

## From Ageing to Sageing

A sermon by the Rev. Makanah E. Morriss

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I want to begin with a reading from author and spiritual teacher, Marianne Williamson:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.  
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually, who are you not to be?  
You are a child of the Cosmic Creative Source.  
Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.  
There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure  
around you.  
We were born to make manifest the glory of the Sacred Spirit that is within us.  
It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone.  
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the  
same.  
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” (from  
*Life Prayers*, p.8)

These are words which speak to the challenge we each face no matter what stage we are at on our life journey. Each decade of life brings us new challenges and invites new clearing and new opening on our part. Some aspects get easier as the years pass but there are always new tests with unexpected and painful “edges” to them that seem to appear.

The truth is we can never stay still – we cannot push the “pause” or freeze frame button and stay where we are. We cannot be successful at staying youthful or middle aged or any particular age. We can be successful at finding ways to be open to the challenges and the gifts which each age brings.

In his book *From Ageing to Sageing*, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi shares his own struggles with coming to an understanding of the later decades of life and he offers a very powerful and profound new vision of growing older. I want to share with you an overview of some of his insights and invite your reflections on them. This is a sermon which I hunch will appeal to those of us in the 55+ category but those of you in the under 55 category may gather some exciting new images for your down-the-road future as well.

As we start on this journey, I want to invite each of you to think of an “elder” whom you admire. Being Unitarian Universalists, we each get to define what “elder” means – the age of the person, why you experienced them as an “elder.” This person may be a relative – a grandparent or great grandparent, an uncle or aunt, or this person may be a mentor, a teacher, a former coach or a friend. This person may be a fictional character – someone you read about in a favorite book or saw in a movie.

I want you to take a moment now and picture that person sitting here with you this morning. Feel their energy and let yourself know what it is about this person that you admire. If you can’t come up with any image, that’s absolutely alright also...one may appear a bit later or not...

If you have an elder in mind, my hunch is that that person lives or lived out the words I shared from Marianne Williamson. Somehow these people quietly let their light shine in a way that has invited our light to shine more brightly.

They had a knack for inviting us to feel more empowered to be who we truly are. They had a kind of centered balance, a quiet grace and strength of spirit that we could almost feel.

One of the very best things about being in a Unitarian Universalist spiritual community is that such elders are very present. Being part of a congregation means that we experience the joy of being part of an intergenerational “village” so to speak – where we stand with and learn with and serve with and enjoy good times with folks of all ages. This is very different from most other aspects of our lives which nowadays can seem quite age-segregated.

I remember that one of the first things I noticed when I became a Unitarian Universalist some twenty-seven years ago, was how vibrant and interested and wise and active the older people of the congregation were. These were folks who were engaged with life and with the continuing pursuit of truth. Wow, I thought. This is the way I want to be on my life journey.

Reb Zalman went on his own vision quest when he turned 60 and realized that he was experiencing some feelings of futility and anxiety about the road ahead. From his forty day retreat near Taos, New Mexico, he gained personal and spiritual insights which opened a whole new perspective on the life journey process.

He writes:

“We don’t normally associate the elder years with self-development and spiritual growth. According to the traditional model of life span development, we ascend the ladder of our careers, reach the zenith of our success and influence in midlife, then give way to an inevitable decline that culminates in a weak, often impoverished old age. This kind of “aging” is depicted as a process of gradually increasing personal diminishment and disengagement from life. As an alternative to inevitable senescence, Reb Zalman proposes a new model of later-life development called “sage-ing”, a process that enables people to become spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible -- ‘elders of the tribe.’

“Sages,” Reb Zalman, goes on to say, “draw on growth techniques from modern psychology and contemplative techniques from the world’s spiritual traditions to expand their consciousness and develop their wisdom. By expressing this wisdom as consecrated service to the community, they endow their lives with meaning...This ongoing process, which he calls *spiritual eldering* helps us consciously transform the downward arc of aging into the upward arc of expanded consciousness that crowns an elder’s life with meaning and purpose.” (*Age-ing to Sage-ing*, p.7)

Think of the elder whom you have called to mind, does or did that person draw on techniques or tools from mind/body theory or from contemplative disciplines which helped them maintain their clarity and creative balance? How did they express their wisdom as consecrated service to the community – did they perhaps act as mentor or teacher, did they offer the world artistic and creative gifts, did they witness for justice, equity and compassion for others, did they live their lives in eco-sustainable ways?

There are as many ways to achieve and share this quality of “sage-ing” as there are individuals. Reb Zalman’s purpose is to invite each one of us no matter how young or how old to begin this particular journey.

The understandings of healthful living and the significant wonders of modern medicine mean that we can expect to have extended longevity of life. Such longevity calls for the development of extended consciousness to help offset the inevitable physical and social diminishment of old age. Reb Zalman is not denying the physical challenges which occur or the differences which occur in social role. What he is encouraging us to do is to re-image what this later part of the life journey might be like.

Some spiritual writers have looked at the life journey using the metaphor of the months of the year with each month up until the last month being equivalent to about seven years.

The first period, January represents infancy and early childhood. In

February puberty arrives with the awakening of sexuality and the transition into adolescence. At the end of March you are twenty-one years old and on the verge of “first adulthood.” By April you are twenty-eight and for many this is the time when you start cleaning up the emotional and intellectual debris that you may have acquired from your parents, educators, and friends in building an adult personality. Pruning away certain goals and mind-styles, you retain what seems workable and proceed to the new challenges of the thirties. By May at approximately age thirty-five, many people but by no means all of us have settled into a career.

By June and July the morning of life is over, and it is a time when we often begin the task of “individuating,” being more intentional about finding ways to tap into our inner selves and becoming and expressing the unique selves that we are. This is a time which involves the evocation of soul and spirit.

The June (42), July (49) and August (56) phases of our lives are periods in which mind, body, and heart are unified. There is a shouldering of responsibility during this time which is markedly different from earlier decades.

Reb Zalman suggests that between ages forty-nine and sixty-three (September) as we grow beyond our drive for personal power and success, a fuller, deeper humanity begins to emerge. Now we may be more concerned about the health and maintenance of communities and institutions and organizations which we deeply value.

As we approach the October (70), November (77), and December (84 and on) of our lives, from ages 70 on, the time for “harvesting” arrives. This involves reflecting on our lives in ways that bring clarity and healing for ourselves and perhaps others, seeing more clearly how the pieces of our lives have contributed to the greater whole fabric of life, and ultimately finding our place in the cosmos. (*Age-ing to Sage-ing*, p. 22-23)

I want to hasten to underline that this metaphor of “months” of the life journey is very approximate – many of us can see ourselves moving back and forth at various times in our lives with different life tasks. None of us actually do all of these. But this is one way to vision our life pilgrimage.

Who then are elders and what is their role? Reb Zalman suggests that they are “wisdom-keepers” who have an ongoing responsibility for maintaining society’s well-being and safeguarding the health of our ailing planet Earth.

“They are pioneers in consciousness who practice contemplative arts from a variety of spiritual traditions to open up greater intelligence for their late-life vocations. Using tools for inner growth, such as meditation, journal writing, and life review, elders come to terms with their mortality, harvest the wisdom of their years and transmit a legacy to future generations. Serving as mentors, they pass on the distilled essence of their life experience to others. The joy of passing on wisdom to younger people not only seeds the future, but crowns an elder’s life with worth and nobility.” (*Age-ing to Sage-ing*, p.12)

In many traditions and cultures, elders are valued and honored. In our post-industrial Western culture and society this has not been true. And it is time to change this. The world is in too much need of mature wisdom, our planet is in too great a peril not to call upon the richness of human resource that can be tapped by helping transform “age-ing” back into “sage-ing” with some new aspects.

As Reb Zalman points out, aging itself isn’t the problem. It’s the images that we hold about it, our cultural expectations, that cause our problems. To have a positive old age, we must change our aging paradigm. (p. 14)

Ageing is a developmental process and we need to honor it as such. To be sure there are shifts in the limberness of our bodies and some aspects of our minds. But just as some doors are seeming to close, other windows of clarity and wisdom and extended vision are actually opening in new ways.

We know that we actually utilize only a small portion of our brain power most of our lives. Reb Zalman suggests that the intuitive, visioning and empathic abilities of our pre-frontal lobes are actually more effectively tapped in our elder years. We can utilize understandings from the mind/body theories and techniques which are increasingly available to help

us in these next stages of development. And even with the physical challenges of the aging process, we can tap into the newest understandings of body mechanics and processes to determine what types of treatments we want to utilize, accessing both the most effective frontiers of modern medicine as well as holistic, organic approaches.

The first challenge on the journey to sage-ing is to come to terms with our mortality. Our unwillingness to acknowledge that we will someday die holds a portion of our life energy hostage. Those of us over 55, sometimes find ourselves rushing around trying to look and act and respond as though we are younger than we are. One of the meditative techniques offered by Thich Nhat Hanh is a meditation on the process of death and dying – not in a morbid way but more in the way of appreciative inquiry and an acceptance of the cycle of life.

I have told the story before and it fits well here, of “Eleanor” who was in her mid-eighties when she found Unitarian Universalism. Her granddaughter who was a young adult had found our church in Richmond, Virginia and brought her grandmother. Eleanor was thrilled – she had been looking for us all her life.

I remember so vividly one Sunday morning during our adult education class before church when we were discussing death and dying and whether or not it really would be a good thing if we lived forever. Eleanor who was always a positive and energetic participant in our discussions raised her hand. She shared that one night earlier in the week, she had awakened in the middle of the night. Her heart was pounding and she found herself wondering what was happening. Suddenly, she said, she realized this might be it, “death,” the end, so she said she lay back on the pillow, opened her arms wide, and asked aloud, “O.K., what happens next?”

She was so genuinely curious and accepting of the life process that it really stopped our class cold that morning. No one knew what to say. I think we were all in awe of her and many of us hoped we could achieve that kind of clarity and peace. It nurtures my heart and soul whenever I think of that morning.

Reb Zalman devotes a whole chapter in his book to “tools for harvesting life,” tools which I might say we will be utilizing in the new upcoming adult education class on age-ing to sage-ing. Harvesting one’s life is a second aspect of the journey to wise elder.

The Kabbalah, the mystical tradition of Judaism, teaches that we express ourselves on four levels – the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. The healthy person strives to integrate all four levels of their being.

In leading workshops on “harvesting our lives”, Reb Zalman begins on the physical level with exercises that relax the body and make it more flexible and energetic. Our own yoga classes here at the church are a good way to do this.

On the emotional level, we can engage in life review, reframing past mistakes and betrayals, clearing and healing ourselves with courage and honesty and letting go of resentment and guilt. There are many helpful guided meditations and reflective techniques using journaling and art that can help with this.

On the mental level, it is important to do our “philosophic” homework addressing life’s perennial questions, such as “What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of my life? and What is my relationship to the Cosmic Source of Life which some call God or Goddess or Spirit or Fullness or Absence? These are actually questions which we often explore in our adult education programs, our Wednesday Noon Theology group, our Chalice Circles, and our Spiritual Film series.

And finally on the spiritual level, we need to begin to acquire contemplative skills to develop the extended consciousness from which harvesting can proceed. Our Bird and Bell Meditation group offers such practice as do our Dances of Universal Peace, the spiritual yoga classes, and Reiki workshops which will be offered this spring to name just a few. Given our Unitarian Universalist openness to the wide variety of religious and spiritual and philosophic traditions there are a myriad of possible techniques and disciplines which we may try out until we find the one or ones which nurture our inner soul.

As Reb Zalman says, “Our task in elderhood is to give ear to that inner voice which has been calling us to authentic life and to complete its call to the best of our ability.” (p. 104)

We do this through mentoring as we seed the future with wisdom. One of my favorite images of a mentor was in the movie *The Karate Kid*. When I first saw that movie years ago, I was fascinated by Mr. Miyagi, the wise and skilled martial arts teacher and elder who took the young man Daniel under his wing. The way in which he mentored and kept company with Daniel was amazing. His methods were intentional and mindful but not always obvious to Daniel.

Mr. Miyagi’s personal energy which seemed peaceful and strong, centered and clear invited the best from Daniel’s energy. Mr. Miyagi actually did not do a lot of talking. He listened deeply and then he would respond. There was a quality to his life that I found very appealing.

In heeding the call of our Inner Self, we also may choose to be active in ways small or large on behalf of healing our communities and our planet. We may look for ways to offer our hands and hearts that match our current energy levels. We may offer healing to our Earth by creating a much more simplified lifestyle which moves in harmony with the rhythms of nature and is filled with daily decisions which are eco-sustainable. The release of the need to acquire or even continue to own a multitude of material goods somehow offers us the cosmic or spirit space to be more authentic.

Reb Zalman suggests that deep inside each of us exists the Inner Elder, our Future Self. We can each visit this wise being at any point in our life journey, be nurtured by its energy and gain new clarity. As we honor our Inner Elder and look forward to our lifelong developmental journey to wisdom, we will find a peace and a healing stillness which connects us with all that is.

There is a favorite reading of mine found at the back of your hymnal. It is reading #484 by William Henry Channing and it goes like this:

“To live content with small means;  
to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;  
to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich,  
to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;  
to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with an open heart;  
to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.  
To let the spiritual unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common;  
This is to be my symphony.

So may it be, my fellow travelers, so may it be.