

In this paper I would like to include verbatim my interview with a 75 year old male, whom I am calling Michael. I am choosing to include the whole interview, as I feel I would not be doing justice to this insightful and touching account of Michael's aging if I did not relate it in its entirety. Rather than describe the interviewee's life chronologically, I have left the information as presented to me. I believe that the reader will gain sufficient insight into the life-changing events that occurred for Michael through his life's journey toward old age. I will begin with the interview (see my questions in bold), and subsequently discuss concepts and theories of aging, in the light of answers given below. Lastly, I will touch on how the interview may have affected my own attitudes and beliefs about aging and the aged.

Interview with a 75 year old white male – December 8, 2004

How would you say that your former years prepared you for aging?

Yes. The experience at an early age of being around older people, grandparents, friends, relatives, and seeing the incredible difference between their skin and my skin when I was a boy, and seeing a dear family friend whom I called grandma laid out in the casket in her parlor. She died at the age of 90. I remember seeing her there and wondering about why she wasn't getting out of the coffin and slowly realizing that she had died. And then I had a mentor at a summer place who was a handyman in his seventies and we had a wonderful connection. I was 10 at the time and he showed me how to carve a 200 lb. block of ice into 25 lb. pieces using only an ice pick. And he also taught me how to drive when I was 10. I associated him with being a very wise figure and a mentor who knew a lot of things he could teach me. So I had the experience of being around older people, both men and women who were introducing me to old age just by their presence and their way of being. The preparation was that I never feared getting older, so they helped to take the fear out of it. There was something else, along with older people as mentors, teachers and models for me. From quite a young age I was on some kind of spiritual quest and that led me to eventually having a variety of mystical experiences and these were like glimpses of another reality, or a reality that was impinging on this one. By virtue of those glimpses I was always curious about God and what was beyond the sky. I used to lie for hours being fascinated by the sky, and my childhood dream was a flying dream. And I ended up becoming a theologian after years of theological study which eventuated in a wider spiritual quest to many teachers in India and in other parts of the world. I began to realize from one perspective that there is no birth or death, and from another perspective that there is. And there is aging, and aging is part of this reality; it just belongs here.

When we talk about an old soul, we can look at perhaps a 4 year-old child and say that is an old soul, and this child is somehow born with a quality of wisdom that you can find in older people, and not just in older people. So part of my attitude towards aging is always in the context of what is ageless. Illness – I had several near-death experiences so oftentimes equated with eventual dying, so I feared aging less because I had these near-death experiences, which were also preparation for aging. And also a lot of experiences of dying people, because I used to work in hospice and spent time with people who were actually dying.

What has aging been like for you?

Psychologically: One of the biggest things is curiosity. I have a curiosity about...I've always had a curiosity about where I was as a young person and what it was like to be older...so I have the curiosity about each birthday and what the next thing is that I'm going to experience as an older and aging person. I worked with death as it's associated with aging, and here again my experience in India with burial grounds, and with hospice has been psychologically freeing. There is always ...I notice that I experience ageism in the sense of not being seen, or looked over – passed over – and so there is something I experience as psychologically marginalizing in the culture as I age. It makes me sad and also angry. In some ways it is easier for a man to age oftentimes than it is for a woman. I have an easier time than my wife for example. I can get by with looking older, easier than a woman can get by with looking older. I still have the question of what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. I have always had that and probably always will. What is the best use of the life that I have left. For me its always been difficult to say no, and ageing ...in a way one of the gifts of ageing is learning how to say no, partly because there are just some things I don't want to do, or can't do. I am more selective now and will say no more frequently, whereas I might have thought I could not do that when I was young. I can also say yes to a lot of things. I think the yesthe fewer the years I have left, the more I want to say a loud YES to life.

Physically: There is obviously a shift in one's physical abilities. I was a runner for many years, but had to stop running because of knees and ankles. That was hard because I loved running. I then took up Tai Chi as one form of movement. It is interesting, because every time I have had one physical limitation, it has opened up other opportunities. For example, I now go to the gym and do some weights. There are the physical things like enlarged prostate, some arthritis and hearing isn't what it used to be. I'll probably have to get a hearing aid. Also reduced vision. It is harder to get up from the floor. The easiest way to get up is to turn round and get on my knees first, just like a baby. I don't have the same quality of energy I've had before, so there has been a gradual shift in energy. First I noticed it physically and it's a subtle thing, but I don't have the energy to do the same amount of work, whether its desk work or yard work, and spend the same amount of time that I could once before. The energy to accomplish a variety of tasks is reduced. That leads me to a deeper appreciation for stillness and silence. That's the paradox. On one hand less energy, but on the other more energy to allow and experience the stillness.

Would you say that a sense of fulfillment has developed for you as you age and that aging has allowed you to be more in touch with this?

I think that the thing I've learned most is that the more expectations I have had over the years, ironically, the less fulfilled I've felt. There have been a number of different tasks that I've completed that have been very satisfying, but what I'm finding more and more is that kind of achievement is not filling even though there is fulfillment in that, and that the more I look outside to be fulfilled, the less fulfilled I feel. So, the fulfillment comes when I feel well in myself and then I can also feel well when I'm with others. And that's fulfilling. I think that when I'm in touch with that I also feel free. And when I'm not in touch with that I also don't feel fulfilled, and then there are all these things I should have done and never did, and all the roads not taken of which there are myriad numbers. So the fulfillment is really dependent on the internal experience. My sense of fulfillment has grown as I've grown older and I have fewer regrets as I age about the roads not taken. In earlier years these regrets were present. At times more fulfillment and at other times I wake up depressed. I've always had a kind of background low-grade depression – a kind of melancholy – but I understand it more now. In some ways it's very difficult to live in this world with all the pain and suffering and not have a kind of melancholy or be mildly depressed. And I think my depression is a barometer of where I really am spiritually in the moment. Sometimes I can feel (and again there is so much paradox), I can feel well and also feel depressed simultaneously, so that it's not an either/or. This having both has developed more fully for me in latter years. It helps me to connect with people; it's a connecting device. It seems that older I get, the more I love people and connecting with them.

Do you perceive your character changing over the years? Has it got stronger and more uniquely you? Have you dropped certain parts of your character and developed others?

I have a stubborn streak in me, so I resist change. I think that's an aspect of my personality or character that has certainly become more predominant than it was. It's easy for me to love people and I think I'm even more aware of that now than I used to be. I'm less shy to acknowledge it now than I was. I find injustice intolerable and I am more aware of my intolerance to injustice as I age. I have a harsh critic but the one thing I am grateful for, I don't know whether it's part of the ageing process or not, I find that critic is still around but not as solid. That is loosening up a little bit, it's going in the opposite direction and I have more love for myself

Have you noticed any qualities you may have had as a young child coming back now?

Yes, I think the quality of wonder. I used to wonder at the flight of birds, and the ocean, and vanilla ice-cream buried in deep dark chocolate sauce. I'm having flashes of memories...of childhood walks along mountain trails, me in a choir robe, me standing beside a tree...the tree was the same height as I was when I was 4 or 5 years old and now is about 60 feet high. There was always this tension between the rascal, the mischievous one and the good boy. I would say that's still there, but I am less inclined to be good and the mischievous quality is beginning to pop out more now.

Would you say that you have grown in wisdom? I've learned to listen more. I think that listening is associated with wisdom. I mean really listening and listening both to the words and what is between the words. I think my bullshit detector has probably become more sensitive over the years. And then there is a sense of this too will pass. I look at the Bush administration and I ask myself who is going to be around 300 years from now, and that puts a little relativity to the scene. I think it's a growing in accepting that this too will pass. I think Buddha was absolutely right...this world is suffering and tears, and I don't expect that part is going to change. I think this world is always going to be something like a workshop and a place where we are somehow challenged to reach beyond....to open ourselves to other realities and not just this one.

Have you experienced a polarization between living according to your integrity and a sense of despair at ever achieving your true nature? I take it at several levels. One is that sense of acting out of my own fullness and I think my life has been a trajectory of acting more out of a sense of fullness, but on the way I have also acted out of a particular inner figure around at any particular moment, and often those figures would take over. I've had times when I have been unbelievably self-righteous, in part as a social activist, but also as a person. This is the right way and I'm going to stand for that and will not budge. That is not acting out of my own fullness. I think that now I can move a little more easily in and out of those parts and have a little more humor around them.

Have you become more sensual in any way (i.e. sensing your universe) now than you have been before in your life, or less? On the one hand stories that are told about ageing are somehow a dulling of the senses. I have the opposite experience. I can sometimes be captured by something small, like the bark of a tree, just walking on the sidewalk. I might pause and look at it. I am hypersensitive to certain sounds. Some I just hate, but I have been trying to use those as a meditation and I get through my aggravation with them. I have learned to explore where that sound comes from, and realize its the silence, and that it returns there. That is a new development. That makes me more tolerant. Touch...I find I like to touch and be touched more that I used to when younger.. Again it's a paradox, because I have numbness in some of my toes. And tasting...I love deserts and sometimes I just like to pause in eating a desert and just taste it. So the world is somehow more sensuous in a way...it isn't that it wasn't before, but it's very sensuous now.

In looking back on your life would you say that you are satisfied with it and with yourself in it, or would you have liked it different in any way? I have to say yes and no. I could drop it right now as I feel I have lived fully and am satisfied with that. I still love life and there is still a lot to be engaged with and to be lived. A great YES and a great NO. I can pat myself on the back and say that I have truly lived.

I would first like to discuss aspects of my interviewee's responses which highlight the way aging may be related to character, *the force of character*, as Hillman (2000) expresses it. Michael replies as follows to my question concerning character's transformation over the years.

I have a stubborn streak in me, so I resist change. I think that's an aspect of my personality or character that has certainly become more predominant than it was. It's easy for me to love people and I think I'm even more aware of that now than I used to be. I'm less shy to acknowledge it now than I was. I find injustice intolerable and I am more aware of my intolerance to injustice as I age.

There was always this tension between the rascal, the mischievous one, and the good boy. I would say that's still there, but I am less inclined to be good and the mischievous quality is beginning to pop out more now.

Hillman (1999) views aging as a natural process reached at a physiological point in a human lifetime. Rather than viewing the later years as ones in which an individual becomes useless and decrepit, he sees this period of life as the culmination of the force of character introduced and sustained through the journey of life. Hillman emphasizes character as images revealed in traits. Lying within the imaginal field is also an intelligence with insight and an intuitive sense of the images at work in one's life. These are one's actual truth. By investigating these traits and living them with an awareness of how they may embody aspects of our character, we can begin to access deeper levels of their existence and thus connect with our true selves. Not only does character show itself through these traits but also through the windows of our faces. Hillman (2000) cites Ishmael when he asks whether the face reveals character or hides it (p.136). Ishmael is sailing off with Queequeg to hunt for Moby Dick, and on first seeing him, becomes frightened of Queequeg due to his physical appearance. Later on though, as he studies his face, he comes to realize that you cannot hide the soul, and he sees Queequeg's heart reflected in his face. In this way character shines through and remains evident with maturing and aging. As I sit with Michael during the interview, his character shows itself to me. I can see the young child he had described behind his eyes, his mischievousness

manifesting in his smile, and his strength and trust in himself reflected in his upright body and posture. I feel his support for his truth and am touched at the way in which he accepts himself and his character. The way in which he embraces the world of images in his own way, and then lives these in his life, is evidence of how it can become possible to live one's truth. Trusting in the archetypal images of the imaginal worlds bring us to an awareness of soul and its expression in this life. Longevity becomes a kind of osmosis merging with older lives in older places and older things. "You are sinking into the sapwood, and you become one hundred, one thousand years old, as old as the tree itself". (Hillman, 2000, p. 27).

Michael says:

I think Buddha was absolutely right...this world is suffering and tears, and I don't expect that part is going to change. I think this world is always going to be something like a workshop and a place where we are somehow challenged to reach beyond...to open ourselves to other realities and not just this one.

In some ways it's very difficult to live in this world with all the pain and suffering and not have a kind of melancholy or be mildly depressed. And I think my depression is a barometer of where I really am spiritually in the moment. Sometimes I can feel (and again there is so much paradox), I can feel well, and also feel depressed simultaneously, so that it's not an either/or. This having both, has developed more fully for me in latter years. It helps me to connect with people; it's a connecting device. It seems that the older I get, the more I love people and connecting with them.

I think that both of these statements demonstrate how the connection between our ego identities, and other dimensions outside of our consciousness, can be enhanced and the boundaries between them become permeable. Arnold Mindell (2000) describes this as *wormholing* between parallel worlds. As one grows older and approaches death, these doorways open to allow in experiences of other states of consciousness. Michael's ability to hold both depression and feeling well, signifies another state of awareness which is able to contain both of these, an out-of-the-ordinary level of consciousness.

I would like to change tack now and bring our focus to the work of Erikson (Erikson & Erikson, 1998), who believed that we are moral beings attempting to balance ethical principles with negative morality. Erikson sees human development as a number of stages in which the individual may integrate the developmental and psychosocial factors inherent in the stage. Associated with each stage, are syntonic and dystonic polarities of the particular factor present at this particular stage. These range from hope to

wisdom; withdrawal to disdain. For old age these qualities would be the attainment of a sense of integrity or the state of despair; wisdom or disdain. When one has lived with integrity, life feels full and one can look back on the past with satisfaction. As Michael describes, “my sense of fulfillment has grown as I’ve grown older and I have fewer regrets as I age about the roads not taken. In earlier years these regrets were present. Now there is more fulfillment “. One can begin to see how this traces itself back to moments in Michael’s childhood experiences and the influences present for him then. He has the experience of living in a community, something which in itself can be very satisfying and supportive. This community also contained members who were aging and who were models and mentors for Michael as he describes, “through their presence and way of being”. He describes mystical experiences of lying looking up at the sky for hours and becoming fascinated and curious about God and what lies beyond the sky. These factors, already present in Michael as a young boy would, according to Erikson, together with other experiences built on these, provide the foundation for his later development of fulfillment and integrity as he ages, bringing wisdom with them. As we go through the stages we redo the ones ahead and redo the ones past (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Each stage develops from each other one and the way in which the individual approaches, experiences, and passes through each stage reflects aspects of the other stages. In each succeeding stage the child and adult are elevated to a new height. I find this patterning through Michael’s journey from childhood. Beginning with his childhood wonder, and later his spiritual search in other countries, ultimately he emerges as a theologian. Moody & Carroll (1997) speak of the *call* as a moment in a person’s life when he or she discovers a central life task, vocation or spiritual meaning in existence. Both Hillman (2000) and Erickson (1997) often associate this with the process of maturing and awakening to a particular psychological aspect of oneself, particularly as one ages. Michael appears to have had this experience early on in life. He describes this as follows.

From quite a young age I was on some kind of spiritual quest and that led me to eventually having a variety of mystical experiences and these were like glimpses of another reality, or a reality that was impinging on this one. By virtue of those glimpses I was always curious about God and what was beyond the sky.

In reflecting on his experience of satisfaction and fulfillment, Michael points out how his sense of fulfillment seems to depend more on his internal state than what is transpiring

externally in his life. The spiritual quest he describes when he was young, appears to have come to fruition here. His internal satisfaction with his life is deeply connected to his experience of fulfillment and satisfaction in what he has lived, as he ages and looks back on his life. He sees integrity and fulfillment as feeding each other. Without that there is despair, a deep sense of suffering, a hopelessness, perhaps a subtle bitterness. He wonders whether this state of despair is perhaps the grief at the loss of fulfillment and integrity.

Despite Michael's slowly decreasing physical capacities he has found that physical limitation opens up other opportunities and expands his range of exploration. Not able to run any more he takes up Tai Chi or goes to the gym. Having less physical energy than formerly and not being able to accomplish as great a variety of tasks, Michael has learned to savor stillness and silence. His capacity to embrace his limitations and allow them to lead him further into new and alternative ventures, illustrates what Hillman (2000) has described as the propensity for life in the face of death as one ages. Rather than become despairing or disdainful, Michael's *élan vital* leads him to newer pastures of love and happiness. As he says, "I could drop life right now as I feel I have lived fully and am satisfied with that. I still love life and there is still a lot to be engaged with and to be lived. I can pat myself on the back and say that I have truly lived". This of course is not always the case with the aging. There are many aging and elderly whom I have known, or with whom I have worked, who seem to go in the direction of despair and disdain, and who eventually leave life dissatisfied, fearful and unhappy. Hillman (2000) states, "we do not live zestfully on bone and muscle alone; something else, the erotic, must fire the spirit (p. 105). It is the erotic impulse that spurs creativity and fantasy. Michael speaks of the erotic, of his sensuality, as follows.

On the one hand stories that are told about ageing are somehow about a dulling of the senses. I have the opposite experience. I can sometimes be captured by something small, like the bark of a tree, just walking on the sidewalk. I might pause and look at it. I am hypersensitive to certain sounds. Touch...I find I like to touch and be touched more than I used to when younger. And tasting...I love deserts, and sometimes I just like to pause in eating a desert and just taste it. So the world is somehow more sensuous in a way...it isn't that it wasn't before, but it's very sensuous now.

In reading through Michael's responses to my questions, I am struck by references to polarities of experience. He is both depressed and feels well; he has heightened sensuality at the same time as numbness in his toes; he has both a big YES and a big NO to life. These highlight Jung's (Storr, 1983) emphases of the polarities found within the transcendent function, and also link us to Erikson's (1997) remarks concerning the conflictual struggles that we face within each stage of development, ultimately choosing one or another polarity as the attitude with which we approach life at that stage, as for example, integrity or despair in old age. Michael clearly has developed the capacity to hold some of these conflicting experiences in his view as he engages with his aging process. In recognizing his ability to do this, I become aware of my own developing capacity to accept my experience of the opposites, without losing myself in either one or the other polarity. In former years I would become stuck in one or another extreme and become despairing, believing that I would never emerge from that state again. As I grow older I am more able to realize that each extreme is impermanent, and the natural process of enantiodromia will lead me back to a more central position, which I am able now to stop at for longer and longer periods.

In writing this paper, I notice myself becoming excited about my aging and about my death. It feels enormously relieving to notice aspects of my personal identity dropping away and to be able to surrender more to the passage of time. Michael has been an inspiration for me in looking beyond the losses of certain faculties and abilities as I age, to new possibilities. His openness to the experiences that aging brings validates my own belief that it is possible to find meaning and joy, even as we let go of things important to us. Since reaching the age of 50, I have been thinking of how I have changed in my interests and proclivities. Formerly an enthusiastic dancer and party-lover, a theater and entertainment attendee, these days I find myself far more fulfilled by reading a good book or spending time at home with my son in front of the fire. Friendship has become extremely important to me and the simple pleasures in life such as Michael describe, the experiences of taste and touch. Like him, I can look back on my extremely full and adventurous life, and feel a sense of having really lived, knowing that I am still open to the new experiences that life may bring. In learning of Michael's experience with aging,

and reflecting on my own, I feel very privileged to be able to approach aging with this attitude..

Many elderly who are afraid of losing their physical abilities or mourn this loss, do close down to enjoyment and excitement in life, often feel ostracized and marginalized by society, and begin to feel invisible to most others. Some live very lonely existences, no longer cared for or visited by their friends and families. Those who have not been *called* in one way or another, who have not had a breakthrough, find themselves impoverished internally and thus spiritually, and are often terribly afraid of what aging and death may bring. They long to go *home*, to find a sense of belonging and purpose, to be at peace with themselves. In my work with the aged and dying, I have seen people suffering terribly over this. In our attempt to idealize and honor old age, let us not forget those who are living in fear or despair. I believe that the structure of our culture and society also adds to the suffering of our aged. They are often cast aside, put into residential care facilities, and over-medicated. Without community or family who can understand their predicament, support and guide them in their journeys, they feel lost and alone. I remember an old Zulu African woman mentor of mine, who always advised me when a child to have many children so that I would have somebody to care for me when I became old. Family and community support, and the wisdom that comes with life experience and soul searching, I believe are the factors that lead us through an aging process in which we can feel enriched and fulfilled. My wish is that we all may experience these so that our aging and death can be a passage into another reality or realm of existence, instead of a tormented end.

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