

“Life Has a Sense”

An Interview with Anna by Milana Todoroff

Milana Todoroff, one of our Guest Editors for this issue, recently interviewed an 86 year-old woman she esteems as an elder (her crone figure), particularly for her spiritual wisdom. The following are excerpts from their conversation. (Anna is a pseudonym).

MT: Will you talk about some of the ways that aging has affected your life?

Anna: One of the things I remember was many years ago, maybe twenty years ago, I was taking an extension course at university and there were students of all ages in the course. There were young people—maybe twenty, twenty-two, and the elder were over eighty. The professor, he looked at us and he said:

I am very pleased to see represented every age, but especially those who are already retired. Because nothing is worse when you retire than to sit down in an easy chair, to lean back and to just say, ‘So now I am waiting to die.’ Instead, there are a lot of things which are waiting in you to come to the surface which you have suppressed because you just didn’t have the time. You had to bring up a family, you had to lead your daily practical life. And there are a lot of things that Mother Nature had put into your inner most being — talents and gifts and so on, you didn’t even listen to them because you didn’t have the time. So now they are just waiting to come to the surface.

So this means that there is an opening up to a new period in one’s life. We know that there are others, like Grandma Moses, the painter who started art at sixty, sixty-five. And there are a lot of people I see who start university at this age. There is Verdi, who at eighty did one of his best

operas and in a new style. So, really there shouldn’t be a topping or a limit.

One thing which I had to learn when I was a little older was to stop carrying the burden of past life. Because, all those things which happened to us when we were children, or when we were young—the disappointments, the efforts which led to nowhere, all this is dead. We have to bury this. We have to leave it behind. Otherwise, we are carrying around heavy weights with us. Then we can’t even enjoy what we have now. If we just say, “My mother did this, my father did this, my boss did this and my sister and my brother and my friend...,” it leads to nowhere. It doesn’t change anything. It gets only worse because I can’t enjoy my life now.

MT: There is a real sense of letting go of old baggage.

Anna: Yes. And it applies to everybody because young people sometimes do this and they ruin their lives. They get bitter, they get disappointed because something happened when they were growing up. It doesn’t do them any good. And it hinders them from opening up to the new.

MT: I was wondering if there were points in your life where you found yourself making different choices along your path of spirituality?

Anna: Oh yes, there have been quite a few moments in my life. I remember when I was forty-five or fifty and I had been very happy with my spiritual beliefs and convictions. I never went to church because I grew up in a family typical for central Europe, where religion and soul and immortality are regarded as just nonsense and just the talk of old women. So this is how I grew up. But then I made my own convictions and I found something which I liked and so on. And then I felt as if I had something new.

I wanted to study a little the Oriental philosophy and religion and to move freely and to look around at what was interesting and what I would like to know and could accept. But I couldn’t because I belonged to a movement where I was only allowed to read certain things. And that was a pretty tremendous crisis, I must say. I almost got sick because I took it very seriously.

And then the best psychologist I have ever met told me one of Buddha’s parables. The Buddha got a lot of new disciples, and some of whom had been Hindus (or whatever religion was traditional). When they began to follow his teaching, they had to leave the teachings and religion of their fathers and fathers and fathers and so on. So for them it was quite a problem, as it is even today for many people. So Buddha gave a parable:

If you go through a forest and you come to a river you have to cross, what do you do? You make a raft. You get on the raft and you cross the river. Then when you come to the other side, you feel very grateful to the raft which allowed you to cross the river. But does that mean that you now put the raft on your shoulder and go on and climb the mountain with a raft that doesn’t serve you any more? So the raft had its part and was necessary for you for a certain part of your life. But now, it doesn’t serve you any more, so leave it.

So that was the thing which convinced me to leave my old beliefs. I think we all come to this point where old beliefs which are learned from childhood, we have grown out of like a small dress. You can’t stay in it any more; you need something new.

MT: Did you move then towards Carl Jung’s work?

Anna: Not yet. I started to read freely

what I wanted to. I read a lot of Indian philosophy, whatever there was. But then I met someone who had quite a spiritual power, who taught me a lot of things. And then I met a woman who was very spiritual and who taught me a lot of things. And then I found Jung and, to my great surprise, I found that what Jung was saying in good part corresponded to what I had learned from this man and from this woman. So it wasn't Jung: it was something I knew already, something I could expand, deepen and enlarge.

MT: As you moved along your spiritual path, how did that work out in your day to day life? How did you find the time to...

Anna: I was fortunate that I had the time to do it. I was a bit over fifty then. What I learned was that the so-called 'spirituality,' that means a kind of interest in what is not material and so on, must be lived in a material world, or else it is of no avail; it remains an empty theory. Because to live it practically, you have to be with other persons. It is quite a difficult thing, but it is necessary.

MT: Did you have a sense that your spirituality deepened as you got older?

Anna: Mmmm, maybe in the sense that I got this conviction that life is not senseless, that life has a sense. Things that happen kind of *have to happen*. And if we understand the underlying lesson of what we are to learn, and when we have learned what we need to, it will fall off. It is not that we just have to suffer or we have to be uncomfortable for the necessity of suffering or being uncomfortable. Just that when we have learned the lesson, we can go on and this falls off.

MT: I was wondering about your spiritual practice in your life now. Do you have a time that you set aside for prayer or for a ritual?

Anna: I am afraid that I do not have a ritual, nor do I really pray. But I always set aside time to dedicate to reading what I am interested in. I always did it and I do it now. But now it is Jung and I am interested in dreams. Dreams can tell you a lot of things. And I read whatever I am interested in.

I just found this today. This is what Jung says. This book is by Anthony Storr;

in it he says that Jung thought that certain figures rise in our unconscious, which he thought were the personifications of qualities — the anima, which is soul and so on. He thought of certain figures, the Great Mother, for example, as existing in an imperishable world. So he believed in an imperishable world. These figures would manifest themselves from time to time in the psyche of an individual. And you can also dream of them. You can feel that you are not alone, that you are always in the presence of some superior power which is absolutely beneficial. This power doesn't judge, doesn't punish us, but is very be-

"The Great Mother has been put aside by this other God who calls himself Father God... She has been eliminated from the memory of humanity."

nevolent and is always ready to help us, like a good mother.

MT: I'm wondering if you can talk more about the Great Mother?

Anna: Gracious. That is quite a big subject. I know, not just from myself but from the man and the woman I met who were very spiritual, that the Great Mother, who is the life and the source of everything, has been put aside by this other God who calls himself Father God. And She has been eliminated from the memory of humanity. This comes up in a lot of old myths and a lot of old legends and a lot of dreams from the most different people who don't know anything about it. And the so-called "creation" of this man, of this divinity, is not very successful as we can see today because humanity is on the brink of self-destruction. So evidently, there is the necessity that She, now, intervenes. Because all the 'feminine' qualities as we know, have been put aside and it has become a purely patriarchal society. So our culture is like someone who walks with one leg. So we have now to bring in the feminine qualities, to get rid of the hurt and to heal it if possible. This is my conviction.

MT: You have been talking to people about their dreams for many years. I am wondering if you are noticing any patterns.

Anna: Oh yes, I see a trend. Definitely. And the strange thing is, as I said before, that people who don't know each other, with completely different backgrounds, often experience similar dreams. One lives in the prairies, one lives in Ottawa, some live here, others in Europe. And very often, more or less in the same period of time, within the period of a month, they have the same dreams. And the dreams tend towards undoing the old patriarchal formula and bringing forth the feminine, the Mother.

And this is true through the symbolism. Three is a male symbol, masculine. Two and four are feminine. For example, Jung says, someone dreams he sees three people or there are three chairs or three apples and now there are four apples and four chairs and four persons and four, which is feminine. So the triangle, which is masculine, gives away to the square, which is feminine (because the square is a container). The symbolism changes.

MT: So you see hope through all the problems?

Anna: Oh yes, I do.

MT: Would you have anything to say to people who feel as if they have lost hope?

Anna: Well, what I would have to say is get interested in more positive things and open up to new ideas. One of the things I think is very important is to be ready for new things, because elderly people tend to become rigid in their habits, their outlooks, their opinions, and their convictions. I do think that is one of the things I had to learn: be ready to change, to open up to new things. Because rigidity leads to death. So in all things try to be elastic: open up to totally new things, begin something new and leave behind the past.

As I said before, there are people who start painting after age 65 or take up music or go to university. Whatever, do something to take yourself out of the old you. So when you get older, and you have the time, go out to some nice place if you can. Have a cup of tea. Have a chat with people. There are a lot of things one can do.