

Growing Old Gifted

Much has been said and written and researched about gifted children. Gifted adolescents also have a place in the consciousness of researchers. But it seems that there is a dearth of information when it comes to the gifted adult and giftedness in old age has not, as yet, caught our attention as a worthwhile subject of investigation. There are many stories about old people: about their loneliness, their surprising longevity, and their ability to continue to participate in social life. In other words, how they stay young but not much how they actually grow old. I don't really know what old age is anymore or when it begins. I've seen many people get old and die.

What a difference between my grandparents at age 70 and my generation. What comes after adulthood? Seniorhood? Isn't that just an older adult? What defines a senior? Getting old and dying kept being postponed I used to think that old age began about age of 70. And so it did, but right along with my own aging. People began to stay younger older or did they get older? Well I am too old to figure that out it was as though the end of the road moved further and further as I traveled it. Being an "adult" covered an ever-larger span of time. People in their seventies were fully functioning adults deeply rooted in the only reality we know. There was little time to ponder life death and eternity, which mankind is eternally concerned with, especially the gifted. We postpone these thoughts until later. But upon arrival in one's early 80s, the road one has been traveling which had been — relatively well lit, well-described, and well-worn, begins to peter out, until one is left standing in a field, no longer sure of the way. Older old age has not been well described except as a lack of young age. Moreover, at this point in the development of the species, old age is being

postponed to an ever-later time in life. I am feeling that I'm kind of on virgin ground now and there is not much, as far as I know, that can help me and others cope with these experiences now that I am 87.

Most of what I read and observe is based on the idea of staying young as long as we can. While the adolescent is looking forward to being an adult, the old person is trying hard to remain at the stage of the fully capable and participating adult. Much of what I'll call older old age consists of cumulative losses. You may lose your spouse, your friends and relatives (many of whom you've known all your life), you lose many of your capacities: your eyesight, your ability to hear; you lose your sense of smell your driver's license, and you lose at least some of your memory. You also lose status and respect.

Old age is a time of loss; it can't be denied — it should not be denied. But many try in diverse ways to hold on with all their might to their past status. It is also a time when people begin to get confused. I feel the confusion might be part of the denial, "If I can no longer really understand the loss, it may not hurt so much. I personally want to experience this period with open eyes. In our society you don't really count anymore. You feel demoted. This is a huge problem, actually typical for our society. The rug is literally pulled from under our feet. I am elaborating on this because I am literally in the middle of this.

How do you find yourself? Rather how do you find your new position in life? Is it a new period of dependency? It is in some way a repetition of childhood only instead of having a growing body, which is geared to attaining independence you have a disintegrating body where you don't know how far you are yet going to sink. When you are a child you look forward to building up to gaining. At this point, you don't know how far the

deterioration is going to go and if you are gifted you stand by it with open eyes.

When we're younger, we learn to compensate for almost everything in which we are deficient. We can also try to fix what ever may be wrong. We can fix relationships for instance by trying harder. As we get older, we can't continue to compensate for everything that we might lose. What we need to do is to find a way of facing the ongoing losses, and learn how to cope with that, rather than compensate. Some people find ways of accepting the losses by putting them into a religious framework ("It's God's will,"), but one of the ways in which the gifted have to cope with life is to look at whatever happens in a most honest way, and not necessarily finding ways in which to cover up these losses, or in which to compensate for them. Maybe that's the task of the gifted older old person: to look at things as they are, without trying to compensate or replace. I will never be young again. I will never drive a car again. My life on this planet is definitely moving toward its very end. This is probably the last stage of my life. Some of my dreams will not ever be fulfilled; in fact, one of the things we give up at old age, or perhaps sooner, is that there is plenty of change but not much progress, except in certain areas. It's not true that everything is a contrast, good and bad, god and devil, right and wrong. The universe is an experience without explanation, life the fact of it, can not be explained, When we reach old age, we have to start giving up some of our hopes. In old age we realize that we can't change the universe. Though we may make a great impact on a small part of it, even that impact needs to be seen as part of the overall unknown universe. We don't have the capacity to really understand life and the universe, but there are ways in which we express that lack of understanding — through poetry, music, and art — which resist interpretation, and are a

mystery we are creating. When we are young we still hope that we will find the stone of wisdom. We spend all our life to crack open the secret of life and in the process we have learned and invented an amazing amount of knowledge amassed, so much of it and changed the face of the Earth. We never discovered the secret of the Universe and scramble along blindly creating havoc but also much beauty. We are searching forever driven by a need to know and create busy like the little ants. From my window I see two highways. Day and night thousands of cars travel back and forth and above them is the beauty and mystery the unknown, the stars, the sun and moon. I have lived on this planet for 87 years but have not come any closer to the questions I have been asking every day of my life. “What is this life, this universe all about ? Now I really know deep in my heart that I will never know the answer. I’m trying to use or find a perspective that isn’t usually used – I think this older old age outlives our framework of definitions. I’ve always had this feeling that I don’t belong and that we can’t really interpret the mystery because we don’t have the capacity for thinking beyond the three familiar dimensions. With old age we no longer have the ability to look forward to an imagined future. We can’t fix it. And of course this is a definition of death, the ultimate finality of fate.

There’s no definition of where I am in life now. It’s beyond old—and I can’t write about it because I can’t define it. I’m saying goodbye to the last stage that’s definable. I have never felt this way before. I’m also feeling that there isn’t anybody who can identify with this. The other old people I know are either senile or too firmly rooted in the concrete! I’m living in a twilight world. There is a lack of definition. In younger years, you can get through these times by considering your future, but in old age, there is no more future to imagine. How can you live without the future?

Maybe being beyond old forces us to really understand that the mystery is a reality. What stretches beyond the door of death is an eternity of unknown. Eternity and infinity are concepts that young children often struggle with, but soon give up because they can't find the answer. During our active lifetime we forget about it, and get so involved with day-to-day living that we don't see the mysterious universe in which we are trying to put our feet on some kind of concrete ground. Living beyond old, with our eyes open, may force us to truly accept the reality of the infinite and eternal, as well as to continue to understand the fact that we can never really know the answer while we are on this earth. So, peeking around the door of death, I see the road to eternity and infinity as the reality I need to live now. From traveling miles and miles of earthly road, I will need to accept the unknown not only as the past and the present, but also as my only future. So my conclusion is that when you reach the age beyond old, your only reality is the unknown, but this has actually always been true. We don't know the past or truly the present, we don't know whether what one feels as a Self, while we are alive, will remain as such or transform into further unknowns. Integrating these understandings as a reality may be the definition of "beyond old" age.

Gifted elders have to keep their minds trained carefully, and keep on using it, and in fact I think that preservation of the mind has an additional task: it serves to maintain the self-preservation and the independence of the individual. Keeping a sharp mind becomes a way of preserving one's independence and control. Just as I consciously watch every step I take so that I won't fall, I watch every thought I think, so that I can keep control. But the need for control is also a form of mistrust. If we look at our whole life experience, and especially that of young children, we will find that often

we impose our own agenda on them; the same is true for old people. There is a point at which we must give up that control, and the only people to whom we can trustingly give it up are those who love us unconditionally. As I am rereading this article with which I have been struggling for a long time I realize that I have accepted “unconditionally” the modern concept of old age. Namely, that there is really no place in our bustling “reality“ (as we see it) for it. They become ”seniors” not the “wise elders“ whose advice is “sought“ and respectfully listened to. We “put” them into retirement homes. In fact, their children put them there. They are often not considered fully responsible anymore. There are those who feel the burden of responsibility for them and gladly turn it over to their loving children and, of course, that should be respectfully accepted. But I am sure there are many who have accumulated much wisdom but no one asks their advice. Congress does not have a section for “elders”. You don’t hear the elder’s advice. Occasionally, one hears of Elder statesmen, but we have no official place for them. We don’t hear in congress, “The “elder” stateswoman from Hawaii wishes to speak. What would happen if every administration had an elected council of elder state people? Of course, they may have the same limitations as others but chances are that there may be a spiritual dimension, a view from the greater distance. Most of all, there is less of a personal agenda because they have lived their life and done their work. They are retired.

What opportunities do we miss by not hearing our elders and what heightened experiences do they miss by not playing their appropriate role in society? How much wisdom goes down the drain unused? In personal terms, I probably have more opportunity to be heard because I am still active in my work with gifted children and am listened to because my knowledge is defined and specific. Let us just remember how many parents and

grandparents take care of their grand children or great grand children. They are the unsung heroes. I would like to end my remarks with a salute to old age.