

ONWARD! WITH SPIRIT

Into the Full, Rich Wholeness of Life

Specter of Decline • Self-Confrontation • Self Reformation
The Return of Magic • Practical Wordly Wisdom • Transcendence
Emancipated Innocence • Mediation • Dying Well

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Let's sit at the feet of this world and learn

By Denise Bissonnette

in *The Wholehearted Journey: Bringing Qualities
of Soul to Everyday Life and Work*

If only we could sit at the feet of every experience
and learn

Even as we resist its lessons, refuse its counsel

And declare ourselves the master of our own
lives,

Life will find a way to break the shell around our
hearts wide open.

It will astound or confound us, startle or surprise
us,

Shake and awaken us to the very core.

With sudden unemployment or an unexpected
promotion,

By way of divorce or a reconciliation,

Through an illness or through healing,

On the wings of a miracle birth or the loss of a
loved one,

We will find ourselves humbled, ungrounded,
unsure.

At a loss for words, with eyes wide open,

With hands unclasped and our hearts soft, tender
and teachable again.

There we will be, sitting at the feet of our own
lives,

Unable to do anything but learn

In every situation, there is a lesson.

At any moment, even now, there is a teacher like
a hovering angel.

Let's not run, hide or look away.

Let's sit at the feet of this world and learn!

Introduction

“Two old, well-worn, muddy shoes,” he replied.

The teacher had asked someone to choose any descriptive element in the story he had just read to begin our discussion.

Why did the story include a description of the main character’s shoes in this detail—two old, well-worn, muddy shoes? What does this say about the character, an older man who, unbeknownst to anyone, was on a journey—actually on a mission of some sort—intent on getting to his destination and willing to walk miles along a stream that was leading him deeper and deeper into an enchanted forest?

A lively conversation took place between the other students as they jumped from one symbolic phrase to another. I understood not a word. All of us in the class were over age 50, eager to learn about the growth that occurs in the second half of life. But I wasn’t expecting to listen to stories, much less fairytales. “This doesn’t make any sense.” I gritted my teeth during the drawn-out metaphoric discussion. “Just tell me what I need to know.”

And yet, years later, despite my earlier display of exasperation and impatience, I proposed to teach a class based on stories called elder-tales to a group of men and women over age 60 at the local senior center, beginning with the same collection of stories from which the two old, well-worn, muddy shoes came. I wanted to teach something different, unique—something I instinctively knew I needed to learn.

Thus began my journey. Wearing fashionable yet practical and comfortable well-cushioned flats, I tiptoed along a narrative creek that took me to the fountainhead of fairytales, myths, legends, and fables. Off came the shoes as I splashed in pools of contemporary movies, poems, and song lyrics. I kept walking, determined to deepen my knowledge and share what I learned with others.

If you are wondering about the personal growth and spiritual development that occurs in the second half of life, I promise you a view that is distinctly different from other perspectives contained in many fine books about the second half of life. In this book, supported by thorough research, I reveal that with each day, life event, opportunity, and obstacle we encounter we are growing, not declining. With each passing year, we are maturing, evolving, and moving toward healing and wholeness.

There is no such thing as a *decline* in the second half of life.

Without a doubt, as we age, we face physical and mental challenges. But while there is certainly deterioration in some areas of functionality, these “declines” are robustly offset by overall growth as we mature and become wiser, more human and more humane. Just as hearing becomes more acute when sight diminishes, the heart becomes more open and receptive as the mind slows its processing and begins to see the larger picture and greater meaning of life. The challenge is to embrace the continuing gifts we receive from a life fully lived.

Growth sometimes feels like swimming upstream in murky water. We need help to see that each experience we have in the second half of life—including suffering, setbacks, and celebrations—offer us (and the people we live with and love) an opportunity to expand our capacity for compassion, to know the depth of joy and despair, and to improve our imperfect health and social systems until the day we die.

“It’s time for a better, truer, and more motivating paradigm—not a rosy, everything-is-wonderful perspective, but a clear-eyed view that acknowledges the hard realities of growing old while at the same time celebrating its benefits, pleasures, and rewards,” says Eugene Cohen, M.D., a researcher and clinician who conducted cutting-edge research on aging at George Washington University reported in his book, *The Mature Mind*. It was with this recommendation that I became curious about the age-old wisdom contained in the collection of stories called elder-tales, compiled and interpreted by Allan Chinen, M.D., in his book, *In the Ever After: Fairy Tales and the Second Half of Life*.

Most of us are simply living our life as it comes. We’ve learned to take it one day at a time. We are absorbed and focused on our individual life and the lives of our friends and family. And so, it’s virtually impossible to see the themes that reveal how we are evolving and developing in ways that have been known since humans first walked this planet. In the olden days, one of the ways people shared this knowledge was to sit around campfires and listen to stories.

Today, we typically take a class. In January 2010, I began teaching a class called “Once Upon a Lifetime: Tales for the Mid-Life Traveler,” for people enrolled in the SAGE program at our local community college. SAGE stands for Senior Adults Growing... I say, EXPONENTIALLY! The class is organized around the themes in Dr. Chinen’s book.

In each class, students listen to stories that give voice to the subtle, almost imperceptible, clues of how each of us continues to evolve. To complement timeless elder tales, I include the results of research and more deeply explore the

developmental tasks individuals must master in the second half of life—in the years after 50.

Together, elder tales and contemporary research present a sound bio-psycho-social map of the road we travel in the second half of life.

The stories I tell in class and in this book, both ancient and modern, warn of the difficulties and dangers while previewing promise and potential. They portray what can be, and not what simply is. They break the bonds of social convention and help you unlearn what is no longer relevant and offer a vision of what is yet to come.

Any book about the second half of life would be incomplete without personal stories that reveal these themes via our hopes and dreams, fears and failings, and allies and antagonists. In each class, I'm inspired by the real-life stories participants share that make clear the growth, challenges, and magic that happen in the second half of life.

When I reflect on my own life, I am astounded that the universal themes conveyed in elder-tales, contemporary research, and modern stories are playing out there, too. As you read my personal stories, I encourage you to look into your life. As one of my favorite teachers, Maxine Clair, says, "Begin to notice and be amazed" how your life is unfolding and how you are evolving.

No! I exclaimed when I read a controversial article in *The Atlantic* by Ezekiel J. Emanuel "Why I Hope to Die at 75."

[...] *"Living too long is also a loss. It renders many of us, if not disabled, then faltering and declining, a state that may not be worse than death, but is nonetheless deprived. [...] We are no longer remembered as vibrant and engaged but as feeble, ineffectual, even pathetic."*

Emanuel, like so many of us, has no affirmative vision of what it is like to grow older. He anticipates decline and debilitation and so declares defeat.

Without any vision of what succeeds youth and its heroic paradigm, the second half of life often seems like a slide into oblivion—with perhaps a nostalgic remembering of one's accomplishments and regrets. Growing older appears to be a time only of deterioration, which for those who protest this prospect, is to be avoided at all costs. In a society centered on youth, the older individual is caught between the specter of decline and the dream of eternal youth.

The stories you will read in this book offer a dramatic alternative to this grim view—a new image of maturity, centered on wisdom, self-knowledge, and transcendence.

These are the virtues of an archetypal figure long overlooked in modern society, but equal in importance to that of the Hero—the Elder.

Here is the journey of the elder, on the road each of us is traveling. I first discovered these lessons when reading Dr. Chinen’s book as he revealed, through stories, the magic that occurs in the second half of life. I’ve organized this book around these themes.

Deal with the specter of decline and the reality of multiple losses...and allow magic to return.

We enter the second half of life with the perception that old age equals decline and loss (for example, poverty, grief, illness, and retirement). Many of us are stymied and stagnant because we can’t or won’t or don’t know of a way to deal with the specter of decline. Others declare war and refuse to acknowledge the reality of loss and steadfastly march to the beat of the anti-aging drums. With eyes tightly focused on the past, the glory of what is yet to come remains elusive. Yet, painful as they are, “losses” clear the way and make room for unexpected developments.

Self-confrontation and self-reformation opens the door for magic to step in.

In virtually every story, including yours and mine, the theme of self-confrontation and self-reformation appears. To induce self-confrontation, you must take a courageous look at what happened in the past; sometimes do the exact opposite of what “the type of person I am” would do; at other times, be willing to experience an extraordinary opportunity; and often take the painful steps of healing after an arduous ordeal or tragedy. What happens next is magical. Self-reformation—that is, re-forming yourself—is a task and feature of the second half of life.

Magic occurs when you turn from a preoccupation with yourself to an empathic understanding of others so you may offer your practical worldly wisdom in a way that will be well-received.

As you break free of personal ambitions you naturally turn to helping others, typically as a mentor to someone younger who is seeking your guidance. Sharing what you’ve learned with another is a compelling desire of the soul. However, to serve well as a mentor, you must slowly acquire a brand-new set of skills. You need these skills to become effective in offering your life lessons and experience with kindness, a long view, and with a deeper understanding of self and others.

Transcendence initiates a special kind of magical growth, often described as “transpersonal development.”

Transpersonal growth refers to development that transcends, or goes beyond your familiar, well-constructed understanding of how the world works. When you give yourself permission to look deeply into human experience and grapple with transcendent insights, you intuitively adopt a greater vision of yourself in the community, of the place of society within human history, and of human history in the cosmos.

The magic of childhood returns when you break free from the pragmatic rationality that dominates the middle years and experience emancipated innocence.

Wonder and delight returns. Spontaneity and sagacity are integrated. Newly discovered creativity and mature judgment are wedded. This stage of growth resembles what many spiritual traditions call enlightenment, and though rare, it is one of the highest forms in which magic returns and remains in the second half of life.

Understood and nurtured, emancipated innocence blossoms into a renewal of the mythical state of mind, more mature than when it occurred in childhood, almost

mystical in nature. Yet, as delightful as it may sound, enlightenment is not the final goal. True magic comes next.

Genuine magic happens in mediation—linking this world with the next and integrating your inner and outer worlds.

You may be surprised to find out that an enlightened state of being naturally turns you toward working for the betterment of society. Rather than complaining about social problems, you engage in work that may more precisely be called social movements. My friend, the Reverend Don Horrigan, expresses this theme well when he writes in his 70s: "I saw the connection between my own inner journey and the outer manifestation of that journey. My work in hospice patient care is becoming more prominent, my funeral ministry is growing, and my community involvement is expanding."

Dying well—a special and sacred time.

It's hard to believe that dying is a stage of growth and development. We think that it's—well—the end. I wrap up this book with what I've learned from reading wonderful contemporary books on death and dying, and what I hope to make possible when my time comes. I will close with a fanciful story of how it all turns out written in a mythical and magical state of mind.

In each of these areas, all of us have moments of growth. Typically, we spend a couple of years in each stage to fully learn its lessons; and in some areas, we may linger for much longer as we develop ourselves deeply. And it's true, that in some areas we remain neophytes. For example, some of us will never master the skills to offer practical wisdom in a way that others can embrace. We may admire those who tell us how they helped a younger person learn a new skill or reunite with a family member and wish we could do the same.

Some of us will never have a transcendent experience until, perhaps, in the days or hours just before we die. Yet, we find ourselves listening in rapt amazement when someone tells us of a time he or she made contact with the spirit world.

Some of us may remain crotchety, withdrawn, or fearful and never truly experience the childlike freedom that becomes possible in the stage of emancipated innocence. And yet when we recall the things that delighted us as a child, we remember and get a sense of what that might be like for us now.

It's only within a community that we find the totality of lived experiences that these tales tell us about. It takes a village of matured adults to reveal all of what elder-tales have to teach us. And so, we must learn from each other about what is possible. We collectively constitute the full spectrum of development these stories symbolize.

Imagine that you are in my class listening to the stories I tell, and your mind naturally goes to areas of your own life in which you are facing these challenges or witnessing your movement to the next stage of growth.

As you read this book, allow yourself to be inspired by the possibility and indeed, the probability of new growth; that magic will and does appear; and that there is purpose and meaning to all of your life's experiences.

Picture yourself years from now wearing two old, well-worn, muddy shoes, having successfully navigated each mountainous challenge, slippery slope, and gooey quagmire—and knowing that you undeniably have lived life fully. You smile, understanding that every step and misstep was inevitable. See yourself basking in the light of the self-satisfaction and gratitude that comes from recognizing the milestones that have marked your journey.