

Aging with Wisdom

By Olivia Hoblitzelle

INTRODUCTION

Much of life comes down to a matter of perspective. Given this truth, how do perspectives change for elders and how do we handle the process of our aging? Each of us will have our own answers, but speaking generally, the elder years ask for another kind of growth, different from our earlier years. They invite continuing discovery, deepening the inner life, and opening to the mystery in which we live.

Now in my late seventies, I live with persistent questions about what it's like to be an elder in a culture that, for the most part, doesn't respect its elders. Not only that, but a culture that shies away from the realities of old age, death, and dying. Yet these are the realities that give great depth and richness to life. Questions and challenges abound: How do we find beauty and meaning in old age? How do we overturn the paradigm of ageism? How do we age consciously and cultivate an inner life that is resilient enough to withstand the vicissitudes of old age?

Aging with Wisdom reflects on these questions. As I was called to write about this subject, I began to regard these musings as a kind of memoir of my seventies—an extended meditation on how to age consciously and embrace life in all its fullness and wonder. I was not only living with these questions, but I realized that something significant had shifted in my life. I watched as friends received serious medical diagnoses. I accompanied them to doctor's appointments as their advocate, stood by them as they dealt with life-threatening illnesses, and eventually sat vigil as they moved toward death. This new dimension of life had quietly insinuated itself into the relative complacency of my middle years when old age and death still seemed like distant prospects.

Reflecting on this new perspective, I'm reminded of an enduring legend from the Buddhist tradition. Previously I had seen it as a colorful story, but now its deeper meaning demanded attention. As the story goes, Prince Siddhartha, later to become the Buddha, lived a protected life in the palace and extensive gardens of his father. At age twenty-nine, the prince became restless and curious about what lay outside the royal realm. He ventured forth from the palace, and there he saw, in succession, an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering contemplative. These were called "the four heavenly messengers," sent by the gods to alter the course of his life. Because the king had forced a

sheltered life upon his son, Siddhartha was shocked to encounter these challenging sights. *Was this the inevitable trajectory of all lives?* He asked himself.

When Siddhartha beheld the serene expression of the wandering monk, he saw a path he wanted to take where even old age, sickness, and death could be transcended through contemplation. The message of the story is that there are dimensions beyond aging, sickness, and death—that ultimate freedom is possible.

After his encounter with the four heavenly messengers, Siddhartha left the palace, dedicated his life to contemplative practice, and became enlightened; thereafter, he was called the Buddha—the awakened one.

Why are the harsh realities of the story called heavenly messengers? When we wake up to the inevitability of our own diminishment and death, we realize how precious and transient our lives are. This is a wake-up call for all of us. Some may start exploring philosophy or religion; others may feel a sense of urgency, a longing to be free from the apparent meaninglessness of old age, sickness, and death. Is that possible, you might ask?

This legend echoes our own lives. We coast along with relative well-being, preoccupied and distracted by the complexities of our lives, oblivious to what lies ahead, until one day when we are shocked with the news of a serious illness. Suddenly we're in a new reality for which we can never quite be prepared.

Aging with Wisdom is a collection of reflections, stories, and what I call wisdom treasures—thought-provoking vignettes that have inspired me during this phase of life. My assumption is that, with the inevitable diminishments of age, the inner life calls. The more resilient our spiritual life—whatever form it takes—the greater our inner resources for handling whatever comes our way. The elder stage of life is a time for consolidating, reflecting, and diving deeply into the realms of spirit we may or may not have had the time or inclination to pursue until now.

Of the many influences that illumine these pages, let me mention the key ones. As a child, I was curious about the mysteries of life and perplexed that the people around me didn't talk about these things. Who am I really? Why do I feel separate from others? What happened to my pets when they died? What about those billions of stars in the night sky? And on and on. My existential questions persisted and led to a lifetime of searching, teaching, and being a

friend and student of wise elders. Typical of the exploring of the 1960s and '70s, I practiced in several spiritual traditions and ended up with a longtime Buddhist practice. Not surprisingly, this book is informed by perspectives from Buddhism as well as from other wisdom traditions.

Another influence came through my husband Harrison, known as Hob, who appears in the book. As lifelong seekers, our lives overlapped in uncanny ways: we both worked in the field of psychology and also shared Buddhist practice and teaching. Because of our backgrounds, when Hob was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, we were able to bring the wisdom of our training to negotiate his heartbreaking illness. Given our particular perspectives and inspired by the remarkable way he handled his illness, I wrote about our journey in *Ten Thousand Joys & Ten Thousand Sorrows: A Couple's Journey Through Alzheimer's*.

Not knowing what challenges lie ahead as we age, we need some form of faith or practice, ways of being with the mind and heart that we can rely on for inspiration and support. We need equanimity, resilience, and courage—all cultivated by a practice and a life continuing to be fully lived.

As I've come to see it, the last chapter of life is the most heroic. That's a powerful reframing of the current paradigm. Elders are invariably hit with a cascade of challenges, yet how they live through their late years can become an inspiration and teaching for others. Above all, *Aging with Wisdom* invites you, dear reader, to share in this journey of exploring the mysteries, wonders, and challenges of growing older. May we ripen in wisdom for the benefit of all whose lives we touch.