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New Ideas on the Spirituality of Aging

Three secrets of aging and how conscious elders become spiritual activists

John Robinson

My generation of Elders has entered a new developmental stage in the human life cycle. It's an amazing time for spiritual awakening! Driven by our unprecedented longevity and three powerful psycho-spiritual forces, we are starting to experience a new kind of aging, creating possibilities for social and metaphysical transformation unparalleled in human history. As a psychologist, minister, and mystic, I'd like to share with you four rather startling revelations I've had in recent years about this new spirituality of aging: *The Mystical Nature of the New Aging*, *The Coming Reality of a Sacred World*, *How Conscious Elders Become Sacred Activists*, and *the Great Work of Creation Calling Us to Renew the World*.

The Mystical Nature of the New Aging

We Elders are living in an extraordinary time. For nearly all of recorded history, only one person in ten could hope to live to the age of sixty-five. With the medical and dietary advances in the last one hundred years, however, nearly 80% of us in developing countries will live to 65, and if we get to 65, we will average 16 more years for men and 19 for women. But what is this revolution in longevity for? Is aging just about getting old, falling apart and dying? The answer I've received from hundreds of older people in Conscious Aging workshops and conferences across the country is, "No! This is our time for profound psychological and spiritual renewal." Why is that?

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I believe that three powerful psycho-spiritual forces now drive this New Aging. I call them *The Three Secrets of Aging* because the media (and most new Elders) are focused instead on overcoming aging with creams, exercise, vitamins, hormones, cosmetic surgery, and positive thinking, but that only works for a while. In the end, aging wins. But that doesn't mean we lose, rather we have to surrender to a life transforming process. What are these three forces? They are: *Initiation, Transformation, and Revelation*.

Secret I. Initiation:

The first secret of aging says, "Aging is an initiation into a new and extraordinary stage of life. The events and processes of aging—changing bodies, fading identities, and losses of all shapes and sizes—represents an initiation into an entirely new dimension of life, a time of personal and spiritual growth unprecedented in human history. While aging may represent the end of our old life, it is also the beginning of a new one."

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To really appreciate this secret we need to examine the nature of initiation. In its simplest form, initiation means being moved from one state or stage of life to another. Indigenous cultures understood this better than we do and created rituals to place initiation in a sacred context, like rites of passage.

For "modern" Elders, retirement, aging bodies, and accumulating life changes can represent powerful and disorienting initiation experiences. One day in our aging we realize that everything has changed: we have left the old world of middle-aged goals and values for a completely new and unknown land. Huge questions rise up inside: "Who am I now?" "What do I do with myself?" "What is this time for?" "How will I face my own future, including decline and death?" But here's the magic: if we can pay attention, we will discover that an unexpected adventure in consciousness has also begun.

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Secret II. Transformation.

The second secret says, "Aging Is a transformation of self and consciousness. It is enlightenment in slow motion. It begins spontaneously, naturally and subtly. As we wake up from the illusions of mind, we transition from personal identity to the consciousness of Divinity, giving birth to the enlightened Elder." This secret is as enormous as it is unexpected. Let me try to unpack it a little.

Aging is indeed a transformation of body, self and consciousness. The body part, of course, is obvious. I ask conscious Elders if they've seen their latest photos; they report that the first glimpse of their current visage is always a shock! But more importantly, as we age, we surrender our old identity, schedule, roles and purposes. In the process, our sense of self changes. For the motivated and prepared, however, this natural emptying of age presents some wonderful opportunities! No longer

constrained by the rules of the middle years, we have the freedom to do and be whatever we want. Growth possibilities abound as the unfinished self blossoms with new interests, goals and inspirations. My older friends are doing the most amazing things that I never would have expected!

But the spiritual/mystical dimension is even more astonishing. With the dissolution of our familiar identity, social status and long-term goals - structures of mind that dominated our consciousness for decades - we can become conscious of consciousness itself, that pure space of awareness that held all those thought forms.

Then, if we are perceptive, we discover that this consciousness is not just in me, I am in it, and it is divine, a realization the mystics have described for millennia and one that is central to enlightenment. Given its nature and origin, experiencing consciousness as divine progressively changes you. In fact, it is our opening into Christ Consciousness, Buddha Mind, and the Divine Human. We are not who we think we are - we the awakened consciousness of the divine universe - timeless, ageless, and transformative. And there's more.

Secret III. Revelation.

Carl Jung suggested that aging would not exist without an evolutionary purpose, and I believe one of the most important purposes of aging is to transform our experience of the world itself. More to the point, Pierre de Chardin, the French philosopher, priest and paleontologist, considered evolution to be a spiritual process leading to the "divinization" of the world. Our third secret addresses this evolutionary spiritual purpose directly. It says, "Aging is a Revelation of Heaven on Earth. As the veil of thought dissolves in conscious aging, Heaven on Earth begins to shine everywhere and the world is sacred once again. We have come home from our long journey through the world of thought and invite others to join us in a new consciousness of Creation."

This realization, too, is incredible. Who can possibly believe in Heaven on Earth? But let me tell you, our spiritual teachers have been describing Heaven on Earth for eons. For example, Jesus proclaimed, "The father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth and people do not see it...What you look for has come, but you do not know it." Ramana Maharshi, the famous Hindu sage added, "This is the Kingdom of Heaven.

The realized being sees this as the Kingdom of Heaven whereas the others see it as 'this world.'" And Thich Nhat Hanh, the beloved Buddhist monk, advised, "You don't have to die in order to enter the Kingdom of God. It is better to do it now when you are fully alive...The Kingdom doesn't have to come and you do not have to go to it. It is already here...There is not one day that I do not walk in the Kingdom of God." The reader will discover scores of similar pronouncements in *Finding Heaven Here*.

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The Coming Reality of a Sacred World

If Secret III tells us that Heaven on Earth has already arrived, why don't we see it? First of all, we do see it but fail to realize what we are seeing. We tend to experience Heaven on Earth when we are in love; incredibly happy; in the midst of heightened natural beauty; at the birth of a child; during the runner's "high;" or with spontaneous mystical experiences. Does this list jog your memory? Abraham Maslow, the father of humanistic psychology, called these moments of altered consciousness "peak experiences" and found that, with guidance, nearly everyone could remember them. Sadly, we typically dismiss these Heavenly glimpses, telling ourselves that it was "just" a beautiful day or temporary mood.

Why are people so blind? For most of our lives, we're trapped in that dominant thought world described above. As human beings developed their amazing capacity for thought, we fell in love with ideas, creating a virtual second reality in the mind. Over twenty-five hundred years ago, Buddha observed, "We are what we think. Everything we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world." In this thought world, we disproportionately experience our concepts, beliefs, stereotypes and prejudices in place of reality: we see a "run-down building," an "old man," a "forest," a "chair" or "table," an "alcoholic." These concepts filter our experience so completely that we stop witnessing the infinite beauty of what is right before us. Buoyed by the transformations described in *Three Secrets of Aging*, conscious Elders are beginning to break free from these "chains of illusion."

How Conscious Elders Become Spiritual Activists

Riding the energies and revelations of this new evolutionary consciousness is a growing movement of older people envisioning aging as a time for personal and spiritual growth. I witness this collective new inspiration when I present at Conscious Aging conferences and workshops across the country, including Sage-ing International, The Conscious Elders Network, The International Conference for Ageing and Spirituality, Creation Spirituality Communities, and The Mankind Project. This new consciousness is everywhere!

The goal of the Conscious Elders movement is to age courageously, consciously, and in community, transforming both our aging and our work in the world. We lovingly embrace workshop topics like "Releasing the Identity and Roles of the Middle Years;" "Discovering the Language and Wisdom of the Aging Body;" "Learning to Grieve and Survive;" "Finding the Hidden Meaning and Value of Change;" "Life Review, Understanding and Repair;" "Growing the Unfinished Self;" "Discovering Meaningful 'Work;'" "Clarifying Religious and Spiritual Beliefs;" "Leaving a legacy;"

"Preparing for Death;" "Opening the Heart;" "Speaking Our Moral Voice," and "Staying Involved as We Age."

What does all this mean? Here's the answer: we don't get wise just by getting old, but if we do this inner work, a whole new life of creativity, wisdom and spirituality opens up to us. And that leads to the importance of "giving back."

Conscious Aging organizations encourage Elders to contribute their time, energy, wisdom and experience in giving back to the world in countless ways. Elders volunteer at food banks, mentor youth, meditate for world peace, and start discussion groups. We pursue political action on causes like climate change, income equality, homelessness, racism, ageism, sexism, sustainable living, education, and world peace. There is virtually no limit to our volunteer opportunities or the world's needs.

This question of how to "give back," however, is a challenging one. When I do workshops designed to help Elders find their calling, I ask, "How many of you have experienced moments of doubt or burnout in your "giving back" activities, evidenced by declining interest, loss of motivation or commitment, or questions about the real effectiveness of what you're doing?" Virtually everyone's hand goes up, which inspired me to examine the role of discernment.

From my own unique blend of professional experience, I view discernment from a spiritual and depth-oriented perspective where it implies a prolonged and heart-felt search for one's truest nature, vocation or calling. "Who am I?" "Why am I really here?" "What did I come here to do?" How do we respond to these questions? Here's one brilliant answer eloquently expressed by theologian Howard Thurman. He said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

How do you respond to Thurman's question? Find the answer and you've found your own source of authentic passion.

But how do enlivened Conscious Elders become Spiritual Activists? The kind of discernment I am describing leads naturally to Spiritual Activism, for the deep questions Elders are asking are fundamentally spiritual in nature. We are, in effect, seeking to integrate spiritual meaning into our giving back activities. This integration can occur in three ways.

In Sacred Activism, the depth of our spirituality moves us to care for the world as spiritual commitment, deepening the personal significance of our work. In Subtle Activism, a gathering of like-minded people creates a subtle force field to bring healing energies to traumatized peoples and places in the world. Lastly, we can dissolve the self-idea and its thought world into the omnipresent Divine Consciousness. In this third form, our resulting divinity—remember Secret II?—leads spontaneously to sacred action. The mystic now becomes the prophet, called

by unitive consciousness to interfere with injustice and suffering wherever it is encountered.

The Great Work of Creation Calling to Us to Renew the World

Finally, I want to discuss the idea of the Great Work. We Elders are all potential bodhisattvas aboard Mahayana's Great Vehicle, the all-inclusive Big Boat of sacred consciousness committed to the enlightenment of all sentient beings. And in this journey, we are called upon to do the Great Work. What is that?



Mathew Fox, who has been one of my teachers, writes about the *Re-Invention of Work*. He says, "We are being challenged today - in light of the wounded Earth, the one billion unemployed adults, the billions of despairing young people who see no guarantees of either work or jobs, and the needs of other species - to redefine work." And then he adds, "Cosmology teaches us that there is only one work going on in the universe, the 'Great Work' of creation itself — the work of creation unfolding..."

And it unfolds through us! When we wake up to who and where we really are, and express the resulting aliveness, we join this work and become everyday Bodhisattvas, knowing that there's more than enough work for everybody and everybody's gift is needed. Then The Great Work of unveiling Heaven on Earth lives through us.

Conclusions

The theme of spirituality and aging is much larger than simply applying our spiritual beliefs to the aging experience. As awakening Elders, we are re-inventing our place in the world. Indeed, the ongoing political turmoil of our times may be opening the door to the next stage of spiritual evolution, raising human consciousness toward the realization of a "New Heaven and New Earth."

Everything we've ever done in our lives has led us to this moment. This New Aging experience is so powerful because it offers us the possibilities of spiritual initiation, mystical transformation, divine revelation, sacred activism, and a place in the Great Work of Creation itself. We may be finally waking up as Divine Humans in to a Divine World. Are you ready?



John C. Robinson is a clinical psychologist with a second doctorate in ministry, an ordained interfaith minister, the author of nine books on the interface of psychology and spirituality (along with numerous articles, book chapters and guest blogs). A full time writer now, his work focuses on the psychological, spiritual and mystical potential of the New Aging. John's books include *The Three Secrets of Aging: A Radical Guide*; *Bedtime Stories for Elders: What Fairy Tales Can Teach Us About the New Aging*; *What Aging Men Want: Homer's Odyssey as a Parable of Male Aging*; his first novel, *Breakthrough*; and *The Divine Human: The Final Transformation of Sacred Aging*. Learn more about John's work at www.johnrobinson.org.

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I love this poem because it speaks so poignantly about the subtle and progressive awakening of consciousness that can happen in aging if we pay attention. I've been on a journey into the deep mysticism of aging and it is changing me. I am lived now by an awakening presence that is not my own yet is. This mystery grows deeper every year. – John Robinson

Lost Son

Theodore Roethke

*It was beginning winter;
An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind,
Above the blue snow.*

*It was beginning winter;
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.*

*Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.*

*Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?*

*A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.*