

Aging:

One Woman's Pattern

By Margaret Reid

Dear Margaret,

Here I am at forty-seven, realizing I'm aging. My body doesn't do all it once did and the flushes of menopause disturb my sleep. Lots of letting go is necessary: the kids, some dreams.

I remember you saying that at sixty-two you were widowed, had retired from teaching, and your children were gone. The three most important roles in your life were no longer there. There was only emptiness.

You've been a model for me for years. I want to know how you got from there to where you are now: at seventy-seven, full of physical energy and creativity! What was aging like for you?

— Love, Shirley

Dear Shirley,

What a letter! What questions! Aging? What is aging like for me? You've set me thinking!

The Need for the Individual Approach

I'm a bit surprised at the thought that I might be "a model," for I know that there are many different paths to follow into later life, and that my path is only one of them. Each of us, I'm sure, has to find and walk her own individual way. Another thing I know is the necessity to decontaminate the mind from the modes and expectations about aging as held by the culture.

People sometimes greet me with the enquiry, "How are you keeping?" Perhaps it's my imagination, but it does seem to be

a greeting reserved for older folk. It's certainly the question with which I approach a piece of cheese that may have rested overlong in the fridge, and the small internal giggle that arises in response to the question helps to remind me that I am not cheese, even though, like everything else on the planet, I am aging. It reminds me also that I do not wish to take advantage of any method of artificial preservation to prolong my possible "shelf-life."

A Time for Reviewing Values

Strangely, my amusement over this greeting connects me to a phrase often used about one's earlier years: "I was raised ..." we say. On the contrary, I think, the experience for most of us is that, rather than "being raised," we grew relentlessly up, even in spite of being vigorously pruned back, or, many of us, being squashed down. So I often have a sense of the later part of life as a time to review and revise many of the teachings of the earlier years. I find it necessary to examine and test many of the ideas and ideals with

which I started out; which I inherited. The opportunity to do this work, and "work" it is, comes to me as one of the gifts of these later years. The middle years were so filled with busyness, with meeting the daily demands, that mostly I just ran on the existing rails. This left little time for review or repair, even when those rails seemed to be laid on shaky ground, so that they groaned beneath me.

Journey of Exploration

To seek and walk an individual path isn't always easy. Indeed I often feel it to be a rather bumpy road, with many pot-holes and few signposts. It's proving to be something of an exploration rather than a journey planned, with a map. Doubtless there are many easier ways of doing it!

But my journey has needed to take me exploring, because I have not seen many positive role models. I don't often think in terms of "aging," since I have an inner sliding scale which says, "Anyone ten years my senior is Old, and anyone ten years my junior is Young." This works very well for me because it's how I feel, inside, and it delivers me from the labels and the stereotypes, the expectations, of the culture. It also delivers me from all the "ologies" and "ologists," including the gerontologists. I feel affirmed in my recoil from the "experts" in the so-called "field of aging," by recollecting what I understand the particle physicists to be telling us: namely, that merely to examine, to study or look at, an object or phenomenon, alters its quality!



Margaret Reid and part of her garden (also part of one of her dogs!)

Models of Aging

When I do think the word "old," I see my grandmother as she slid hopelessly into invalidism and dependency. Or my mother, straining to avoid dependency and finding only loneliness, for there seemed to be no resources available to her at that place and time, and so, eventually, she too became trapped into invalidism.

For me, these are negative models: examples of how not to grow old, how not to waste one's later years. I have even felt some impatience with the apparent helplessness of those generations, although I see now that they were doing the best they could with what was available to them. In their day, people were old at sixty, if not before, whereas now we realize that fitness and agility, physical and mental, can be promoted and enjoyed far beyond that tidemark. Today there is amazing richness of opportunity and choice available. To become aware of this richness is to expand horizons, to enlarge expectations. The way we hold the concept of aging has a great deal to do with what we make of the process!

Menopause

You speak of the trials of menopause. My experience of this time was of an unhappy stumbling, blindfolded by false expectations. I see now that a large part of my upset was that I had no context in which to hold the process. I came to it in fear and dismay, believing that it rang a death knell to my sexuality and sexual attractiveness; to the vigour of my life as a woman, to my femininity; and that life thereafter would be downhill all the way. In fact I have found that none of this is true. I see it now as a rite of passage, a time of letting go of the biological creativeness and responsibilities of the earlier years, and a freeing of the creative energies into other channels. But rites of passage, of initiation, are often difficult, so I offer you the encouragement of my belief that it is a passage into a time of richness rather than an unwilling stumbling, regretful or fearful, through what only looks like a dark door.

Is This All There Is?

Indeed, the process of individual exploration is at times a process of discomfort, and when I think of this discomfort I recall particularly the middle years, the "Sixties," which were my "Fifties." For, un-

derneath all the ceaseless activity and busyness of this time, and the real satisfactions of marriage, home, family and professional life, a discontent began to stir and then to ripen. It had no words then, but now I see it could be summed up in the question, "Is this all there is?" So it came about that my discontent combined with the spirit of the times to take me into "Personal Growth Work" of various kinds. Then, as though to underline and intensify the question, "Is this all there is?," the three years of my life from age sixty saw it all dissolve: departure of the three now adult children (two of them for other continents), early retirement from my profession (because of "burn-out"), and the death of my husband.

The Time of Emptiness and Withdrawal

As you say, the three roles most important to me, which defined to a large measure who I was, were no longer there. There was only emptiness. It was a time of great aloneness, for even my siblings were on the far side of the Atlantic, and I compounded the aloneness, the sense of emptiness, by moving from the city, with its many friends and contacts, to the country, where I knew no one, and to a rather decrepit little house, with no other house in sight. In retrospect, the "all there is" had disappeared, and the emptiness provided the space, the opportunity, to discover the richness of "what else" there was.

The Simple Life

What initially drew me to the country was an old longing, to live close to Nature and to the land. I have always found healing and peace in contact with the earth, and I came to a new sense of inner grounding as I put new roots down into this lovely countryside.

In the first few years I fed this urge to strengthen roots in the reality of earth by a programme of the "Simple Life," tending and learning from the earth I love, as I grew most of my own food. The rehabilitation of the almost derelict little house was taking place at the same time, in synchronicity with the rehabilitation taking place within.

The so-called "Simple Life" brought many satisfactions, but left little time for other interests. So eventually it became time to let go of the idea of food self-sufficiency in order to have time to ex-

pand out into the world again. I notice that it was as the life began to expand that I also added an extension to the little house!

The Peace Movement

One of the first things that caught my attention at this point was the danger of nuclear war. I was astounded at the activities of the military power-mongers, and the apparent irresponsible insouciance with which they contemplated and planned the destruction of the planet. I was also astounded by the hopeless fatalism and ostrich-like attitude to this danger that seemed to be common reactions to the circumstances of that time. I felt enraged by what I perceived as a threat to everything I valued, and the energy of that rage took me into the Peace Movement. I put much time and energy into the work of raising public consciousness of what was going on, and of what ordinary people could do to influence events.

Foreign Travel

Opportunities arose also for foreign travel. I love to travel, and I'm fascinated by the differences between the various cultures I've experienced. Contrasting the cultural values of other countries against those of my own helps to highlight and clarify the values of each, telling me more about my own culture and about who I am within it. A strong focus of interest in this is looking at the place of women in the various cultures, and I am energized by the sense of an awakening woman-consciousness worldwide. My curiosity about "how everything ticks" out there, as well as within, is increased by what it feeds on.

Body Work

You speak of your body as "not doing all it once did," and because "body work" has been, and continues to be, so important for me, I'll offer you some of my experience. I've noticed that there are many ways of regarding the body, and how you regard it influences how it behaves.

Concepts of the Body

You can think of it as a mere physical vehicle, to be treated like your car; to be fuelled regularly, run into the service station for "fixing" when something goes wrong with its works, and Driven. Or, how about the body as "Pet Dog?" You feed it what You believe is good for it,

exercise it when You have time, give it friendly pats when you remember, but don't ever expect it to have anything useful to communicate to you. Or, there is body as "Servant:" you give it its orders, pay its wages, and expect loyal service in return. Loyal service you get but, since you are deaf to any of its dissatisfactions, in time, and maybe when you least expect it, it quits. Or, body as "Slave," in which case you don't even pay wages, just issue the orders, without consideration for its comfort or convenience. The only possible release from this bondage is for the Slave-body to drop dead in its tracks. There is also body as "Tyrant" over you, its fearful subject: you are the one without choice, who must obey its every whim, placating it with whatever you think may keep it quiet. I've tried most of these concepts of the body at one time or another, to some extent or other, and have come at last to knowing body as "Friend," a friend being one about whom you care, in whom you have confidence, with whom you communicate, whose wisdom you respect and seek to hear.

Body Needs

Most people know the physical needs of bodies if they are to be healthy: good diet, good air, adequate rest and relaxation, and exercise. I would also emphasize the truth of the saying, "You're as old as your spine," for young spines are flexible: aged spines are stiff. Stiffness and pain are the way the spine communicates its needs and complaints, and it pays to respond to its signals with imagination and care. For example, sitting or standing in one position for long periods settles the vertebrae into a compact mass, squashing the interleaving "cushions" between them until they lose their resilience, so that the vertebrae grind together into pain and "disc trouble." Posture that pulls the spine out of its natural position, vertically or laterally, produces similar results. So, if your work makes any of these spine-threatening conditions necessary, take frequent opportunities to stretch or move in conscious response to the body's need. Afterwards, for a spine that feels weary or over-burdened, it is wonderfully healing just to lie flat upon the floor, breathing deeply, even for as little as ten minutes.

Body Tensions

There are many tensions in modern living conditions, and tension that gets

stored in the body blocks the energy flow and causes pain. Biologically, we are programmed to respond to threats of danger by "fight or flight," and the body still triggers its adrenalin system into high production in order to provide the energy needed to respond to crisis. But in our environments, it is not often possible to respond to danger in either of these ways, so that the adrenalin has nowhere to go, the body is in conflict with itself, unable to respond to its own signals. If that conflict remains unconscious it is stored in the body cells, but if you can bring the source of conflict into consciousness the cellular tension and pain are released. Some of the avenues to this consciousness and release that I know of include body massage, Reiki, Shiatsu, any of the Oriental Martial Arts (my own choice is Tai Chi), movement and dance, and the use of the voice. You can sound out your frustrations in the shower, or when driving alone in your car; or beat them out on a cushion, or on the earth! These are some of the ways I use to keep the body free of stored unconscious tension. Finally, to dance or sound out your joy, enhances and intensifies the energy of joy!

Meditation as Connecting Mind and Body

Conscious breathing is the spirit-connection moving between body and mind; listening to the voice of the body is a form of meditation. The energy rides upon the breath: I can steer the energy into any part of the body by focussing attention on that area. By this activity I make contact with whatever is going on there, for the cells communicate when I open to their message: for example, when an ankle seized up with pain so that I could only hobble with that foot. Half an hour spent lying in a darkened room, breathing into the place of pain, brought the information that I was so angry with "X" that I wanted to kick him. But there were reasons for not taking this course of action, so that the ankle was receiving two conflicting messages, the anger being squashed down into unconsciousness where it became a burden on the body. When I got this message, I could make some decisions about how I would deal with "X": there was no need for any further pain signals. I walked downstairs on two painlessly functioning ankles.

Another form of meditation that works for me is through the energy centres or chakras as they register in the body. A

useful introduction to this is "Meditations on the Seven Energy Centres" by Gurudev Shree Chitrabhanu.¹ And Yoga exercises and practice are wonderful.

The Mental Plane

There is a huge smorgasbord of food for the mind available in the form of books, lectures and workshops. The only difficulty is to choose among so much richness. I myself find great enrichment in the work of C.G. Jung and his modern disciples, specially in the lectures and workshops arranged by the Jung Foundation of Ontario,² and the work of Marion Woodman.³

Another stream of enrichment for me comes in the work of Mariamne Paulus and Arleen Lorraine of the Teleos Institute in San Diego, particularly their "Theatre of Life" programmes, and their series "Life as a Waking Dream."⁴

Healing the Split Between Body and Mind

All these are important to me and provide guidelines for the explorations of my Journey, but what truly fascinates me is to touch and explore the connections between body and mind. I believe these two have been split apart in our culture, and that it is time, culturally as well as individually, to seek to re-unite them, to re-establish communication between them. So I seek to bring the light of consciousness into the body, and to listen for the body to speak her cellular memories and wisdoms into my consciousness. I am enchanted by the yin-yang dance of it, and there is a sense in which, for me, body and mind become symbols of the feminine and masculine principles within the Being.

What I am seeking is the union, the Yoga, the wholeness, of Body-Mind: of Matter-Spirit, and the exploration, the seeking, are the excitement.

¹*The Psychology of Enlightenment: Meditations on the Seven Energy Centres* (Jain Meditation International Centre, 244 Ansonia Station, New York, N.Y. 10023).

²The C.G. Jung Foundation of Ontario, 223 St. Clair Avenue West, Toronto, Ontario M4V 1R3.

³*The Owl Was A Baker's Daughter; Addiction to Perfection; The Pregnant Virgin; The Ravaged Bridegroom*. Toronto: Inner City Books.

⁴For information, contact: Teleos Institute, P.O. Box 7601, San Diego, CA. 92167-0601.