

Our Autumnal Years: Coming Back Home

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We face many important challenges during the Autumnal years of our (the years of late middle age: 55-70). We find a profound, unrelenting, regret. We have learned that a failure to recognize what is actually happening in our world and a failure to learn and correct our actions producing a state of remorse that never leaves our heart or soul. We have also learned something about home and life purposes. We have learned that “home” might no longer be a true home for us at a later point in our life. We are striving for the wrong thing—and may come to realize that this is the case too late in our life. There is no return to a former state of affairs. The old home no longer can accommodate our life purpose and our relationships with significant other people in our life. There is a wishing for return to a former time and place. But this can never happen. In the words of the noted American author, Thomas Wolfe, “we can never go home again.”.

How then do we learn and take actions during our Autumnal years in a manner that produces something other than regret? How do we find our true Autumnal home? It often takes a direct, irrefutable physical event to get our attention. We lose our job; our spouse leaves us; we survive a heart attack; we file for bankruptcy. To what extent do we set up conditions so that they reach a critical stage? Is this the way in which we finally pay attention? Is this the only way to learn and discover our outdated or false home? Doesn't this reliance on a crisis to change our ways lead inevitably to regret?

Many of us have been accustomed to serving for many years as “crisis managers” and “fire-fighters” in our own family or in our organization. We sometimes collude in starting or at least fuelling the fire because we are great at (and in some ways get a charge out of) managing the crisis and putting out the fire. To what extent do we do the same thing in our own personal life? To what extent do we only pay attention when our house is on fire? To what extent do we get “charged up” by the crises in our personal lives, ignoring other issues until they reach crisis proportion? This essay is about the old and the new. It is about finding our Autumnal home and about coming to terms with our past actions and the resultant regret.

Old Heroes and Old Battles

Some of us are inclined in the midst of our busy Autumnal years to give the most important people in our life almost anything other than what they really want: our undivided attention. For many years as adults, we have played the roles of breadwinner, defender of corporate values and objectives, crusader for political causes (in word if not in deed), and irate father or protective mother. We have been warriors or guardians of the hearth. We have on occasion even been true heroes. We have relished these moments. We are late midlife centurions who hunger for one more battle. It's almost as if we lost an important role in life the day that we left the caves and no longer held the job of defending our families against predators. Instead, we began to pick fights with other clans, other states and other nations so that we might have a rousing good battle.

An anti-war movie, *The Americanization of Emily*, called it straight. Julie Andrews plays the role of a British woman who falls in love with an American soldier. In a moment of absolute frustration, she talks about how foolish war is and how much we aggrandize war by declaring soldiers to be heroes and celebrate victories with grand parades. We love war heroes. We make successful generals into presidents and cloak ourselves in the flag of patriotism. Julie Andrews pleads in vain for a world that does not glorify war, but instead glorifies peace, love and home life.

Yet, peace won't sell—because it is nothing more than the absence of war. We must give peace some purpose and substance. We must somehow find a struggle that is just as exciting as war if we are to become a peaceful world. We long for war and are bored with peace. As late midlife centurion we are eager to take on anyone or anything when it threatens our child, though we are also scared to death. We want once again to become heroes in fighting against or even in escaping from the threatening entity. This is the most compelling of all the temptations being offered in our life. It evokes new dreams of battle and heroism.

We are reminded of the lessons to be learned from yet another movie. *Robin and Marion* provides a lovely depiction of Autumnal love and heroism. An aging Robin Hood, played by Sean Connery, is drawn back into battle with his old and aging nemesis, the Sheriff of Nottingham, played by Robert Shaw. They stagger out to the battlefield in rusty armour to fight one last time. Robin and the Sheriff are both too old for combat. Yet the battle begins. Within a few minutes they are both exhausted. Neither has the strength to pick up their heavy sword. Yet they somehow find the energy to renew their struggle and continue fighting to their death. Robin is victorious.

As Robin staggers off to recover once again from his war wounds, Maid Marion, now a nun, played by Audrey Hepburn, gives Robin and herself a poison so that they might die together after his triumph. The alternative would be for Robin to die alone in defeat some other day in the future. What greater joy can any man or woman experience than to die after a triumph? What greater joy for Marion than to die with the man she loves at this moment of triumph!

This greatest temptation is one of spirit. It directly appeals to the *animus* (masculine energy) inside each of us (whether male or female). We are brave and ingenious protectors—it is built into our biological makeup. Otherwise, our species would never have survived life on the African Savannah. Yet, we are also often stupid and unexpectedly cowardice in actual protective actions. We don't really know how to communicate with those we are protecting. We can suggest to our discouraged wife that she need not find another job for “we can live off my income.” This doesn't seem to be of much use, since she wants to avoid relying on me. She wants to be more “liberated.”

We can help our children when they need some money. We can offer sage advice about finances, buying a new home or repairing a garage door. We sit down over a cup of coffee to talk with our harried daughter about how she might work best with their troubled teenage son. We offer assistance even when it is not needed and feel a little hurt when we are turned down. Our husband turns to us with a fear of growing old and we “assist” him by suggesting that he spend more time at the gym or begin taking some energy-boosting pills. That is not what he was looking for when sharing this very painful concern with us.

Our children and our spouse probably know us well enough as women and men of Autumn to sometimes ask us for advice or assistance simply because they know it will make us feel better. Sadly, they may ask

for our advice only because they know of our limitations. They know that this is one of the only ways in which we feel comfortable communicating with them. Deborah Tannen (1990,1994) suggested many years ago that communication with and between adults (especially men) is often instrumental in nature. According to Tannen, men often talk to get something done, whereas women often talk to build relationships. Our children and spouse ask for our assistance in part because this is the way in which they can connect with us. Our child finally asks for help. We finally take notice. We finally agree to sit down with our wife or husband without the distraction of television, Internet or family chores. We carve out some “quality time” together.

Unfortunately, in our role as provider, defender and advisor, we don’t learn much about ourselves, about our inner life, or about our inner child. We only get a bit of an ego boost and perhaps a few good minutes with our child or spouse. It is particularly tempting for women. As autumnal women, we take on the role of the ‘man’ (animus energy) ~ instructing, directing and advising our younger family members, colleagues and friends. Our words and actions of high intensity cause harm to others, as we are seemingly compensating for the opportunities lost in the past to control, manage and make things happen. We are perceived as insensitive, unloving and impulsive, yet we believe we are doing what is right for us, correcting the wrongs from the past. Unfortunately, the acts of heroism distract us, as late midlife women and men. They lead us outward toward our enemy and upward toward things of the spirit. These acts don’t lead us downward or inward toward our feelings or toward our soul.

Feelings and Warfare

There is an important observation to be made at this point: we don’t know how we are feeling when we are waging war. When the aging Robin Hood was fighting the Sheriff of Nottingham, both men were living off their adrenaline. They were unaware of either their old debilitating war wounds or their exhaustion as men who were in no condition to fight. Like athletes who play through their injuries (and even concussions) during a particularly important game, Robin and the Sheriff were oblivious to their pain. Even at the end of battle we don’t know how we feel. The joys of victory are often quite elusive. While we are fighting for victory, much of the excitement comes from the process of doing battle rather than from the outcome of victory. Even as observers rather than participants, we experience a psychological let down at the end of an exciting sporting event. The game only makes sense, when viewed from the midst of the contest, when the outcome is still in suspense.

In his book *Behave*, Robert Sapolsky (2017, P. 44) conveys the core idea behind his research that “your heart does roughly the same thing whether you are in a murderous rage or having an orgasm.” He adds that the “opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference”. We now know why human beings are unable to recognise their emotions and differentiate between intense sorrow and joy during the battle. No wonder we feel let down after a game. No wonder we wish, at some level, that the battler would never be over. We will not be able to do our souls work during moments of intense sorrow, joy, love or hate. Ironically, there is an opportunity to turn inward when we are indifferent—or at least at peace with our self.

As warriors we are particularly immune to pain and have a hard time identifying our true feelings. The German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was by many accounts, one of the great heroes of the 20th Century. He helped to lead the conspiracy against Adolph Hitler during the Holocaust. He wrote a poem about the confusion between joy and sorrow while waiting for his execution in a prison before the end of World

War II. He notes that it is often hard to distinguish between intense heat and intense cold when we first touch a hot burner or piece of ice. Intensive joy and intense sorrow have similar properties when first experienced in the midst of struggle. We describe this same type of confusion in the following stanzas (based on Bonhoeffer's poem):

Both joy and sorrow strike us now.
They each can touch our soul.
Feel joy and sorrow burn your heart.
Like heat and frost's first toll.

See joy and sorrow hurled from heights.
Past heaven's cosmic reach.
See feelings paint a flaming arc.
Their light at last will teach.

Compelling, strong, these feelings grow.
Past heaven's cosmic reach.
See feelings grasp our tender heart
Their touch at last will teach.

Both joy and sorrow strike us now.
They each can touch our soul.
Feel joy and sorrow burn your heart.
Like heat and frost's first toll.

Joy is enmeshed with fear.
And sorrow can be sweet.
These feelings often intertwine.
Their dance at last will teach.

Our feelings can teach at last. The interweaving dance of joy and sorrow is one of the most important lessons we can learn about ourselves. Recent neuroscience research suggests that the framework for both joy and sorrow is to be found in a subcortical area of the brain called the amygdala. This almond-shaped

structure serves as a monitor for potentially powerful stimuli that might harm us or provide us with great joy. The key role played by the amygdale in our emotional life was first persuasively presented by Joseph LeDoux (1998). Yet it is not in battle or in reading about the amygdala that we will learn these lessons. Bonhoeffer was only able to reflect on these feelings in prison, after he knew that the plot against Hitler had failed and that he soon would die. His circumstances plunged him deeply into soul work and, as a result, he wrote some of his most poignant and soul-wrenching prose and poetry while in prison.

When we are at war, it is hard to distinguish between joy and sorrow. This distinction is much easier to engage in the neuroscience research lab or in our daily, low-stress lives. These soaring feelings that arise in battle are matters of spirit rather than of soul. Our feelings are confused. In the swirl of events, we don't even know if we are wounded. Adrenaline courses through our veins and we do things we never thought possible – playing through our pain and overlooking our hurt and fears. We are truly heroes, but also learn little about what resides inside us—other than courage and determination. At the end of *Robin and Marion*, Robin understands Marion and fully appreciates her undying love for him. He finally realizes that his life holds meaning only in his struggle for justice. He dies happily knowing that his life ends with one final victory.

The rest of us might not be as fortunate as Robin. We might not have a Marion in our life to serve as our final guide. We might die without gaining much wisdom about our need for battle and victory. We will learn little about ourselves from battle and will probably only learn very much if we lose the battle or if we run away or refuse to fight. As warrior we lose consciousness (die) before moving past heroic stances. The woman that Robin loved fully understood that he was unlikely to ever move beyond this heroic point of consciousness until he faced his own death. Perhaps Marion also recognized that she would never be able to attend to Robin again after he had been wounded in battle. Was this her own “high point” – she leaves the convent so that she might return to the real world and be with the man she loves one more time. Marian is filled with both joy and sorrow – as is Robin. So, they died in each other's arms.

What then are ways in which we learn about joy and sorrow? How do we become fully cognizant of the intertwining of these feelings and about all our other feelings and all the other dimensions of our inner life? Sadly, as happened with Robin (and perhaps Marian), it often requires a death (physical or psychological) to bring us to our inner feelings. We experience this in our midlife depression—a physical and emotional manifestation of regret. Or it might take an external event that crushes our ego and even the identity we have built over the years. We mourn the loss of something that is important to us. We have lost an old innocence and are moving with ambivalence to a new level of consciousness. We have lost our old home and must find a new one.

Coming Home to Grieve

We may fear (and even anticipate) that our Autumnal home is no longer very inviting. It may be saturated with sadness and self-loathing. And who else lives in this home: our significant other and perhaps children who have not yet left home. What are they likely to think and feel about the changing status of the Autumnal man or women? Are they angry? Do they feel vulnerable? The widely read book of the 1960s, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is ostensibly about a father, Robert Persig (2009), who is searching for quality in his life. Persig's search on a motorcycle includes a son, who rides on the back of the bike. The father is seeking enlightenment, but his son sees nothing but his father's back while clinging

to him on the motorcycle. Why can't the Zen-enlightened Persig see that he is depriving his son of his own experiences in life? How can he be so eloquent about the world of abstraction, while being so blind to the needs of his own son? How could he be blind to the fact that the world he wanted to love includes his son too?

There are essentially three kinds of losses that we are likely to face (or at least fear) as we enter our Autumnal years. First, we must grieve the losses over which we have no control. We mourn the loss of friends, parents or a job. It is usually during our Fifties, Sixties and Seventies that we begin to face this first kind of loss. We must face the death of our parents and of people our own age who we know and love. We often grieve the loss of opportunities to say good-bye to them. In some sense, as we bid farewell to our colleagues (as well as our parents and other people of their generation) we are saying good-bye to a part of ourselves (Freud, 1917). This type of loss often portends the grieving in which we must begin to engage as we start to bid farewell to parts of ourselves during our Autumnal years.

There is a second kind of loss. We grieve losses over which we do have control. We make tough choices between different life options. We must prune the garden of our life. This second type of loss requires a different kind of grieving. Our colleague, Bob Shukraft (personal communication) (who died at a much too early age) suggested that the primary developmental tasks in the first half of our life concern the expansion of our capabilities, whereas the developmental tasks of the second half of life generally concern the difficult choices we must make between different life options. To make room for our new dreams and our new voices, we must get rid of several outmoded parts of ourselves. We must weed our garden. We must create a new home for ourselves. We must create this new home in collaboration with those we love.

We find it hard to throw out old papers, computer files or memorabilia. We usually drag them from one organization to the next and from home to home. The so-called "object-relations" psychotherapists write about "transitional objects." They suggest that we tend to carry something from our old home to our new home in order to provide some continuity between the old and new. Classic transitional objects include teddy bears, special blankets and a favourite doll. As adults, we also have our transitional objects. Our own teddy bears (be they our favourite books, photo albums or an old set of golf clubs) play an important (though often unacknowledged) role in our transition to a new home. They occupy valuable space and gather dust.

Yet some of these papers, files, playthings and memorabilia are treasures. We need to be careful about what we discard. This is what George Vaillant (2012) was referring to when he described the role played by generative guardians in our society. The 'Delete File' function on the computer that we use might ask: "Do you really want to eliminate this file?" We need to ask ourselves a similar question. Sometimes old projects link again (or for the first time) to new-found or re-emerging interests. These items may move to the top of our list. When we throw out old files, we are also getting rid of old dreams that were never fulfilled or that received little attention. Many of us get stubborn during our Autumnal years: we don't want to give up something, even though it is no longer of interest to us or relevant to our career.

This is not limit to the realm of things and materials. Transitional objects can be relationships, expectations, practices and beliefs. Some of us hold on the past or present-knowing that it is not serving us. Yet the fear of creating space in our present, so that the 'new' can enter, is stopping us from the

courageous act of letting go. Our storerooms, bookshelves, table drawers, calendars and minds are filled to the brim. It is time to take them out, sort through them and ask important questions—before making a choice to discard or preserve.

World expert on organisation, Marie Kondo suggests asking ourselves this question when trying to discern what to keep or discard: “Does this spark joy?” If not, then say thank you to it and gently let it go. She believes “The space in which we live should be for the person we are becoming now, not for the person we were in the past.” The Soul’s journey is more about subtraction than addition. At some point, we need to set aside our teddy bear (or give it lovingly to our grandchildren). The transition is now complete. Spring will never be reawakened if we don’t find a new home in which to live while welcoming the Spring. We can’t wear the old purple—but must find a new shade of purple—perhaps worn by us in a new way.

A third kind of loss must be addressed. As women and men of Autumn, we grieve the continuing loss of innocence as we learn about ourselves by following our anima and animus guides and acting upon voices from other rooms. This third loss requires a painful recognition that old conceptions, assumptions and even values may no longer be appropriate or valid. We often assume that by this point in our life we have no more major personal lessons to learn. This, however, is usually not the case, unless we choose stagnation over generativity. The new learning is often difficult because we now may have less energy than we did when we were younger.

In attending to these new lessons, we must bid farewell to other more assuring and continuing aspects of our life. Parts of our self that are quite mature and that require little pain or new learning may no longer be primary. Thus, we must prune some parts of our overgrown garden that are particularly fragrant and beautiful. We must allow the seeds of other plants that may seem thornier and initially less beautiful to germinate. During our Autumnal years we must face shifting priorities, voices from other rooms, and reappraisal of dreams and aspirations that were dominant earlier in our life. All of this requires new learning, along with the loss of an old, secure sense of self. We leap into the storm. Like King Lear, we go a little mad, in hopes of eventually finding a new form of sanity.

Relishing the Past and the Mundane

Let’s turn to an intriguing term: *relish*. What does it really mean to relish and isn’t this promotion of relishing simply a return to the old home? There is a bit of irony (and seeming contradiction) here. Midst the grieving for that which is lost during our Fifties and Sixties we should also appreciate (relish) and celebrate that which provides continuity from the past and the simple and instructive things which we chose to do during our Autumnal years. This appreciating, relishing and celebrating is the more mature version of the transitional teddy bear.

During our Autumnal years, we have the opportunity to acknowledge and assure continuation of that which remains good and relevant from our past, while preparing for that which is changing. In the midst of our Autumnal years, we must balance challenge with support. We can relish the rich moments in our live that remind us of that which is best and most distinctive in our past life. These relishing moments and simple actions and gradual progressions that follow are elements of a meditative process. Simple acts and gradual progressions in building a new home are just as much a vehicle to the soul as our more dramatic grieving of that which we have lost or abandoned.

What might these simple actions and gradual progressions from past to present and future look like. We might choose at times to do things in the old time-honoured way. We might choose to get rid of those shrubs that pose a fire hazard or block our view. Do we delegate tree pruning at our home to a professional in the field or do it our self? Do we pick up our grandchildren from day care in order to save our very busy daughter the hassle of completing one more chore? What about that meal that we want to cook for that neighbour who is now alone (after her husband passed away)? Should we still tend to the dishes in the sink, waiting to be washed?

None of this is a waste of time. These mundane activities may be the “royal road” to new insights and soul work. Grieving and rebirth take time and energy. They might best be done when we are trimming trees or chopping away the brush, picking up our grandchild and listening to their recounting of a day at school and after school care, cooking that simple dish our neighbour loves. For some of us, our soulful work might be done while we are playing house with our grandchildren; when we are washing the dishes; or when we sit by the fireplace with a loved one during a quiet winter eve or strolling along the beach.

Conclusions

Grieving is paradoxical. It is a source of joy as well as sorrow. We all know the bittersweet experience of reminiscence. We must honour (and grieve for) that which we have left behind-before we move on to something new. Bill Bridges (1980) describes the “neutral zone” as a place in our life through which we must pass during a major life transition. While living in this neutral zone we must honour what remains from the old, especially the common places where the soul lives. We must often look backward before we can be enthusiastic about new parts of our lives. This is a mature form of retaining a transitional object. Bridges strongly asserts that we will never leave the neutral zone until we have celebrated the past. As mature women and men we often best appreciate our past and prepare for our future by doing simple things and finding new insights within the mundane. In this way, we are not over-attached to the past nor over-fear the future. It is in this present moment that Spring re-enters our Soul and refreshes our Spirit.

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