

The Role of Old Age in the Course of One's Life

by

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As we grow older, we realize ever more clearly that the course of our life is a gestalt that unfolds in three distinct phases: childhood, adulthood, and old age. Consequently, there are two transition times: youth to adulthood and again when we reach fifty, which we sometimes call the “change-over years.”

As an adult we might meet a childhood friend, whom we have not seen for a long time. Often it is difficult to recognize the cheerful blond boy of former years in the serious, well-established man now facing us. During adolescence one, so to say, sheds one's old skin, find new friends, a new environment, and develops new interests. Do we, during that time, form a new identity or do we remain the same person? In any case we are dealing with a profound change, a metamorphosis like that of a plant turning from leaf to blossom to fruit. This experience helps us understand the concept of reincarnation more easily, that is, how something entirely new can emerge from one life on earth. At the same time we are starting to intuitively sense the law connecting one life with the previous and the following ones, which is the Indian concept of “the law of karma.”

A distinctive characteristic of old age is that memories play an ever greater, even dominant role. Long-forgotten scenes and situations re-emerge in our memory with an astounding wealth of detail. As if we had never forgotten anything, we are carrying our experiences like a snail carries its growing house. When we call up such forgotten episodes in old age, we do not just observe the past with neutral attention because, in the process, we have learned one thing or another. We weigh and assess a situation in which we ourselves were intricately involved. We recognize where we failed, made mistakes, hurt someone, or obstructed the paths of others. This can build up into such a painful experience of repentance, soul torment, and shame that we come to an understanding of the medieval term “purgatory” or, the Indian term *Kamaloka*.

We are now talking about the third and last phase of life as the “fruit” of a conscious life. But a fruit also contains the seeds, which develop over time in each fruit. That is a good metaphor for what is actually happening to us in old age: we are developing desires and motives for a new life, with the intent to atone, to right the wrongs, to balance what was lop-sided as we are balancing the chapters of our lives.

It is important to clearly distinguish between the “voice of conscience” which impacts us early on and accompanies us throughout our life and that process which mostly occurs in old age, forming the seeds of the future. The voice of conscience comes to bear mostly in situations requiring a decision, and it demands action. For the older person, who is looking back on a lived life, something else is of importance: We may be able to gain insight into our mistakes and limits, but we do not know what to do with that. Our self-awareness tells us that seeds are forming for a new life, but we have no insight into how such a new life will unfold. We are facing something profoundly unconscious in our soul, like in deepest sleep. We can only become aware of the closer circumstances of our entry into life and of the ensuing constraints. We have no knowledge of the change which these factors will undergo later. We can only look to religious and philosophical traditions for clues to understand the process prompted by our unconscious. But these clues must perforce become abstractions, which can easily lead to misunderstandings and distort those ideas which tradition has guarded. We can therefore easily comprehend the necessity to let go of the idea of reincarnation for humanity at a certain point in time – about 700 B.C. The challenge at that time consisted in developing a new sense of self, which provided the foundation for Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, among others. In our time, with its scientific bent, we should be able to develop such a high degree of objectivity and self-awareness that we can correctly understand the meaning of the concept of reincarnation (repeated earthly lives).

We assume that the human being is essentially endowed with a “better self,” a higher moral center, which is manifesting as conscience on one hand and, on the other hand, as that review of life which is so characteristic of aging. Is this higher moral compass something different, more than a reflex caused by our education and other influences? This issue touches upon the wider question: Are we really dealing with a meaningful moral universe (world order) as opposed to a pure manifestation of natural laws? This is a fundamental question of ethics (moral philosophy), which we cannot examine here in depth. But one viewpoint deserves more attention than we are used to giving it: Our actions continuously meddle with the natural law, particularly in our century. Life on earth is now greatly impacted by human activity. But in these new environments the human

being feels increasingly alienated. It is quite a paradox that we feel like that in an environment which we ourselves created, and that we are now longing to return to original nature. Obviously a fuse has blown here: the world, as man created it, is experienced as being adverse to man. So we can safely assume that it is our one-sidedly naturalistic view of the world which has alienated us. Consequently, we have to regard nature (earth) as an arena and stage for our moral development. We are in fact facing a moral world order with which we must actively interrelate as we do with natural laws and the law of nature. We are part of the “realm of karma” that not only includes humanity but all life on earth and morally predicates the entire created universe. This is a dizzying thought and brings up the question of why we ponder such ideas.

Basically the answer is already there: The discomfort in our culture (to use an expression of Sigmund Freud) has become so urgent that a radically new perspective of life is not only a necessity of the soul, but, more than that, it has become a requirement for a humane life. The concepts of a moral world order and of reincarnation can form a new life impulse for all kinds of people, but first of all this may become an impulse for uniting a splintered humanity in a time that requires cooperation in all areas.

We started by contemplating the situation of old age, which is so difficult to appreciate nowadays. Maybe old people do not need more care giving, but greater understanding for the role of old age, its mission. In former times, the elders represented wisdom; they were those who possessed superior knowledge. In a time of all too rapid development, old people can no longer claim superior knowledge. On the contrary, the young quickly leave them behind. No, old people fulfill a radically different role in the gestalt of life: they carry the responsibility for keeping mankind connected with a moral world order, not by preaching ethics but by processing their own life experiences and contributing to the moral seed formation which will safeguard the future of humanity.

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Leonidas at Thermopylae, by Jacques-Louis David (1814).