
THE UNPOPULAR SUBJECT OF AGEING

by

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It is fashionable in growth circles to deny ageing. Or boldly to claim it as a wonderful, rich process or else declare that it doesn't really matter. I did all those things until I was fifty.

But all processes matter. On both a biological and a psychological level, all processes have significance. We all age - all our lives and it is suspect if we ignore that fact. Of course 'ageing' usually refers only to changes occurring in the second half of one's life. 'Development' is the name given to the more attractive changes of the earlier half. This discriminatory use of the word displays the fear and negativity which it carries for us on its underbelly. If we are honest, we have to admit that the word 'ageing' has connotations of a gradual build-up of losses whereas the word 'development' communicates the idea of the gaining of ground. Just as development is to do with ascent, ageing is to do with descent: a gradual and inevitable descent into the greater likelihood of ill-health, lowered sexual energy, immobility, slow thinking, poor memory, dying and death.

Naturally, then, in the growth movement, if we are to be true to our very name, we must reject this

ageing business. We must declare that it need not be that way. We are eager to point out the amazing old characters - the remarkable exceptions. I love telling people that I know a working therapist of ninety-four. But it is a shame to undermine these genuine and meaningful truths by using them to cover up unlooked at fear. First, we must dare to be the culture-prone creatures that we are and acknowledge how much of the unenlightened, common view is still in us. Having heralded my forties with joy and vitality and having written a celebratory poem on being forty-five, I found it disturbing when the reluctant awareness began edging in on me that I minded being in my fifties. Somehow, it was different. I had to admit that I had entered that second half of my life.

Those of us into growth and development feel in the prime of our lives at forty. We have often, by then, established ourselves professionally or found outlets for our talents; left behind the ties of young children; gained some wisdom and confidence and learned to let go of a few unnecessary fears and habits. It is easy to think that we are free of our culture's accent on youth, to think that we know better and to

smile smugly at the TV commercials. So easy. For women there can be an unexpected and exhilarating pre-menopausal up-surge of energy and creativity, and, if we have done our therapy well, we can even carry this into the menopause itself. We pick up the next wave of a new quality of energy which is released as we leave behind the Mother archetype of nourisher of others and give ourselves prime time at last. I found it the richest time of self-development I have ever experienced. I even made notes for a book on 'Creative Menopause' which I never wrote because I was so busy doing other things that I wanted to do more. I felt on top of the world - on top of my life. I had come through the turbulence of the turn of the hormonal tide and had surfed to the shore with pride and gratitude. I was eager to see what the next stage of life would bring. I was fearless and expectant.

But I know now that we cannot say that we have come to terms with ageing, or are at ease with it, or truly know about it until we have entered what **feels** to us like the second half of our lives. That experience will come at very different ages for different people. Perhaps for the last generation it happened when one reached forty, and because we now ride high, as it were, on our forties in the way our mothers did not, we think that there is no problem. But at some point we are hit by the sense of having less time; less time to make mistakes, less time to learn to get it right, less time to actualize our hopes and visions. And that sense of being nearer to our end than our beginning is sobering. Because I have always

regarded death with curiosity and long seen life as an opportunity for continual expansion of awareness and wisdom until the final state of at-One-ness, I was surprised to be so sobered. I did not entertain the ascent/descent model (or so I thought). Why then did I feel a strange sadness when I reached fifty? Why did I begin to experience a sense of loss? Having been quite happy about the wrinkles that first came, I found that I minded about the next lot. And I felt that I was betraying my long-cherished belief system with these unwelcome feelings.

I now think it was because a certain simplicity, the sure sense that my life was unfolding, had deserted me. My energy was no longer thrusting me forward. And it seems that there must come a point in the rhythm and shape of our lives when this is so. There comes a stage when we need to learn to be still in order to ripen. It can feel like a time of non-production after all the energy of budding and blossoming and creating the fruit. It is a time of waiting, and times of waiting have never been valued or understood in our industrialized society. Moreover, it comes at a point in our lives when our culture asserts that we are past it - or certainly past our best; insists that we are into descent and loss. And this cultural residue, gathering into a strong underground current through our denial as we hungrily espouse the more attractive growth model, this residue is touched and is stirred so that it wells up to the surface of our consciousness demanding to be acknowledged. Until we have lived through the trappings and aches of our

conventional attachments and the morass of 'never agains', we cannot enter the inner stillness necessary to allow the ripening of the fruits we have shaped. Nor can we take time to find the best means of distributing the fruit when it is ready. What is perhaps most distressing of all is that if unowned and shameful feelings of loss lurk on the borderline of our consciousness, then our faith that the ripe fruit will nourish ourselves and our world is seriously undermined. And a crude growth model can render us ashamed of feelings we are bound to have, making their assimilation all the more difficult.

And so this has been the most perplexing time for me since I started on the long therapy road. I thought I should welcome the approach of the Old Woman (hopefully the Wise Old Woman) archetype as I welcomed other phases on my journey. At times I managed it, but something was amiss. At the vulnerable point when our culture calls our process decline rather than development, we enter a hiatus. Is this the **true** latency period? Even if we do our work and acknowledge our inescapable participation in cultural norms, there is still a long period to be lived in between the prime of life (and challenge of the menopause) and real old age. It is a stage that has been skipped over by theorists, even by Shakespeare; the grey age that needs to be thoroughly lived and given the light of our attention. Something more is required than the natural letting go that every life

passage make of us. We hover uneasily on this extended and unrecognised border that has been given no status, no clear function, no definition, no name. Sometimes we are drawn backwards to our younger self and sometimes pushed on towards an old age that is not yet ours. And this uneasy pull/push happens at a time when, inwardly, we need to be still, to take things quietly and surely, so that our fruits ripen fittingly and so that when we do reach our wise old self, we know how and what to communicate.

It would be helpful if the growth movement were to acknowledge this awkward, uncharted and often lengthy life-phase rather than encourage us to stay young; better if it were to drop the tempting challenge to produce more and more blooms when the tree may well be laden, its fruits needing only to be allowed to mature. Otherwise we might find we have a somewhat lean old age. For the flowers, eventually, must fade and the fruits of wisdom might not have come into their own special fullness and flavour, ready for the sharing. And surely it is only if we give of **our** fruits that we truly rest in peace.

It is not that we have to abandon our growth model at a certain stage and bravely accept mere decline in its place. Rather do we need to deepen our understanding of the subtler and slower movements of human growth and allow completion by integrating our fear of loss and letting the true grace of ageing take its course.