

Aging and Death: The Beauty inside the Beast

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Even though not many of us like to think about it for too long, the combination of aging and impending death is often considered to be a ferocious, out of control beast, coming at us at full speed. This article is an invitation to explore this beast instead of looking away. After exploring it thoroughly, many of us gradually realize that it is a beast well worth facing. As many age old folktales suggest, opening our hearts to the beast transforms it into a beauty. In other words, we realize that, after grieving our loss of control over our impermanence, we discover a deeper level of truth; what we are beyond our identity as an individual body that ages and dies.

Key Words: Death, Aging, Love, Grief, Loss, Consciousness

The way of love is not
a subtle argument.
The door there
is devastation.

Birds make great sky-circles
of their freedom.

How do they learn it?
They fall, and falling,
they are given wings.

Mevlana Jalal-uddin Rumi (2003, trans. Coleman Barks, p. 49)

For those of us who have first-hand experience, we know all too well how the combination of aging and our impending death can feel like a ferocious, out of control, beast. This article is an invitation to explore this beast. Although, as human beings, most of us are tempted to ignore this beast for as long as

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we can, I am gradually realizing that the beast is well worth facing and exploring. This is because, very much like the many folktales around the world suggest, I am discovering that opening our hearts to the beast transforms it into a beauty. So, if you are willing, please join me in this exploration.

Wonderful! If you are still reading, I take your answer as a "yes". Of course, we do not suddenly begin aging, in the way I am implying, from the moment we are born. It begins a little later in life. So to understand aging, we must first consider what happens before we begin to age. In some ways, life is a puzzling and challenging experience. We are born, seemingly beyond our own will, and then we are supposed to live life. When we look around for guidance, nobody seems to know why or how and those of us who claim to know are the ones that seem the least trustworthy. Existentialists such as Martin Heidegger (1996) call this experience, "thrownness". It feels like we are thrown into this world and left to our own devices. I trust that most of us probably understand this feeling.

So what do we do? Our ego, the part of us that believes we are a separate entity from the rest of the universe, says, "No problem! I've got this!" and it tries to take control. It directs us to build security. It directs us to find people that protect and nurture us. We make friends and allies to make sure we have enough people on our "team" because there is strength in numbers. We have more people to turn to in times of need. We have a solid defense system in case our team is threatened. Our ego directs us to learn how to survive and build a "secure" future. We go to school, get a job, build a home, get insurance policies, save up for retirement. We go to the gym to stay physically healthy. We go see our doctor for health checks. We purchase large motor vehicles so that we are safe in case of an accident. We engage in social activism to create a safer world. We vote for politicians that make our nation feel safe. We work for physical security, personal security, family security, community security, national security, and global security.

The Significance of Loss

No matter how secure we have made things for ourselves, we cannot secure ourselves from the threat of aging and death. Sooner or later, the walls are torn down and we lose this battle. Although most of us have our security walls torn down in many other ways before significant aging takes place, aging and death is a great equalizer because nobody can escape the latter and many of us who are fortunate enough to live long enough cannot escape the former either.

As life goes on, the ego accumulates losses in the battle for control. We often find that nature does not cooperate with our egos. Other people do not cooperate. And as we lose our health and our youth, we find that our own body does not cooperate with the ego's agenda of how it should be. The following quote from John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States of America, is an excellent illustration of this experience of losing control through the aging process. This is what he said on his 80th birthday.

"John Quincy Adams is well. But the house in which he lives at present is becoming dilapidated. It is tottering up on its foundation. Time and the seasons have nearly destroyed it. Its roof is pretty well worn out. Its walls are much shattered and it trembles with every wind. I think John Quincy will have to move out of it soon. But he himself is quite well, quite well."

As if this is not enough, we also find that our own mind does not cooperate with how our ego thinks it should be like. This happens for us when we have emotions and thoughts running through our minds in a way that feels out of control. It also happens as we lose some of our mental capacities as we age. As we accumulate more and more losses in these battles for control we feel more and more helpless. And as sad and painful as all of this is, I am here to invite you to consider the possibility that this is all a beautiful blessing in disguise.

To begin with, I invite you to consider the following is a poem written by Rashani Réa (1991) entitled, *The Unbroken*.

There is a brokenness
 out of which comes the unbroken,
 a shatteredness out of which blooms
 the unshatterable.
 There is a sorrow
 beyond all grief which leads to joy;
 and a fragility
 out of whose depths emerges strength...

After all the tears are shed, the sun comes through the clouds again and we discover who we really are behind the clouds, behind who we thought we were. This is most probably what Henry David Thoreau meant when he said, "The soul grows by subtraction, not addition." Throughout history, all over the world, so much beautiful poetry has been written about this ego-transcending experience. Please allow me to share one more. The following is a haiku by Mizuta Masahide.

My barn having burned to the ground
 I can now
 see the moon

(trans. unknown)

By using some of the elements of an old story told by Morrie Schwartz discussed in the book entitled, *Tuesday with Morrie* (Albom, 1997), my mind has created a visual image of how this process works. I imagine I am a big wave in the ocean repeatedly hitting massive rocks on the shore. Each time, I crash onto the massive rocks, I break into pieces. I then frantically collect all the water molecules that used to be me and put myself back together so I can remain being a wave. Most of the time, though, some of the molecules are lost in the vast ocean. If this happens enough times, I eventually become a tiny wave and the rest of me is mixed in with the rest of the ocean. Some of us waves are hit on the rocks so hard that we might become a tiny wave with just a few crashes onto the big rocks. Different folks receive different strokes. Either way, we eventually get to a point where we think, "Oh, what's the point. I can't find most of the pieces anyways. Might as well just become a tinier and tinier wave..." And after I mourn the loss of all of the water molecules spread in the ocean, I rest in an emptiness, a silence, a space that I have not known for as long as I can remember. Then, a mysterious thing happens. A figure-ground reversal is experienced. I reach a point where I realize, "Wow! I'm not a tiny wave. I'm the ocean!" And I look at the tiny wave that I thought was me and say, "Wow... You are such a cutie! I love you..." Then I look at all of the other waves and say, "Wow... You are all so beautiful! I love you all... You are all me and I am you." I realize that the ocean is not an "other" that I need to protect myself from. The ocean is me. And now, the freestyle dancing begins.

Joseph Campbell (1971), a wonderful and legendary scholar of depth psychology, says this beautifully with the following quote.

"The hero, whether god or goddess, man or woman, the figure in a myth or the dreamer in a dream, discovers and assimilates his opposite (his own unsuspected self) either by swallowing it or by being swallowed, one by one the resistances are broken. He must put aside his pride, his virtue, beauty, and life, and bow or submit to the absolutely intolerable. Then he finds that he and his opposite are not of differing species, but one flesh (p. 89)."

Yes, sooner or later, we find ourselves as the hero in our own story swallowing or being swallowed by our bitter opposite. The hero in this analogy, the wave who fights the motions of the ocean, is swallowed by the ocean and becomes one with it. Even after the wave is swallowed by the ocean, however, waves appear afterwards. In the same way, this figure-ground reversal is momentary in the

beginning. We forget that we are the ocean quite quickly. The ego is very sneaky and keeps sneaking in the back door when we are not looking. Before we know it, we are identifying ourselves with a wave again. When the wave crashes onto a massive rock again, we are shattered, and every once in a while, if we are lucky, we remember that we are actually the ocean and not the wave. To borrow the language of the Sufis, we can say that the awareness of our oceanness is, at first, only a temporary state. It is only something we catch glimpses of every once in a while. As the growth process continues, however, these temporary states become more like permanent stations. The question is, "how does this growth process occur?" This is a difficult question. I don't think anyone really knows exactly how this happens. Most of us do not intentionally grow in this way. It almost seems like a haphazard side-effect that comes with accumulating experiences of loss.

Embracing the Shadow

If we were to discuss this process in some way, we could perhaps discuss it as a process of embracing the shadow. The shadow is a term used in depth psychology that refers to parts of our mind that we are refusing to accept (i.e., denying or repressing). As you can imagine this is not an easy task. There is a good reason why we are refusing to accept things. They are extremely unpleasant. So it is natural that to not only accept but embrace them with love is clearly a long and challenging process. This long and challenging process can be seen as consisting of three steps. They are the three steps in embracing the shadow with loving kindness.

The first step of embracing the shadow is to embrace the conspicuous and obvious parts of our mind. By this I mean embracing the thoughts, desires, and emotions that are very unpleasant. As we go through life, we gradually learn that to be honest, in the truest sense of the word, means to be, first and foremost, open, accepting, and loving to our own inner experiences. We learn to accept that there is a part of us that is hurt, fearful, sad, selfish, stupid, defensive, hateful, mean, destructive, angry, bad, sexual, wrong, irresponsible, and just plain evil. We begin to understand that although we may think twice about acting them out, it is perfectly okay for us to desire things for selfish, stupid, hateful, and superficial reasons. We learn that it is okay to feel angry and mean, to feel hateful, to feel sad and depressed, and to have "inappropriate" sexual feelings. We learn that it is all an essential part of being human.

Earlier in my career, I had a senior colleague at work who liked to say outrageous things in public. At the time, I just thought that he was just doing this because he enjoyed the attention and the reaction he received from other people. One day, as I was chatting with another socially sensitive and conscientious co-worker in the hallway outside our offices, this senior colleague came by. He began speaking to both of us about how much he enjoyed Japanese pornography. He spoke about the specific details of what he liked about it and continued chatting about this for quite a few minutes as other people walked by in the hallway. In the process, he literally admitted that he was a "pervert" in such a matter of fact way, almost as if he was stating his nationality. My other co-worker and I were in a state of shock, and did not know how to respond. We just nodded politely and hoped that he would stop talking about this soon. This memory stuck in my mind for quite a while. Many years later, I am beginning to understand and appreciate who he was and how he helped me grow up. I still think this was partially motivated by the attention and reaction he received while talking about something outrageous like this in a work environment, but I now understand that this was not the whole story. Many people say outrageous things to receive attention and emotional reactions from people but very few reveal that they are a pervert. He was in a stage of life in which he was embracing the parts of his mind that are considered deplorable for most of us. He was essentially saying, "To be perfectly honest with you, this is who I am. It is not pretty but I would rather embrace it than deny it."

In his lectures, Ram Dass, the wonderful spiritual teacher, often spoke about how mindfulness practice helps us love everything that happens in our inner world. He once shared that as he was exploring his inner thoughts, emotions, and desires, he would silently say, "Why hello sexual perversity, how are you today?" Or at other times, he would say, "Hello murderous anger and violence, what would you like to tell me today?" and he would patiently listen to the responses coming from inside of himself.

In other moments, he would say, "Is that you fear? ...Wow... ...That's what you feel like today in my body... ...Wow... ...I love you..."

I think this is what is meant by embracing the thoughts, desires, and emotions that are very unpleasant. In depth psychology, the thoughts, desires, and emotions that are very unpleasant make up the shadow. As we spend more moments identifying with the ocean and less moments with the wave, we gradually learn to be patient, to forgive, accept, respect, and love ourselves even in our worst moments.

The second step of embracing the shadow is to embrace our body, especially the bodily sensations that are unpleasant. As humans, we have a tendency to blame our hormones, our brain, our medication, our joints, and our many other parts of our body for how we are feeling. But as we face more and more of the inevitable pain and physical decline of our bodies, we gradually learn to not only respect but love our own bodies even if it is too sick, too fat, too thin, too short, too tall, too ugly, too old, in serious pain, permanently disabled, or in the process of dying.

Seung Sahn, a legendary Zen teacher who helped many people in the United States understand and appreciate Zen practice, experienced heart complications toward the end of his life. During those challenging moments, one of his students asked him, "Master, are you okay?" As he lay in bed, a kind smile broke out on Seung Sahn's face. He then replied, "Yes, I am fine. My heart is singing. This time it is singing a sad song but it is a beautiful sad song."

In one of his talks, I remember a teacher in my meditation class speaking about his experience of extreme bladder pain when he was suffering through a life-threatening bladder infection. In the beginning, he said it was excruciating and intolerable. However, as time went on, he learned to embrace the pain. When he would feel the sharp pain, he would silently say, "Is that you my dear bladder pain? ...What would you like to tell me this time? ...Wow... ...Really?... ...Thank you for visiting again... ...I love you..."

I am certainly still a novice in this process but I think this is what is meant by embracing our body. As our consciousness unfolds and we spend more moments identifying with the ocean and less moments with the wave, we gradually learn to be patient, to forgive, accept, respect, and love our bodies even when our bodies make us feel pain that seems unbearable. We gradually learn to not only respect but love our own bodies even if it too sick, too fat, too thin, too short, too tall, too ugly, too old, in serious pain, permanently disabled, or in the process of dying.

The third step of embracing the shadow is to embrace our thoughts and feelings about the outside world. With the help of a wonderful teacher of life known as Byron Katie, I have come to realize that all of our thoughts about the outside world (e.g., other people, our possessions, the planet, nature in general, etc.) are projections of how we feel about ourselves (Katie & Mitchell, 2003). As humans, we have a tendency to blame our boss, our mother in law, the government, the polluted air, the inadequate social system, our clunky car, our noisy neighbor, for our unhappiness. As you probably know from personal experience, this list can go on forever.

Byron Katie has developed a remarkable mental exercise known as "The Work" (Katie & Mitchell 2003). Although explaining the entire process is beyond the scope of this article, one of the things we do in "The Work" is called "turn it around". Please allow me to discuss this part of the exercise to explain how we can embrace our thoughts and feelings about the outside world.

Suppose I am very angry at my co-worker named Donald. I first write down my thoughts about him. "Donald is a disrespectful idiot." Now I turn it around to "I am a disrespectful idiot." Then I explore all of the ways that this statement may be true. I might notice that the very fact that I think someone is an idiot is disrespectful of me. I might be an idiot for being so blatantly disrespectful to another person, even if it is just in my mind. As I explore why I am being disrespectful, I may find out that I have some fears about being taken advantage of. And then I may realize that Donald is behaving in this way because he has a fear of being taken advantage of too. It may take a while but this discovery may eventually lead to thoughts like, "Donald, you are just like me! I see your fears... ...I have them too... ...We are so alike... ...I love you."

When we can accept ourselves in our worst moments, it becomes easier for us to accept other people in their worst moments. At this point, because we have started to love ourselves even in our worst moments, we can begin learning to love others even in their worst moments. This is because all of our thoughts and feelings about others are projections of thoughts and feelings we have about ourselves. As we identify ourselves more and more with the ocean and less and less with the wave, we learn to hold everyone and everything with unconditional kindness. We begin to love others even when they are selfish, stupid, defensive, hateful, mean, destructive, angry, bad, wrong, irresponsible, and just plain evil.

In this way, we not only learn to love other people but everything in the world. We love the dog poop that our neighbor neglected to scoop just as we love that neighbor. We love the storm that destroyed our precious house. We can hold it all with love as if it were our own baby having a hysterical fit in our arms. When we know we are the ocean, we can hold every wave as it arises in celebration and dissolves into grief. When we know we are the ocean, we can hold every wave that engulfs and destroys other waves with unconditional kindness and without any panic.

The following is a wonderful poem from Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) entitled, *Please call me by my true names* that expresses this all-encompassing, all-loving state of mind quite beautifully.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
 so I can wake up,
 and so the door of my heart
 can be left open,
 the door of compassion.

(pp. 72-73)

The World as a Classroom

If you have been around in this world for long enough, you know that life throws things at you; both from within and without. Some of it may be astonishingly beautiful and some may be hideously ugly and excruciatingly painful. Each moment, whether beautiful or ugly, pleasant or painful, is part of the life's lesson. And after many decades, if we are fortunate enough, we discover that we have space in our loving hearts for all of it. We can embrace it all with tenderness and forgiveness. After all, the ocean can hold every single wave in it without any effort. Jack Kornfield (2000), a great spiritual teacher for me, once wrote about Ram Dass, another great spiritual teacher, who made a speech after suffering through a major life-threatening stroke in his latter years. This is what he said.

"For years I practiced as a karma yogi, the path of service. I wrote books about learning to serve, about how to help others. Now it is reversed. I need people to help me get up and put me to bed. Others feed me and wash my bottom. And I can tell you it's harder to be the one who is helped than the helper! But this is just another stage. It feels like I died and have been reborn over and over. In the sixties I was a professor at Harvard, and when that ended I went out with Tim Leary spreading psychedelics. Then in the seventies I died from that and returned from India as Baba Ram Dass, the guru. Then in the eighties my life was all about service – co-founding the Seva Foundation, building hospitals, and working with refugees and prisoners. Over all these years I played cello, golf, drove my MG. Since this stroke the car is in the driveway, the cello and golf clubs in the closet. Now if I think I'm the guy who can't play cello or drive or work in India, I would feel terribly sorry for myself. But I'm not him. During the stroke I died again, and now I have a new life in a disabled body. This is where I am. You've got to be here now. You've got to take the curriculum (pp. 184-185)."

Indeed, this world is a classroom and our entire life is a school. We are taking the curriculum of life. What is the curriculum for the present stage of your life? Each part of the curriculum in every stage is designed to help us awaken to our oceaness behind our identity as a wave. I am currently entering a stage where the signs of aging are speaking loud enough that I can no longer ignore them. Those signs of aging are a large part of my curriculum. They seem to be calling me to grow and learn in new ways that I have never imagined before and thus helping me realize my oceaness more and more.

The Curriculum of Middle and Late Adulthood

James Hillman (1999), an incredible scholar examining the meaning of aging has provided me with some wonderful insights about the curriculum that comes with aging. He suggested that the signs of aging function as messages telling our consciousness to move beyond our current earthly level of consciousness. The following are some examples of this.

As we age, we lose our physical strength. We lose the ability to carry heavy physical objects. This loss in physical strength serves as a reminder that we are entering a period of life where it is more appropriate to carry more non-physical matter. Our responsibility, what we carry in society, moves from dealing with things in the physical world to dealing with things in the non-physical world. This may involve, among other things, the responsibility of guiding others to increase their own awareness of the deeper layers within themselves.

Another example comes from the experience of climbing stairs or mountains. As we age, we have more difficulty climbing up the stairs or mountains. Hillman suggests that this experience may call us to begin finding other non-physical ways to bring ourselves to a higher level. It serves to motivate us to grow internally as human beings.

Another example comes from the experience of losing our sensory acuity as well as retirement from worldly life. As we age, we lose sensory acuity. We cannot see, hear, smell, taste the outside world as sensitively as we used to. In addition, most adults retire from worldly life in late adulthood. Hillman suggests that both of these experiences serve as a calling to focus on the beauty and terrors of the inner world rather than the outer world. Therefore this experience also serves as a motivator to grow internally as a human being.

There is a wonderful story written by Jack Riemer (2001) that illustrates this point quite nicely. I do not know if it really happened. It is nevertheless a wonderful story about the world famous violinist, Itzhak Perlman.

"On Nov. 18, 1995, Itzhak Perlman, the violinist, came on stage to give a concert at Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City.

If you have ever been to a Perlman concert, you know that getting on stage is no small achievement for him. He was stricken with polio as a child, and so he has braces on both legs and walks with the aid of two crutches. To see him walk across the stage one step at a time, painfully and slowly, is an awesome sight. He walks painfully, yet majestically, until he reaches his chair. Then he sits down, slowly, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his legs, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down and picks up the violin, puts it under his chin, nods to the conductor and proceeds to play.

By now, the audience is used to this ritual. They sit quietly while he makes his way across the stage to his chair. They remain reverently silent while he undoes the clasps on his legs. They wait until he is ready to play.

But this time, something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few bars, one of the strings on his violin broke. You could hear it snap -- it went off like gunfire across the room. There was no mistaking what that sound meant. There was no mistaking what he had to do.

People who were there that night thought to themselves: "We figured that he would have to get up, put on the clasps again, pick up the crutches and limp his way off stage -- to either find another violin or else find another string for this one."

But he didn't. Instead, he waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled the conductor to begin again. The orchestra began, and he played from where he had left off. And he played with such passion and such power and such purity as they had never heard before.

Of course, anyone knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night, Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. You could see him modulating, changing, recomposing the piece in his head. At one point, it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get new sounds from them that they had never made before.

When he finished, there was an awesome silence in the room. And then people rose and cheered. There was an extraordinary outburst of applause from every corner of the auditorium. We were all on our feet, screaming and cheering, doing everything we could to show how much we appreciated what he had done.

He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then he said -- not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone -- "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

When we age, we don't lose a string on our violin but we lose our sensory acuity, our mobility, our strength, our memory, our health, our loved ones, among many other things. And as we lose all of those things, we learn to become more and more like an artist trying to create "music" with what we have

left. These losses are challenging for sure. At the same time, however, these very losses serve as important and necessary catalysts to grow internally as a human being. They force us to discover the ocean, the source of our creativity, beneath who we thought we were, the little wave that has lost so much.

Let's return to Hillman's (1999) insights about how aging promotes internal growth. This next one is about the humility and respect we express when we bow to others. When we age, it becomes more difficult to maintain a posture with our backs straight and our legs are no longer as strong and reliable as they used to be. When we trip and fall in late adulthood, it is more likely to lead to serious injury. Therefore we look down to pay more attention to where we place our feet. These changes drive us to walk hunching down, looking down at the ground as we walk. Hillman observed that this hunching and looking down is very much like the act of bowing. Therefore, when we are old, we walk around bowing to the world. Hillman suggests that this constant natural bowing serves as a reminder to maintain humility and respect for the world.

The final example comes from slowing down and our general decline of physical mobility in late adulthood. Hillman mentions that our growing physical limitations such as the decline in mobility and our slowness is a reminder to spend more time paying attention to our immediate surroundings and focusing more on the here and now rather than a future destination or goal. The following is a poem entitled, *The Lame Goat* by Mevlana Jalal-uddin Rumi (1996) that illustrates this beautifully.

You've seen a herd of goats
going down to the water.
The lame and dreamy goat
brings up the rear.

There are worried faces about that one,
but now they're laughing.

because look, as they return,
that goat is leading!

There are many different kinds of knowing.
The lame goat's kind is a branch
that traces back to the roots of presence.

Learn from the lame goat,
and lead the herd Home.

(trans. Coleman Barks, p. 144)

Grand Parenting

This focusing on the inner life and reaching into the root of our being, our oceaness, as we slow down allows us to be more patient, generous, and loving to others. Hillman (1999) suggests that this is where the word "grandparent" comes from. Many of us become grandparents in late life. When we become grandparents, we become "grand parents", meaning a "great parent". According to Hillman, the grandparent epitomizes ideal parenting. Grandparents tend to see the inner beauty of the child regardless of how the child is behaving. Grandparents tend to be undistracted by the worries of parents who are more likely to think, "I need to ensure that my child is going to turn out alright." "I need to take control so that they learn the appropriate behaviors." Because many grandparents have learned to trust their own inner wisdom, they can trust the natural inner wisdom of the child. They trust that children will naturally learn everything they need to when they are ready. According to Hillman, parents mainly help us learn ways to physically survive. Grandparents mainly help us remember and respect our own inner beauty. As children, we are not consciously aware of it in the same way the grandparents are aware of it.

However, grandparents play a wonderful role in helping us children remember, somewhere in the back of our minds, that there is something beautiful deep inside of us. In many cases, they also serve as wonderful models reminding us that it is still there even after we grow up and have lost touch with it. When we reach middle adulthood entirely immersed in earthly concerns and wonder where all the beauty and wonder has gone, our memory of our grandparents maintains our faith that it is still there somewhere. This helps initiate the search for the beauty of the unconditional inner space inside later in life. We think, "I want to get it back and become more like my grandparents!" Having said this, it must be noted that not all grandparents become "grand parents". Like most kinds of psychological developments, this only happens if the individual is fortunate enough to develop in the most ideal way possible without becoming stuck or delayed in earlier stages. Nevertheless, even if we were not fortunate enough to have grandparents like this ourselves, we still have the opportunity to become "grand parents". Some of us may have the opportunity to become "grand parents" in a literal sense (with actual grandchildren). Yet others will become like this by becoming an elderly person in the community who consistently sees and trusts the inner beauty of all people.

The following is a beautiful story about this from a book entitled, *My Grandfather's blessings* by Rachel Naomi Remen (2000).

"If it was Friday, after we had finished our tea my grandfather would set two candles on the table and light them. Then he would have a word with God in Hebrew. Sometimes he would speak out loud but often he would close his eyes and be quiet. I knew then that he was talking to God in his heart. I would sit and wait patiently because the best part of the week was coming.

When Grandpa finished talking to God, he would turn to me and say 'Come, Neshume-le.' Then I would stand in front of him and he would rest his hands lightly on the top of my head. He would begin by thanking God for me and for making him my grandpa. He would specifically mention my struggles during that week and tell God something about me that was true. Each week I would wait to find out what that was. If I had made mistakes during the week he would mention my honesty in telling the truth. If I had failed he would appreciate how hard I had tried. If I had slept for even a short nap without my night-light he would celebrate my bravery in sleeping in the dark. Then he would give me his blessing and ask the long-ago women I knew from his many stories, Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah and Leah to watch over me.

These few moments were the only time in my week that I felt completely safe and at rest. My family of physicians and health professionals were always struggling to learn more and to be more. It seemed there was always more to know. It was never enough. If I brought home a 98 on a test, my father would ask 'And what happened to the other two points?' I pursued those two points relentlessly throughout my childhood. But my grandfather did not care about such things. For him, I was already enough. And somehow when I was with him I knew with absolute certainty that this was so.

My grandfather died when I was seven years old. I had never lived in a world without him in it before and it was hard for me. He had looked at me as no one else had and called me by a special name, 'Neshume-le,' which means 'little beloved soul.' There was no one left to call me this anymore. At first I was afraid that without him to see me, and tell God who I was, I might disappear. But slowly over time I came to understand that in some mysterious way, I had learned to see myself through his eyes. And that once blessed, we are blessed forever (pp. 22-23)."

When we see and trust the inner beauty in others, we gradually help them see and trust it themselves. In other words, when we see the oceaness behind other people's identity as a wave, we help them see and trust their own oceaness behind their own identity as a wave.

Death

Let us now explore death from this perspective. First, I invite you to consider what you would do if you had three months left to live. Good! Now please take a few moments to consider what you would do if you had three weeks left to live? Good! How about three days? Three hours? Three minutes?

Three seconds? You may have noticed that as the timespan became shorter and shorter, your response became less and less intellectual and more emotionally focused. For most of us, as our time horizon for future life shortens, the more the intuitive part of our mind forces us out of our rational and intellectual identity as a wave. The less time we have left, the more we live out of our oceaness and the more we live as a "human being" rather than a "human doing". As we age, we live with an increasing awareness that every moment can be our last. This forces us to recognize who we really are beneath our identity as a wave and focus on what is really important.

It seems like this is one of the great reasons why we die. Death is a great motivator for our personal development. Death is a reminder not to lose touch with what is really important; presence, love, peace, truth, and freedom right now, in this very moment. In other words, remembering our oceaness. Death is a constant reminder to keep digging deeper into our souls so that we do not lose sight of our oceaness beneath our identity as a wave. The following is a beautiful poem about this written by Hafiz (2003) entitled, *Deepening the Wonder*.

Death is a favor to us,
But our scales have lost their balance.

The impermanence of the body
Should give us great clarity,
Deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes

Of this mysterious existence we share
And are surely just traveling through.

If I were in the Tavern tonight,
Hafiz would call for drinks

And as the Master poured, I would be reminded
That all I know of life and myself is that

We are just a midair flight of golden wine
Between His Pitcher and His Cup.

If I were in the Tavern tonight,
I would buy freely for everyone in this world

Because our marriage with the Cruel Beauty
Of time and space cannot endure very long.

Death is a favor to us,
But our minds have lost their balance.

The miraculous existence and impermanence of Form
Always makes the illumined ones
Laugh and sing.

(trans. Daniel Ladinsky, p. 55)

Dying from our identity as a wave, our identity as a physical body, is an excruciating experience. Perhaps the excruciating nature of this experience is inescapable. I do not know. But once this happens, it becomes pure blessing. Dying physically knowing that we are the ocean seems like it would be a

mysterious if not wonderful experience. After having a near death experience, Carl Sagan, the wonderful writer on astronomy said, "I would recommend it to everyone". In one of his lectures, Ram Dass, the wonderful spiritual teacher, shared a conversation he had with Emmanuel, a being with no body but speaks through Pat Rodegast, a person who channels his energy. Ram Dass said, "Emmanuel, I work with dying people, what should I tell them?" Emmanuel replied, "Tell them that death is perfectly safe. It is like taking off a tight shoe."

How do I know that any of this is true? I don't. To be honest, my rational mind does not know if any of this is true at all. I only have a strange feeling inside telling me that this understanding feels just right for me at this point in my life. I am afraid that this is the only way you will know too. Do you have a strange feeling inside telling you anything like this? If you do, wonderful! If you don't, wonderful! Either way, I love you. What else is there to do?

I thank you sincerely for sharing this life-space with me and considering my musings. In closing, I invite you to contemplate on the following poem by Rabia Al Basri entitled, *Die before you die* (Ladinsky, 1999).

Ironic, but one of the most intimate acts
of our body is
death.

So beautiful appeared my death - knowing who then I would kiss,
I died a thousand times before I died.

"Die before you die," said the Prophet
Muhammad.

Have wings that feared ever
touched the Sun?

I was born when all I once
feared - I could
love.

(trans. Daniel Ladinsky, p. 7)

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