

Get Wisdom: Moving Toward the Essential

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Aging, I feel... is a process that is alive and happening, growing up and getting closer, moving toward the essential. (Debra Winger)

My late mother-in-law, Miriam, had a very fruitful old age. She did not climb mountains or work at a career. She did not travel the world. She did not write books or invent cures. Rather, this amazing woman, who had survived the Warsaw Ghetto and multiple concentration camps before she came to the U.S. to build a new life and family, was virtually homebound for several years before she died at close to 90. What she did, in the words of the rabbi who gave her eulogy, was “work the phone.” Miriam maintained a regular telephone correspondence with a couple of dozen relatives and friends all over the country. When you spoke to Miriam, she genuinely wanted to hear about your life. She always had not a kind word and a piercing insight, usually expressed in the form of a perfectly apt Polish or Yiddish saying, prefaced with, “My mama used to say...” After speaking with Miriam, you saw more clearly, or held more lightly, whatever was burdening you. The fruit that Miriam bore, and munificently shared until her dying day, was her wisdom.

Psalm 90 asks, imploringly, “Teach us to number our days that we may acquire a heart of wisdom.” As we grow older, making our days count and developing wisdom is our primary work. How are we to get ourselves a wise heart? I would suggest that this task indeed requires effort. Here are a few aspects of the work ahead.

Reflection. Drawing wisdom out of experience involves actively reflecting on what we have gone through. We gain wisdom as we challenge ourselves about what it is we think we know, both about our past and our present. The qualities of curiosity and humility help us to remain open to this evolving process of gaining perspective. It is when we lack these traits that we risk falling prey to foolishness. The sense that we do not know it all keeps us eager to learn more. Awareness of our limits helps us to avoid overstepping our capacity or bounds. We can actually become smarter, or at least wiser, by keeping our egos in check and our eyes and minds open.

Mining challenges. Growing older inevitably places us in confrontation with loss, limits, change, and disappointment. As unwelcome as these challenges are, it is precisely in facing them that we can deepen our wisdom. For example, historian, Theodore Roszak, suggested in *America the Wise* that

health crises can be a rite of passage in later life, because they impose a “suspension of the ordinary.” In the altered reality of a health crisis, we have an opportunity to be transformed, to enhance our appreciation of the simplest blessings in our lives, and to shift the way we relate to ourselves and others. Of course, this is true with any encounter with vulnerability. We grow wiser by telling the story of our experience, deliberately mining the lessons contained in it. This process helps to prevent the precious gleanings from painful experience from ebbing away as “normal life” returns.

Seizing the learning in every moment. The Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky, a 20th century Hasidic sage, teaches that every day offers a particular and unique piece of Torah (sacred learning) to each person. No two days are the same, nor is one individual’s learning for each day identical with anyone else’s. The opportunity for learning from this particular day will not return, he counsels, so we must endeavor to be alert and awake, lest the gift be lost. In this way, we can *come into* our days (*ba bayamim*) like the patriarch Abraham. According to the Slonimer Rebbe, Abraham lived fully each day of his very long life, and managed to grasp the wisdom available in every moment. This is the reason, we learn, that Abraham was “old and sated” when he died at 175 years of age.

May we, too, grasp the wisdom in each day, so that we might make our days count, and activate our hearts of wisdom.

<http://growingolder.co/get-wisdom-moving-toward-the-essential/>