



## **Aging With Awareness**

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Ron Valle, Ph.D. and Mary Mohs, L.V.N., M.A.

Awakening: A Center for Exploring Living and Dying  
9701 Deer Valley Road  
Brentwood, CA 94513

When we resist aging, we resist life itself, since aging is inherent in living. Suffering results when we push away what is real. Many of us fear growing older; we resist reflecting on our later years, what we will look like, how we will feel, and, hence, we suffer. Healing is the easing of this fear and its resultant suffering. We heal by opening to the changes in life and allowing what is real to naturally evolve. In this chapter, we will explore the anatomy of this process and how wisdom emerges as we bring awareness to the full breadth of our lives.

### **Aging, Grieving, and the Fear of Death**

Aging through our later years can be a remarkable time for increasing self-understanding and deepening one's spiritual awareness. To see this opportunity, however, requires a special sensitivity to these possibilities and an atmosphere of mutual support and encouragement. Rather than guiding us in this direction, our society has regrettably glorified the benefits of our youthful years while minimizing and degrading the elderly and the value of the aging process. Focusing on youth while pushing away the constant change involved in aging reflects our culture's denial of the ever-changing process that life is, as well as, ultimately, of death itself. Until we accept all of life, we cannot truly live. In light of this, it is essential to recognize the sacredness of every human being, regardless of age, as well as the unfolding wisdom inherent in the aging process itself.

We know in our hearts that living, dying, and grieving are inseparable, each dependent on the other two for its meaning and purpose. In fact, although they are often treated as opposites, life and death are two aspects of a greater, single process with aging and grieving as the connecting glue. Grieving is the painful response we have to the loss of someone or something we have become attached to, a response we experience quite often to one degree or another given that change and loss are in the very fabric of life itself. As Levine (1982) has pointed out, the degree of grief that we will experience whenever change occurs in our lives is directly related to how much we resist this change here and now in the present moment.

When we begin to live mindful of aging and dying, however, grief is honored as a natural response to loss, and death becomes a mirror in which life is understood and prioritized in a new way. Life, death, and grief are everywhere, whether it be the birth of a new idea, heartbreak at the death of a child, or a leaf falling from a tree. In this way, we begin to accept and celebrate the constant flow of life's transitions rather than fearing the next turn in the road. Thus, to the extent

that we can let go into the mystery of life, we find true peace and love in the aging process.

Ram Dass (2000) and Bianchi (1995) both see aging as a means of deepening our spiritual awareness, and that looking within ourselves is central in this process. Ram Dass, reflecting on his own personal process of growing older and struggling to accept difficult changes in his own life, describes the emotional and spiritual benefits that come with embracing aging, changing, and dying. By shifting our perspective on the nature of pain and loss, new ways of being with grief emerge. Ram Dass expands on this process:

When we cease to resist our grief, we learn that, painful though it may be, grief is an integral part of elder wisdom, a force that humbles and deepens our hearts, connects us to the grief of the world, and enables us to be of help. Grief need not paralyze the heart or become a garment for the ego...We must be able to step outside our egos, as Soul. Otherwise we are likely to be swept away by one or the other of grief's common fallouts, either closing our hearts in fear of the magnitude of our own [and others'] feelings and shrinking our lives to a "safe" zone that leaves us feeling half-alive; or becoming professional mourners, caught in the past with its loss and regret, unable to let go or to enjoy the present (p. 50).

Consistent with Ram Dass' emphasis, Bianchi emphasizes that a spirituality of middle age and elderhood calls for a turning inward, for a deeper contemplative and meditative life. Such an approach stands against the tide of our culture that expects the middle-aged, and even the elderly, to compete externally with much of the ardor of youth.

Within our culture, conventional ways of being with suffering and the dying process continue to reflect, on an institutional level, the deepest individual fear: the fear of death. Rather than being recognized as the natural companion of life, death is seen as an outside threat to that life, something to be controlled with our latest drugs and surgical techniques. Or, when the dying process cannot be avoided or significantly delayed, it is often hidden away in nursing homes or the back rooms of special hospital floors.

This same fear of death, left unexamined and unfelt, spills over into our lives. Our need to control others and the environment is our attempt to cope with this fear. Our unwillingness to grow old is one of its manifestations. Restrained by self-imposed limits, we keep ourselves from living in a creative, loving, and meaningful way. We are afraid to live because we don't want to die. We resist change because we don't want to grieve. Rather than celebrating the rich variety and beauty of human expression as it naturally emerges as one grows older and approaches the end of one's life, our emotional and passionate responses are often greeted with disapproval and mistrust. As we progress through our senior years, we are increasingly patronized and treated like children. Gentle acceptance and appreciation are simply not the norm.

### **Understanding One's Responses to Loss**

A simple awareness of how most individuals typically respond to significant or impending losses in their lives can be very helpful, even healing, in being with a present or soon-to-be realized loss in one's own life. Whether you have just heard of a dear friend's death, realized the natural decline of your health with age, or have just been told by your doctor that you have a terminal illness and only have a month to live, your reactions might very well be intense and very painful. Understanding the natural process of grieving can lessen the fear that often comes when we are lost in overwhelming grief. The following three stages or types of response reflect the process most of us go through when experiencing real or impending loss (see, e.g., Grassman, 1992; Mohs, 1995; Worden, 1982):

1. Shock (can last from weeks to months)--- This often includes:  
feeling stunned  
physical, emotional, and intellectual numbness  
denial (e.g., "No! It can't be true!")

feeling confused and crazy  
everything in life taking on an unreal quality  
loss of self-identity

2. Reaction and disorganization--- This often includes:

anger and protest (e.g., "The doctors don't know what they're talking about!")

loss of appetite; overeating

self-criticism and guilt

preoccupation with thoughts regarding the loss;

absent-mindedness

yearning and searching (for the loved one lost)

avoiding (painful reminders)

having a sense of the loved one's presence

nausea, weakness, shortness of breath, sleep disturbance

increased use of alcohol and other drugs

bargaining ("If I can live until my daughter's wedding, I will die peacefully.")

depression, withdrawal, apathy, and loneliness

aimlessness; restlessness

frequent crying and sighing

anxiety and inactivity

3. Acceptance and "letting go"--- This often includes:

talking about the loss without intense emotion

reorganization -- less preoccupation with the loss

being more open to new ideas and behavior

trusting more in the process of life

finding meaning in life and death

realizing the grace in grieving

more interest in serving others

seeing relationships as more important than material possessions

a deepening of spiritual awareness

seeing grieving as a personally transforming experience

Although written words themselves cannot truly touch the deep pain of grief, knowing that there is a recognized process that most grieving individuals go through can serve as a ground for one's thoughts, feelings, and sanity itself when the intense waves of grief appear.

### **Opening to the Value of Aging**

During the last phase of life, we have more time to reflect on the nature of life and death. This is a time when we have a special opportunity to open to our inner process and bring greater clarity, meaning, and peace into our lives. In our earlier years, we focused mainly on doing--- getting married, buying a house, raising a family, and building our career--- there wasn't much time for simply being or reflecting. In our later years, we are preparing to leave this world. Loss is everywhere. Our friends are dying or moving, our house and possessions are being sold or given away, we no longer have our careers, our family is often too busy to spend time with us, and our health is deteriorating. We become rigid and resistant to pain to the extent that we hold onto what we are losing. As we let go and open more fully to life, there is a greater realization of what the present moment has to offer. Our deepest wisdom and understanding thereby emerge.

Christine Longaker (1997), hospice director, author, and world lecturer, describes four dimensions or characteristics she has come to recognize in persons who are facing the end of their lives:

1) The elderly look for meaning in their lives. This search for meaning includes exploring past experiences, recognizing the times they felt love for themselves and others, and finding

understanding and forgiveness for that which they regret.

2) They reflect on past relationships and wish they could resolve those relationships that are remembered as discordant. Communicating more effectively with their families can be of help in this process. It is, therefore, important to explore where each person feels unfinished with his or her past since opening to past experiences often helps to resolve these conflicts, relaxing the mind and freeing one's energy.

3) They also want to understand the physical and emotional pain that they are experiencing and to find some relief. Such relief often comes by finding a purpose for this suffering. One purpose that many spiritual traditions recognize is that the experience of suffering provides an opportunity to offer this suffering for the benefit of others. Seeing one's pain in this transpersonal way (see, e.g., Valle & Mohs, 1998) transforms the solely personal meaning of the pain. This selfless intention leaves its mark in the collective awareness shared by all human beings thereby reducing the fear and pain of countless individuals throughout the world. Consider Sogyal Rinpoche's (1992) words:

Recently one of my students came to me and said: "My friend is in pain, and dying of leukemia. He is already frighteningly bitter; I'm terrified that he'll drown in bitterness. He keeps asking me: 'What can I do with all this useless, horrible suffering?'" My heart went out to her and her friend. Perhaps nothing is as painful as believing that there is no use to the pain you are going through. I told my student that there was a way that her friend could transform his death even now, and even in the great pain he was enduring: to dedicate, with all his heart, the suffering of his dying, and his death itself, to the benefit and ultimate happiness of others. I told her to tell him: "Imagine all the others in the world who are in a pain like yours. Fill your heart with compassion for them. And pray to whomever you believe in and ask that your suffering should help alleviate theirs. Again and again dedicate your pain to the alleviation of their pain. And you will quickly discover in yourself a new source of strength, a compassion you'll hardly be able now to imagine, and a certainty, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that your suffering is not only not being wasted, but has now a marvelous meaning (p. 219)."

4) Finally, they reflect on death, what it is like and how to prepare for it. Exploring their feelings and beliefs about death can help them discover the depths of their spirituality and can bring a sense of greater peace and joy. Connecting with a respected spiritual leader or teacher and praying or meditating in a way that feels right to them can also be helpful.

Gradually as one goes within and opens to all four of these dimensions, one becomes more authentic (i.e., true to oneself) and less reactive to life. In this way, we slowly become more accepting of the changes that accompany aging.

### **Growing Older Gracefully**

What does the cliché "growing old gracefully" really mean? My (Mary's) mother used to say that one needs to grow old gracefully in order to truly live and feel the joy of life. This requires a true transformation in how we view life as well as, perhaps most importantly, how we hold on to what is pleasant and familiar. Our youthful identity and vitality are, for example, especially difficult to surrender. The aging process can be an opportunity for such a transformation. In order for this transformation to occur, one must be willing to be present with what is happening in the moment including opening to one's own inner process. This involves letting go of expectations and past beliefs or experiences that may mask or block what is true in the moment. This letting go allows a deep and natural joy, a joy that lies beyond pleasure and pain, to emerge.

As we become older we have a tendency to resist change and to close out the world around us. In

order to open to life, we need to open our minds and hearts. Whenever we get caught in the grip of our own or others' criticism, or when we ruminate about that which we cannot change, we can consciously and compassionately become more spacious by watching the mind and observing its negative patterns. Rather than trying to analyze why we are feeling frightened, angry, jealous, or lonely, we can observe these feelings, as we sense them in our bodies, with compassion and allow them to simply be.

Working with one's self in this way can be a true spiritual practice. By softening and opening to the painful feelings that we've always run away from in the past, we eventually see what is behind them. We thereby open to the mystery, to the sacred dimensions of life.

## Conclusion

The approach offered in this chapter is truly integral in that it shares a perspective offered by many of the world's great spiritual traditions, namely, that all apparently separate phenomena and processes in life emanate from the same underlying transcendent reality or source. For example, consider the words of Swami Rama (1996) of the Himalayan Yoga Tradition: Life's purpose is to know the distinction between what is outside and fleeting, and what is inside and eternal, and to discover through practice and experience the infinite value of one to the other. Once this experience is realized, life takes on a joyful meaning and the fear of death evaporates (pp. 4-5).

Aging while retaining this level of awareness is a challenge in our culture. It is understandable that many of us feel trapped in an aging body while the world around us constantly celebrates the pleasures of youth. Aging with awareness requires being present in each moment and being willing to open to life and all of its complexities. The process of playing one's part in life and then letting go of the effects of one's actions is emphasized in many of the world's scriptures (e.g., the *Bible* and the *Bhagavad Gita*). Given that we have become attached to persons and things of the world, letting go is a process that involves grieving the losses in our lives. By opening to this process, we develop gratitude, patience, compassion, confidence, fearlessness, authenticity, harmony, joy, inspiration, and peace of mind.

The value of aging involves the journey within. Meditation, contemplation, prayer, journaling, reading inspirational works, dream-work, poetry, and keeping silence are all means that one can use to enter and explore one's inner space. Ram Dass (2000) tells us that: "Without acknowledging the soul level or cultivating a soul consciousness, we are like passengers trapped on a sinking ship (p. 128)." If we can see the aging process as an unfolding opportunity to gain deeper wisdom by discriminating external phenomena from internal reality and by opening to the fullness of life, rather than resisting the pain and contracting into our ego-selves, much of our needless suffering will be eased.

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