

## SPIRITUALITY



“Age puzzles me,” wrote Florida Scott-Maxwell, the Jungian psychologist, in her journal, *The Measure of My Days*, which she kept in her eighties. “I thought it was a quiet time. My seventies were interesting and fairly serene but my eighties are passionate. I grow more intense as I age.”

And why not? If, as the years go by, we grow more and more aware of both the meaning and the meaninglessness of things, we must certainly also grow more sensitive, not less aware, of the ebb and flow of life. We do not simply ignore life as we get older, but we do engage with it at a different level, out of different motives, with a more focused heart.

If we learn anything at all as time goes by and the changing seasons become fewer and fewer, it is that there are some things in life that cannot be fixed. It is more than possible that we will go to our graves with a great deal of personal concerns, of life agendas, left unresolved. That becomes clearer and clearer by the year. Some of the family fractures will not yet have healed. Some of the words spoken in heat and haste will not have been

redeemed. Some of the friendships will not have been renewed. Some of the dreams will never be realized. So has life been wasted? Has it all been for nothing?

Only if we mistake the meaning of the last period of life. This time of life is not meant to solidify us in our inadequacies. It is meant to free us to mature even more.

To hope that in the end all the ruptures will have been repaired, however, is at best unreal. People are long gone and even longer out of touch. Nothing can be done at this late stage to reopen the conversations, let alone fix the rifts or heal the lingering wounds.

Many of the things for which we still feel responsible, even feel guilty about, we couldn't do anything to undo now—even if we wish we could. We can't put back together a failed marriage. We can't cancel the years of neglect, a lifetime of indifference, a history of disregard for the people who had a right to expect our concern. There is nothing we can do now about a lifetime of lack of contact with our children, the tension we felt with our mother, the distance we felt from our father, the jealousies and outbursts and petty irritations that marked years long past, that call up still all our own defenses. That time, those situations, are simply gone. Out of our hands. Beyond our control.

Inside the scars still smart, though. We have been hurt. We have done the hurting. We made the mistakes. We created the mess that came from them. And there is not now and never was, as far as we could see, any way to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again. So now what?

If we cannot deal directly with all the unfinished struggles of our lives, how can we possibly face the end of life with any kind of serenity?

The fact is that the unrest that accumulates over the years is the very grace reserved for the end time, the last years, the pinnacle of life. Only now can the consciousness of these wrongs really make a difference in us. Only now can this pain be made productive. Why? Because now we must deal with it all ourselves. There is no one here to forgive us anymore, no one to tell us we were right, no one to surrender to our insistence, no one left for us to refuse to consort with. Instead, it is all alive within us. Now we must go down into the deepest part of ourselves and come to peace, not with our old antagonists but, more importantly than that, with ourselves, with the conscience we have been refusing to reconcile with for years.

There are issues far more germane to what happened in our life than simply the questions of who did what to whom and why and what happened to us as a result. Instead, what must be addressed now is what we became as a result of them. Did we become a fuller human being—or did we only go through life proclaiming our innocence despite the soul song within that told us how guilty we really were?

This is the period of life when we must begin to look inside our own hearts and souls rather than outside ourselves for the answers to our problems, for the fixing of the problems. This is the time for facing ourselves, for bringing ourselves into the light.

This is the period of spiritual reflection, of spiritual renewal in life. Now is the time to ask ourselves what kind of person we have been becoming all these years. And do we like that person? Did we become more honest, more decent, more caring, more merciful as we went along because of all these things? And if not, what must we be doing about it now?

Whatever caused the rifts in our life, we had some part in the making of them. What of that demanding, narcissistic, spoiled child yet remains in us? And are we willing now to deal with the dross of it?

As the body begins to go to air, as we begin to melt into the beyond, are we able to put down those things in us that have been an obstacle between us and the rest of creation all our lives?

Can we come eye to eye with our own souls and admit who we are? If we have been selfish, can we bring ourselves to the daily discipline of caring for others? If we have been dishonest about ourselves, can we take care now to tell the real truth about ourselves? If we have been God-less, are we able to trust that the Creator of Life must therefore also be the home of our souls, and can we bow before the Life that has claim on our own?

Can we begin to see ourselves as only part of the universe, just a fragment of it, not its center? Can we give ourselves to accepting the heat and the rain, the pain and the limitations, the inconveniences and discomforts of life, without setting out to passively punish the rest of the human race for the daily exigencies that come with being human?

Can we smile at what we have not smiled at for years? Can we give ourselves away to those who need us? Can we speak our truth without needing to be right and accept the vagaries of life now—without needing the entire rest of the world to swaddle us beyond any human justification for expecting it? Can we talk to people decently and allow them to talk to us?

Old people, we're told, become more difficult as they get older. No. Not at all. They simply become less interested in maintaining their masks, more likely to accept the effort of

being human, human beings. They no longer pretend. They face the fact that now, this period, this aging process, is the last time we're given to be more than all the small things we have allowed ourselves to be over the years. But first, we must face what the smallness is, and rejoice in the time we have left to turn sweet instead of more sour than ever.

*A burden of these years is the danger of giving in to our most selfish selves.*

*A blessing of these years is the opportunity to face what it is in us that has been enslaving us, and to let our spirit fly free of whatever has been tying it to the Earth all these years.*

of being needed, that came with the daily problems. We miss being part of the work, the project, the goal, the great glorious accomplishments that no one ever heard about but us.

We miss having a place to fill.

There was a time when older people stayed in the family all their lives. At one time, you didn't retire till you retired—or, more likely, not at all. Before all these changes, we were people, not retirement dates.

True. All true. On the other hand, there was no television to keep older people informed back then. There was no Internet to keep them in touch with their far-flung family and friends. There was no way to become part of something even bigger and more important than the work they did, once the work was over. Now, people look for people who will take the time to do what society really needs to have done. They look for people who are involved in something because it is worth doing, not because it pays well.

Then we discover that if we're lonely, it may be because we have not looked around to see who needs us.

A person who is needed—really needed—is never lonely; never isolated, never without purpose in life. All we need to do is to go out and do something. The world is waiting for us with open arms.

*A burden of these years is that we will hole up somewhere and mourn our age, our change in life, our losses.*

*A blessing of these years is that we will make ourselves available to the world that is waiting for us, even now, even here.*

## FORGIVENESS



“The young know the rules,” Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote. “The old know the exceptions.”

There is a softening of heart that comes with age, not out of virtue so much as out of experience. By seventy, we not only know that no one is perfect, we know that no one can be. Not we, not they, not anybody. In fact, we learn as the years go by that life is nothing but a series of exceptions to be reckoned with, to be mediated, to be understood. Our standards are only that—standards. They are not absolutes, and those who seek to make them so soon fall in the face of their own rigidities.

We know these things now with the kind of knowledge that can only come from knowing ourselves, from the awareness of our own failings, our own mistakes, our great desire to be perfect and, whatever our efforts at anything, our own cavernous need for mercy. We know this and a great many other things as well now, all of them to be reckoned with more kindly, more lovingly, more softly. The problem is that once we know something, we can never not know it. It

requires a new kind of honesty from us. It burdens us with its truth.

Age is a veritable mineshaft of hard-won truths. Marriage is not a matter of always and only "living happily ever after," we discover. Youth is not "carefree," no matter who says so. Governments are not unfailingly worth our "allegiance," and religions, too, "sin," we learn. But maybe more compelling than any other is the awareness that having been failed against, we too have failed. We not only have much to forgive, we have much to be forgiven for—if not by others, at least by ourselves. Alfred Lord Tennyson put it this way: "Two aged men, that had been foes for life, Met by a grave, and wept—and in those tears They washed away the memory of their strife; Then wept again the loss of all those years."

It is often not so much what we have done or what has been done to us, but what we have done because of it that is the greater grief. Family feuds go on for generations, for instance, far beyond the time when anybody remembers, if they ever knew, exactly how the rift started or why. Worse still than breaches of the family are the friendships that collapse and the time that is lost between us because, unlike the family, there are no natural meeting points to bring two people back together again. Even if against our will.

Too often, in the passion of the moment, young and full of the venom of perfectionism, we demand our due. And when it does not come, we stomp testily away, righteous in our anger, martyred in our souls. Better to be a victim than a loser. We have been wronged. Someone has broken the unwritten rules of life by which we live. Someone has scratched the surface of our own perfection and left us exposed, abandoned, distant, aloof,

gone. Sometimes the other person knows what happened, and why. Sometimes he or she doesn't. We simply disappear to wait for a redress that never comes.

Then, the years pass. The more important the relationship, the more vivid the memory of the wrong. Instead of diminishing, the memory—the pain of it—grows stronger every year. This is a weeping wound, festering with time, a scar on the heart, acid in the belly. And time is passing.

Only forgiveness can stem such pain in us. An apology alone can't possibly do it. This kind of pain, held to the breast all these years, licked and nurtured, fed by time and polished by the ages, can be healed only by the wounded, not the offender, because it is the wounded who is maintaining it.

The hardness is in my heart now. It is far and beyond the hard-heartedness of the one who plunged the knife. It is mine. I own it. I fostered it. And I am suffering from it more than the person I hold responsible for the hurt.

Such is the unfinished business of relationship. The question is, why does such an old sore hurt more now that I am old than it did when it happened? Or, conversely, why am I more sensitive to it now than I have been for years? And the answer is, "because." Because I am older now. Because I feel the rush of time now. Because I see my own foolishness now. Because I realize that the distance this has put between me and someone I loved has been much more damaging to my soul than the offense could possibly have been. Because I have finally learned over time that the rules are not nearly so important in life as the exceptions to them. Because too many years of life have been wasted on what is not worth a life already. Because it is time to value exception more than recrimination.

Recrimination never really solves anything. It only evens the scales. It does not turn the need for justice into the balm of love. It does not give me back to myself, a little more humble, perhaps, and a great deal more human as well. Only forgiveness can do that.

Only forgiveness is the therapy of old age that wipes the slate clean, that heals as it embraces.

The unselfish generosity of forgiveness is a myth. Forgiveness is more important to the one who forgives than it is to the one who is forgiven.

Bitterness, once it sinks like sand in the soul, skews our balance for years to come. It is always there, scratching and digging and eating and burning the heart out of us. We smile at some, of course, but the smile is more pretense than real. We are not really open, not really loving, not really a happy person. And the end of time draws nearer.

Only we can free ourselves from the burden of bitterness old anger brings with it still. Only we can begin to look for the exceptions that make this a forgivable offense rather than immutable malevolence. Do we even remember clearly anymore what it was that happened? Are we really sure it was as intentional as we have painted it all these years? Is there nothing that explains it, that mitigates it, that makes it understandable? "Is there anyone we wouldn't love," poet Mary Lou Kownacki writes, "if we only knew their story?"

Hasn't too much time been wasted on this little bit of nothingness already? Is this the kind of thing we want to have continue to weigh us down as we spend the last of our days, the best of our days? Is this the shrunken end to which we have brought

ourselves? Is this the distance we want between us and life, now that we know how wonderful life is really meant to be?

Forgiveness puts life back together again. It is proof of our own learnings. It is sign of our own inner healing. It is mark of our own self-knowledge. It is the measure of the divine in us.

Old age tells us that we ourselves have failed often, have never really done anything completely right, have never truly been perfect—and that that is completely all right. We are who we are—and so is everyone else. And it is our forgiveness of others that gains for us the right to forgive ourselves for being less than we always wanted to be.

*A burden of these years is that we run the risk of allowing ourselves to be choked by the struggles of the past.*

*A blessing of these years is the ability to see that life does not have to be perfect to be perfect; it only needs to be forgiving—and forgiven.*