

Aging and Process Work: OLD AGE: HOPES, FEARS AND BEYOND

By Bogna Szymkiewicz-Kowalska - Pacific Institute 2004

Introduction

Aging is a mysterious process. It is not quite understood either by biologists or by philosophers. Some scientists say that in the first part of our life we "grow up" to the moment of gaining sexual maturity and then we "age." Carl Rogers gave his speech on aging a title "Growing old or old and growing," suggesting that the growing process never ends. From the point of view of our ability to reproduce, sexual maturity is the climax. But from an emotional and spiritual point of view, there is still a way to go to be really "mature."

In this article I would like to introduce some ideas on Old Age and the aging process that come from the theory and practice of Process Work. Aging is related to the mysterious factor of time. At the same time it is the process of aging that may help to discover the timelessness, essential part of our nature.ⁱ I present some concepts that were described in Mindell's books or introduced during seminars led by Arny and Amy Mindell and Max Schupbach.ⁱⁱ

I will talk about Old Age from three perspectives: the first deals with hopes or high dreams about aging; the second speaks about the fear and Old Age as an enemy; and the third discusses aging as an awareness practice.

Hopes: Becoming an Elder

On its bright side, Old Age brings promise (or at least hope) that one day we will finally get wiser, more detached from little troubles, more giving, more stable, less nervous, more relaxed, less preoccupied with self-importance. One day we will understand what was it all about. One day we will be closer to God or Nature. One day we will not be worried anymore. One day we will know how to love.

In old as well as in modern fairy-tales there are a lot of images that support these longings. There are Old Women or Old Men who appear exactly at the moment when they are needed. They have access to the timeless, natural, universal wisdom and generously share it with the younger person in trouble.

Like a "Grandmother Willow" in the animated film "Pocahontas" (who is a real willow tree and an old wise woman at the same time), the elder is deeply connected to Nature, spirits or God. She is also compassionate towards those who are on their way, because she has gone through it all, and has experienced ups and downs of life, which now she neither regrets nor envies.

The ideal elder is at the same time very powerful - she has spent her life gaining and purifying her unique kind of power. By looking at the images of Yoda from "Star Wars," Gandalf from "Lord of the Rings" or Dumbledore from "Harry Potter," we hope that one day our own personal power will also become clear and pure and will only serve the right purposes. Elders radiate with a deep sense of justice, much deeper than any set of rules or laws, as if they were able to touch some fundamental truth and thus find the right direction.

The concept of eldership in Process Work is mainly used in the context of Worldwork.

It has its roots in indigenous cultures where elders played an important role in their tribe or village. Though probably less perfect than fairy-tales figures, elders were present for the community as a whole. Not so focused on their own personal goals anymore, they supported different points of view, even the unpopular ones and created field where different perspectives could meet each other and transform.

This attitude emerges as a role during Worldwork and group processes. It takes the form of somebody who listens to all sides, which notices various levels of experiences, invites unwanted signals and spirits and stands up for all sides.

Arnold Mindell differentiates between the role of an Elder and a role of a Leader:

„The leader follows *Robert's Rules of Order*, the elder obeys the spirit.
The leader seeks a majority, the elder stands for everyone.
The leader sees trouble and tries to stop it, the elder sees the troublemaker as a possible teacher.
The leader strives to be honest; the elder sees the truth in everything.
The democratic leader supports democracy; the elder does this too but also listens to dictators and ghosts.
Leaders try to be better at their jobs; elders try to get others to become elders.
Leaders try to be wise; elders have no mind of their own. They follow the events of nature. (...)
The leader knows; the elder learns.
The leader needs a strategy; the elder studies the moment.
The leader follows a plan; the elder honors a direction of a mysterious and unknown river.“ⁱⁱⁱ

These qualities are often based on experience and come as a result of the way we have dealt with pain and difficulties. Being often oppressed themselves, Elders do know the pain very well, yet they have gone beyond revenge and see the oppressor and the victim inside themselves. “As she [the leader] grows in her awareness and fluidity, the role of leader and elder begin to merge. It is the elder, seasoned by the pain of failure, the joys of success, anger in the face of injustice, guilt from having acted unjustly, the loss of close one through death, and her own mini deaths, who gradually becomes a container for the whole. As she becomes increasingly transparent to the on-going process of life, the more she is there for all the parts – compassionately supporting their unfolding as the dance goes on“.^{iv}

Eldership in that sense is an attitude and a state of mind. Any time when we are very present with what is happening right now and yet free from personal expectations, when we deeply care for the whole group, family or organization while staying in touch with some larger source of order – we become an Elder.

It may happen at any age. There are moments when the child is the wisest and most caring person in the group. Each of us experiences eldership at one moment or another. Through working on ourselves we learn how to use this quality as a meta-skills in our interactions with others, with groups and with nature. An elder embraces everything that is happening with compassionate attention. He or she has a longer perspective and sees outside of the immediate context.

Perhaps, when we look at Old Age with longing, we hope that one day this state of mind and attitude will never leave us. Gray hair and wrinkles could be the price, but the gain would be the never-ending access to the inner wisdom, gentle power,

generosity and love. We would get into the state of perfect harmony and stay there...

Fears: Old Age as an Enemy

Fear of aging is very common, especially in our society, which does not validate the old.

In the culture that is so preoccupied with looking young, we are afraid of our changing appearance. As Ram Dass says:

"The images our culture generates are design to make you feel that aging is a kind of failure; that somehow God made a big mistake. If God were as smart as commercials, people would be young forever, but since God isn't, only the wonders of science and commerce can save us"^v

We are afraid of losing our power, position and social identity. Relationships may change: we may become dependent on others and be perceived as a burden for younger friends and family members. Little we know about enjoying dependency, valuing being taken care of, relating from the needy position.

We are also afraid of experiencing pain, illness, suffering. We all know that aging often brings physical symptoms: body becomes weaker or deteriorates. When we focus on the physical aspect of the body such thoughts are really scary.

In this article though I would like to focus on a special kind of fear: the one that is less obvious and discussed. It is the fear that one day life will be behind rather than in front of us and the mood that comes when we recognize that. This mood may determine how we approach life at the given moment. It is the essence of an Old Age as an enemy, as described the shamanic tradition presented by Carlos Castaneda.

According to this tradition, a man of knowledge meets four enemies on his path. The first is fear. The way of a warrior is to confront the thing that we are afraid of and to gain power. But then the power may blind us. If we recognize that we come to a point of clarity. Clarity means that we see things not through the filter of fear or power; we see them as they are. The danger is we may think we have understood everything and we forget to be in awe about the mystery of life. But if we keep remembering how awesome life can be, we grow until are confronted with yet another enemy. Sometimes it is said that it is the worst of them all. The last one is "old age." Old age comes with the feeling of resignation, a sense that it is too late to do certain things in life; it is not worthwhile.^{vi}

Many people experience "Old Age" quite early in life. I remember myself at the age of 23, after huge turbulences in my life, including dramatic political and personal events. I wrote in my journal: "How fast I have lived my life. And now it is done." I thought that it was over, that I knew everything that I was supposed to have learned, that I had experienced everything that was to be experienced. The mood consisted of a mixture of hopelessness, apathy, and certain arrogance towards life. (It did not stay with me though; so I remember for example at my 30ties birthday I had the feeling that life is just beginning!)

Recently I had a client, 21 years old, severely abused in his childhood, tossed from one orphanage to the other. He is very accomplished in this society: He is one of the best students at his faculty, gaining rewards, dreaming about the creative career

that is open right in front of him. But he has another other side too. He said at one point "You know, I feel really old. I do not know why should I go on, why bother. I have gone through everything already. Does it really matter if I make the next step?"

Another client of mine was struggling with an unhappy second marriage. She was remembering the time of her first marriage and reaching the conclusion that the good times will never come back again. She would repeat, "Good time is over. It is all in the past. There is nothing in front of me, everything is behind."

Arny Mindell said at the workshop in London in April 2001 that Old Age is sometimes experienced as a mood: "You have less available energy, feel low, you may have energy but do not have an access to it, you feel miserable and cannot find creative forces inside."

Max Schubach, talking about Four Enemies on the path of a Man of Knowledge described old age as follows: "You feel it is too late to do certain things in life and you dwell on this feeling. It is too late to learn a new language, to start a new relationship." You give up, you think you will not be able to make it anyway, it seems there is not enough time left. There is a mood of resignation, apathy, and hopelessness. You feel suspicious that you will never get into something anymore.

Old age is sometimes very powerful. It clouds our awareness and hypnotizes us to believe that hopelessness and no meaningful future is the only reality.

Old Age as an enemy may come together with biological age. Aging in Consensus Reality is connected with the body becoming weaker, lower energy, pain, less access to many possibilities in life. Mindell joked during the seminar that aging can be defined as "taking more pills". A Polish joke goes as follow: "If a men after 50 wakes up and feels no pain, it means he has died."

But Old Age is always there; ready to take over, just attached to certain periods and certain areas in our life more than to the others.

Awareness is the remedy. It helps to remember that it is just a state of mind rather than the final truth. Knowing that we may choose if we want to stay there or to use our awareness in order to gain access to other sides of our psyche. Arny Mindell and Max Schubach proposed exercises that help to shape-shift, to identify with the other, more active, young, energetic or hopeful part of our experience.

The exercises include identifying the areas of experience that are governed by old age, various ways of accessing another part (the young, the hopeful) and applying it to the hopeless areas identified before. ^{vii}

Aging as an Awareness Practice

During the workshop in London Mindell reminded us that it was an old person (among others like sickness and death) that Buddha met on his way to enlightenment. In other words there is something in aging that may wake us up and lead us to the next level of consciousness. How does that happen?

Mindell said that we might look at the process of aging at least from two points of view. From the sentient point of view we do not age, we are immortal, we neither necessarily live or die. From the point of view of consensus reality, aging process

brings wisdom, detachment, slowing down as well as symptoms, less energy, feeling that you are falling apart.

The whole process of aging is not yet well understood biomedically. Scientists observe that, among other processes, when we age chromosomes do not replicate identical cells anymore. This process, said Arny, is “a little bit like rusting”: an automatic pick-up of oxygen. So what is needed is some kind of anti-oxygen that would prevent this spontaneous process from happening. The psychological anti-oxygen is awareness. To enjoy the aging process we need to be aware of each new experience that is emerging and to follow it freely. It often requires an ability to let go of the known, to catch vague signals from Dreamland and little “flirts” of attention that bring us closer to the Essence.

Essence does not age: it is timeless. So getting closer to the Essence is a way to avoid the pain of aging. And the other way round; the consensus reality pain of aging pushes us to get closer to the Essence. The attention is forced to get out of the box of roles, expectations, conventions, or it gets stuck in righteousness, pain or depression.

This seems to be a natural process. It is widely observed among many older people are becoming more spiritual as they search for a deeper meaning inside. Apart from organized religions (that do not work for everybody), we have little tools to support this process. We need the ability to free our perception and let it wander to lesser-known realms.

During one seminar Max Schupbach was working with a person suffering from dementia.^{viii} This person felt terror of losing her memory. She was talking about her daily life and work – missing words in conversation, feeling cotton in her head, as if her mind was on vacation, being very slow. Max tried to understand her fear inside of him. He said he understood she was there to teach him something. It was an insight how important it is sometimes to leave others without answers so that they have to figure it out. Especially in the position of a teacher or therapist it is modeling that one does not have to be perfect.

Then they agreed on working of the most terrifying experience of losing the mind by going directly to the experience of having no mind.

Client: It feels right.

Max: I like your hand motion.

Client: The mind is no longer there.

Max: So what is released?

Client: Soul.

Max: From what you are saying I understand that as long as mind is no longer there it releases the soul.

Client: I imagine the mind is no longer there but there is no way to connect to the soul.

Max: Work with movement on losing the mind and connecting to the soul. Go on with movement; get the sentient essence of what is that soul that has been released. That is the true You minus your mind.

(Client laughs, takes time to move)

Max: From that state – what is the difference if the body is deteriorating or not...Big You is already there, little you worries.

They worked further on an edge to look at the consensus reality state of the body from the perspective of the Soul. The work brought tremendous sense of freedom, apparently, for the client, but also for the whole group. As if we all for a moment were given an access to the timeless, immortal essence of everything.

As in the example above, aging and its symptoms may be used as an awareness practice. The practice embrace all: taking role of a wise Elder (who, here, modeled imperfection and became the teacher's teacher), the fear of not fitting into consensus reality, the temptation to give up, as well as going into the immortal essence and coming back. Minute by minute, experience change and make space for a different one, connecting past, present, future and timelessness.

Footnotes:

ⁱ Mindell, Arnold (2004) *The Quantum Mind and Healing. How to Listen and Respond to Your's Body Symptoms.* Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Road. In this book, Mindell writes about aging in Ch.15. Aging and Buddhism: The great message of aging is that we are all shape-shifters. Aging is a multi-leveled process and its meaning is different in Consensus Reality, Dreamland and on the Essence level.

ⁱⁱ I used material from the following seminars:

- Arny and Amy Mindell, *Big Medicine*, London, April 2001
- Max Scupbach, *Four Enemies on the Path of the Man of Knowledge*, Warsaw 2001
- Lava Rock Clinic, Yachats, September 2003

Some of the sentences are probably literal quotations from the seminars. I introduced it by words „Mindell (Arny, Max, Schupbach) said... I did not use quotation marks because I relied on my own notes and not a tape, so i was never sure if it was the exact sentence that was used by the teacher. I hope, however, that I did not alter the meaning of what has been said.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mindell, Arnold (1995) *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation through Diversity and Conflict.* Portland, OR: Lao Tse Press

^{iv} Hand-out for the Worldwork participatns prepared by the teaching staff, India 1997

^v Ram Dass (2000) *Still Here. Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying.* New York, NY: The Berkley Publishin Group

^{vi} Mindell, Arnold (1994) *The Shaman's Body: A New Shamanism for Health, Relationships and Community.* San Francisco: HarperCollins

Notes from the seminar „Four Enemies“ - Max Schupbach, Warsaw, November 2001

^{vii} Mindells' and Schupbach's seminars in 2001

^{viii} I describe the process, including the part of the dialog, based on my own notes from the seminar