom and passion, And who are dangerous. May we be those people.

Blessed Be. Amen.

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