

# LETTING GO



“When physical eyesight declines,” Plato said, “spiritual eyesight increases.”

It is this spiritual eyesight, the ability to see into the inner meaning of things, the spiritual value of things, the essential core of things, that must carry us from this point on. And it is the spiritual essence of a person that emerges from the natural divestment that comes with old age. Life, it seems, follows a relentless cycle: in our early years we accumulate, but in our later years we divest. Both of them have a place in life. Both of them are a struggle. Both of them are liberating.

In the early years, life is a series of milestones. The first words, the first steps, the first book, the first bike, and the first graduation. Then the grasping begins. We must get an education, get a job, get a life. In this period of life, growing means getting.

Every step along the way is marked again by the things that are the sign of it. Now it is a matter of getting the right credentials—the college degree, the technician’s license, the professional certifications, the promotions. And all the while, parents

and friends, relatives and mentors worry about us. They worry if we start the climb late, or if we climb too fast or too slowly, too intently or not intently enough. But whatever the pace, the concentration is on the climb.

And we know if we're doing it right because there are markers along the way that measure the success of it all. The job. The bank account. Our own car. And the trips that mark our rites of passage. We backpack across Europe, or go camping in the Grand Canyon, or buy a motorbike and ride through the Rockies, or we go with our buddies to the big city, to celebrate our coming of age. Then, they say, we settle down.

But oh, the journey is far from over. On the contrary. Settling down, we discover, is not settling down at all. It has its own criteria. Its own struggles. Its own trophies to gather. It is one long exercise in accumulation. Now comes the career and the apartment, the titles and the mortgages, the children and their graduations, the social life and the weddings. And, at long last, the retirement party.

Then we have arrived at the great crossover moment in time. The time for heaping up is over. All we know now is that whatever we have managed to accumulate at the end of the climb is just about all we'll ever get. Did we succeed or not?

The grade we now get in "Living" is not given by someone else, as it was in the course of the earlier achievements. This time we have to grade ourselves. The question now is, how and by what measures do we decide if our life has been a success?

And strangely enough, at this time, we find that one of life's major tasks is to determine what to do with everything we have managed to gather so far. Do we give it away to family and friends? Sell it to antique dealers? Pack it up for thrift shops?

Write a journal of the memories that every piece of it replays in us?

All of a sudden, none of the old milestone markers really counts for much. But what does?

When we get to that point, it is clear that the next part of life has finally begun for us.

Every major spiritual tradition knows as one of its core experiences a period of major divestment, of total renunciation of that which shaped a person *before* he or she began the great spiritual quest. In this period, the seeker considers the meaning of life and death, of the spiritual and the material, of Earth and its beyond, of the soul in contact with the great soul within.

This is the period when we evaluate everything we have come to know about life and look for a dimension above the things of this world, for the sake of what is yet to come. The search means, then, that we strip ourselves of whatever it is we have accrued until this time in order to give ourselves wholly to the birthing of the person within. Into this part of life we travel light.

When I look around the crowded room and wonder why I am keeping the large desk when a smaller one would do just as well, something inside of me is beginning to change. When three sets of dishes are two sets too many, I have begun to need more than just things. When the house is too crowded and the car is too big and the perfect lawn too much of a bother, I have begun a whole new adventure in life.

It is the shaping of the soul that occupies us now. Now, consciously or, more likely, not, we set out to find out for ourselves who we really are, what we know, what we care about, and how to be simply enough for ourselves in the world.

Little by little we begin to strip down a layer at a time. We don't run with the business crowd anymore. We discover the neighbor instead.

Then, we leave the old house and the old neighborhood for a smaller place, easier to handle, easier to give up.

We discover what the Kenyans mean when they say, "Those who have cattle have care." And little by little we become less of our outer image and more of our inner selves.

"We come into this world naked and alone," a saying declares, "and we leave it the same way: naked and alone." But not quite. Because by now, we have learned that the things we amassed to prove to ourselves how valuable, how important, how successful we were, didn't prove it at all. In fact, they have very little to do with it all. It's what's inside of us, not what's outside of us that counts. It's what we learned along the way, what we meant to other people along the way, what we became inside—along the way—that is really who we are.

The problem comes for those who are unable to let go. The "relaxed grasp" has never been part of their lives. Somewhere along the line they accepted the heretical notion that what we have is what we are. So, leaving the home leaves them empty and in agony. Giving away the things that marked all the stages of their lives leaves them feeling bereft of themselves. They have not looked inside for so long, they cannot now appreciate that they finally have the time—and the freedom—to furnish the soul with poetry and beauty, with friendships and adventure, with children to play with rather than raise, and with peers to talk to about important matters rather than superficial things.

The time is here. We have a chance to become what all the living has enabled us to be. Now we can make sense of it. But

only if we can let go of the past. Only if we can let go of all the old ideas of success, all the old marks of humanity and finally, now, allow ourselves to become simply human instead.

*A burden of these years is the temptation to cling to the times and things behind us rather than move to the liberating moments ahead.*

*A blessing of these years is the invitation to go lightfooted into the here and now—because we spend far too much of life preparing for the future rather than enjoying the present.*

## LIMITATIONS



“Old age is not a disease,” Maggie Kuhn said. “It is strength and survivorship.”

When we ignore the fact that all of us are on an inexorable journey to our own old age, we miss the gift of years. We miss the profound insight that we are never too young to begin to see ourselves as old, to imagine ourselves as now, at this moment, shaping what we will be in years to come—as well as the way we will become it. All of us will sooner or later arrive at the point where we are beginning to imagine ourselves entering the final stages of our lives and asking ourselves, seriously, quietly, what kind of person we want to be then, so that we can begin to be that person now. If we're lucky, we meet older people who challenge us into that moment simply by being themselves—something we do not expect at one age or another, and certainly not at a later age, to happen. Even to us.

If anyone proves the point, it is surely Maggie Kuhn. She looked not like your typical main speaker at major health-care events across the country. She was small, frail as a bird, hardly

able to be seen above the speaker's stand in front of her. And she was a woman.

There was a lot of talk about women in the 1980s, of course, but you still didn't see many of them in the public arena. Maggie Kuhn hardly seemed the type to be the pacesetter of a whole new public life for older women. By the end of every presentation, however, people—men as well as women—came leaping to their feet cheering, applauding, calling her name.

Maggie Kuhn, born in 1905, was the founder of the Gray Panthers movement. Having retired from seminary work in the Presbyterian Church at the age of sixty-five, she founded what would, in fifteen short years, become one of the most influential groups of retired people the world had ever known. She had dedicated the group to nursing-home reform, to the elimination of ageism, and to the eradication of the social concept of "disengagement," the notion that older people should be beyond, outside, disengaged from the public arena. On the contrary.

Thanks to the Gray Panthers, legislation easing the lot of older Americans, promising them economic support and breaking down the barriers of ageism, was already moving through Congress and, best of all, alive in the public mind.

With Maggie Kuhn, a whole new population speaking out against ageism began to emerge. The elderly were alive and well and on the move.

We are their inheritors.

But is it realistic to think that the elderly elderly—eighty-year-olds—can possibly have any real effect on public issues? How can those who are almost by definition limited in one way or another be expected to be the shapers of a new society for

themselves, let alone for anyone else? They wear hearing aids. They get cataract surgery. They don't drive much anymore. Well, maybe. But what they can do, they do with increasing amounts of energy and intention.

They know enough about computers to contact one another. They know enough about business, given the fact that so many of them have run one, to organize. They know enough about government, since so many of them have been involved in it at one level or the other, to pool all of that experience, all of that passion, all of that commitment to change politics—whatever the limitations of each of them might be separately. "Old people," Kuhn said, "constitute America's biggest untapped and undervalued human energy source."

More than that, however, they teach the rest of the population, all of its various age groups, something about the power of limitations. No, they aren't as young as they once were, and they don't walk as fast—if at all. They may not organize major political events or societal fund-raisers. But what they do for us, no one else can do. They make us rethink the entire function and meaning of "limitation."

Limitations—those physical boundaries that the old reach before the rest of the world—are only that, elders show us. They are boundaries, not barriers. They limit us—they take time and energy, yes—but they do not stop us unless we decide to be stopped. In fact, limitations in one area simply make us develop in another. If your legs are weak, then getting in and out of a wheelchair will only make your arms stronger. If your hearing is impaired, you will begin to write more letters. Limitations, at any age and every age, call out something in us that we never considered before.

They also alert us to the needs of others. It takes limitations to teach us to be sensitive to their needs. Once our own eyes are not as good as they once were, we want visual aids for everyone. And we will do everything we can to get them.

Being limited gives us an opportunity to learn both humility and patience. We aren't as arrogant anymore as we used to be. But we're more tenacious than ever. Because we know how hard it is to get out of a chair, walk across a room and make ourselves supper, we have learned to stop expecting instant results. We can wait. We can try again. Just as we have learned to do routine physical things differently. Now, we can keep attempting to find another way to get a Congressman on the phone, to launch a petition, to get a letter to the editor published in the paper.

Finally, limitations invite others to get involved as well. We create community out of the needs of the others and the gifts we can bring to them while they, in turn, enrich us.

We become prophets of the poor and unknown, the limited and unloved, the needy and forgotten. We become connected to the rest of the human race, all of whom are just as limited as we are, whether they know it yet or not.

Limitations are the mutual stock of the human race. By helping ourselves we also help others. By helping others we extend our own reach.

The truth is that we are only as limited as we want to be. When we define ourselves only by our limitations, we fail to see to what greater things those limitations are calling us for. What made Maggie Kuhn a modern hero was the way she transcended both age and physical boundaries to be the strong, thinking, visionary person the world badly needed.

She was the essence of vision. She was the exemplar of experience in action. She was brave and smart and persistent. She was everyone's favorite grandmother, everyone's idol, everyone's alter ego. She was what we all wanted to see come to life in ourselves as the years went by.

Age and limitations are no excuse for being a nonperson in a world that needs icons of truth and courage, vision and possibility as never before. She was what the world wanted in the elder: wisdom, truth, and the sign of a better future for us all.

*A burden of these years is the possibility that we might succumb to our limitations as if they were the real definition of age, rather than an aspect of everyone's life.*

*A blessing of these years is that we know at last what really matters, and the world is waiting to hear it, if only we will make the effort and don't give in to our limitations.*