



ANCIENT
WISDOM
AND THE
MEASURE
OF OUR
DAYS

❧

THE SPIRITUAL
DIMENSIONS OF
RETIREMENT, AGING
AND LOSS

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FRED
BRANCATO

**Ancient Wisdom and the
Measure of our Days**

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The Spiritual Dimensions of
Retirement, Aging and Loss

By
Fred Brancato



Strategic Book Publishing
New York, New York

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Strategic Book Publishing

An imprint of Writers Literary & Publishing Services, Inc.

845 Third Avenue, 6th Floor – 6016

New York, NY 10022

<http://www.strategicbookpublishing.com>

ISBN: 978-1-61204-356-2 1-60693-702-2

Printed in the United States of America

To Leslie

My beloved wife and most intimate friend

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my thanks and appreciation to: Tom Frary, who at age ninety-four patiently listened to every word of the manuscript and offered his wise support; Mike and Wendy Laidlaw, for their editorial suggestions and insight about the receptive aspects of compassion; Betty and Ralph Smith for their encouragement to use my own voice in place of lengthy quotes from the wisdom literature; John Grace for his suggestions and encouraging communication about the book being relevant for him as a cancer survivor; Mike Brady for his affirmation about the text's relevance for the readers of his national journal; Melinda Plastas for her enthusiastic support and good counsel; Sherry Hanson for generously sharing her knowledge about the world of publishing; Patti and Paul Brassard for their friendship and ongoing creative support; Alex Clark, my father-in-law and friend who graciously reviewed the text amidst his exhausting chemotherapy; Mark Brancato, my loving son, who reviewed the publisher's contract with me; Leslie, my wife and most loving critic, who gave her considerable editorial skills to this work of the heart; and last, but not least, all the people at Strategic Book Publishing who made the publication of this book such an enjoyable experience.

*As time goes by
You do not care, nor I.
Wandering everywhere without
Anyone's interference
I feel the spring breeze
As I play the flute in the
Tavern pavilion.*

*Hu Chin Tze
8th Century China*

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Change and Aging	5
Chapter 2 Aging and Human Identity	15
Chapter 3 The Nature of the Great Mystery	33
Chapter 4 Ways of Living	39
Follow-up Questions for Discussion	47

Introduction

The title of this book is “Ancient Wisdom and the Measure of Our Days.” The first part of the title, “Ancient Wisdom,” refers to the vast body of recorded spiritual insight left to us by sages, mystics and saints from the world’s diverse spiritual traditions. I feel profound gratitude for their lives and their generosity in sharing with us the wisdom they gained from their experiences. I am also deeply grateful to all the people, many anonymous, who over the centuries have recorded, preserved and passed-on the experiences and wisdom of these great ones. I think of them all, men and women, mystic and scribe alike, as our spiritual ancestors, and I cannot imagine what the world would be like without them and the priceless legacy they have left us.

After 50 years of ongoing study about the world views of sages, saints and mystics from diverse spiritual traditions, particularly those of the Jewish, Christian, Sufi, Taoist, Hindu, Buddhist, and Native American traditions, I continue to be delighted and inspired by how common themes always seem to emerge from their diverse voices. These common themes are the “ancient wisdom” I refer to in this presentation.

The second part of the title, “the measure of our days,” refers to the experience of growing old. The phrase was taken from a book entitled, *The Measure of My Days* by Florida Scott-Maxwell. Florida Scott Maxwell published this book at the age of 85. Born in 1883, she lived until she was 96. *The Measure of My Days* is the most honest and insightful account about aging I have ever read. I would like to quote Florida Maxwell here in my introductory remarks, because her words set the stage for what follows.

After noting the apprehensions she and others often have about the unknown levels of deterioration of the mind and body that may come with advanced age, she wrote:

“But we also find that as we age we are more alive than seems likely, convenient, or even bearable. Too often our problem is the fervour of life within us. My dear octogenarians, how are we to carry so much life, and what are we to do with it?All is uncharted and uncertain, we seem to lead the way into the unknown. It can feel as though all our lives we have been caught in absurdly small personalities and circumstances and beliefs. Our accustomed shell cracks here, cracks there, and that tiresomely rigid person we supposed to be ourselves, stretches (and) expands.... Age forces us to deal with idleness, emptiness, not being needed, not able to do, helplessness just ahead perhaps.

“Here we come to a new place of which I knew nothing. We come to ... the place of release.... A long life makes me feel

nearer truth, yet it won't go into words, so how can I convey it? I can't, and I want to. I want to tell people approaching and perhaps fearing age that it is a time of discovery. If they say – 'Of what?' I can only answer, 'We must each find out for ourselves, otherwise it won't be discovery.'"¹

In finding-out for ourselves what is to be discovered in the measure of our own days, perhaps the common wisdom of sages and saints of every generation, from every corner of the world, can help.

The common themes I've chosen from our spiritual ancestors relate to what I believe are four areas of major concern to us as we age. They are: 1) change and loss in our lives; 2) our personal identity as we diminish; 3) the nature of God; and 4) how to live in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. These four areas of increasing concern as we grow older form the outline for this reflection.

Please bear in mind that the depth and scope of the subject do not allow full development of the thoughts expressed here, and while specific references will be made to only a few mystics, sages and saints, they represent what many others have said over the millennia. Also, please bear in mind that when I refer to the *diminishing* aspects of aging, I do not wish to preclude the great powers of the aging brain that are being verified these days by scientific research; which include tissue

1 The Measure of My Days by Florida Scott-Maxwell, Penguin Books, N.Y., 1968, pp. 138-140

regeneration, brain plasticity, more facile use of left and right sides of the brain simultaneously, and increased ability to see connections between events and circumstances (what we call wisdom).

One final preliminary note: When reflecting upon the wisdom of our spiritual ancestors, I will at times write in the first person. This is because it flows more easily and is less abstract. Also, the pronouns “I” and “my” can convey a sense of common experience among all human beings, while at the same time make room for the fact that not everyone sees or hears things in the same way.

Chapter 1

Change and Aging



*What! Would you wish that there should be no
dried trees in the woods and no dead branches
on a tree that is growing old?*



A seventy-year-old Huron²

Last January, I was fortunate enough to celebrate my 70th Birthday. Friends and acquaintances said, “You don’t seem *that* old.” That’s nice and makes me feel good, but it makes me wonder: What is 70 (or 80 or 90) supposed to look and feel like anyway? To the young man at the deli counter who called me “Pop” the other day, I’m a pretty old guy. To Florida Maxwell at 85 or 96, I may be just a “young whipper-snapper,” as Gabby Hayes would say in the old western movies. It’s all so relative.

One thing I do know is that change and aging are the order of the day for people, animals and cars, to name but a few. The older I get, the more aging and change appear synonymous to

² Native American Wisdom, edited by Ken Nerburn and Louise Mengelkoch, New World Library, CA, p. 56.

me. Change and aging are encoded in every cell of our bodies, and we are intimately knowledgeable about change from our every day experiences. Scientists and philosophers simply affirm what we already know: Change is the law of the universe and of the very essence of life. Our spiritual ancestors often referenced this fact as background to their testimony about the underlying presence of the Infinite, the immutable ground of all being, wherein all life and identity safely and lovingly reside.

The only difference for me between the word “change” and the word “aging” is that the word change connotes the experience of movement, with someone or something becoming different from what it was before through a transformation of some sort. Whereas aging is a mental concept often laden with the images, ideas and values of one’s culture. I wonder how my own personal aging would look to me if I didn’t have pre-conceived notions and judgments about wrinkled skin or the word, “old,” and simply observed the changes going on in and around me.

Change by its very nature makes things different and therefore brings loss of some kind. As it relates to aging, change carries loss of many kinds and degrees: From loss of hair, body dexterity, and short-term memory to loss of former societal identities and opportunities available at younger ages. Unfortunately, the longer we live, the greater the odds that change will bring the dreaded and grievous loss of loved ones.

In addition to loss, change brings new opportunities and beginnings, although not always obvious at first. These opportunities, which we might even call gifts if we are fortunate to live long enough, will be examined within the context of loss often associated with aging. They come in many different forms and are unique to each person and circumstance. Whatever their outer form, these opportunities tend to offer what might be called spiritual gifts. These spiritual gifts can include such things as: a greater capacity to love and be loved, a greater ability to receive and be connected to others, and a greater sense of freedom that comes from letting go (what Florida Maxwell called “a place of release.”) Most important, it seems that the ability to see and accept new opportunities and gifts that may come with loss depends in large measure upon each person’s habitual view of change in everyday life.

Centuries before the birth of Jesus, Taoist monks living in the mountains of China were especially astute in pointing out that waning and waxing constitute the very fabric of change. The Western world has become somewhat familiar with the Taoist philosophical terms of Yang, the Creative, and Yin, the Receptive to describe the movement continually occurring in the universe as we know it. Within the world view of change as the interplay of Yin and Yang (polar opposites that contain one another), the Taoists of ancient China emphasized that it is Yin, the Receptive, that makes Yang, the Creative able to actualize itself. Without this earth, the sun could not grow a daisy.

I would like to share here a very personal example about the power of the receptive: When my mother, Diane, died of dementia in a nursing home, her very experienced caretaker told my wife and me, with tears in her eyes, that my mother positively affected her life more than anyone she had ever known. She said my mother had in fact changed her life. This had a powerful impact on my wife and me because my mother could do absolutely nothing for herself and barely spoke. Among all the people in a similar state whom this caregiver bathed, dressed and fed over many years, why did my mother have such a creative, life changing influence on her life? From the experience of my mother's disposition during the two years of progressive incapacitation before her death, my wife and I concluded it was the *way* my mother *completely received* everything that had to be done for her. It seems that completely receiving what someone has to give transforms both the giver and receiver, each in different ways. It's like the healing and transformative power of total, undivided listening. Being *receptive* is such a *creative* embrace of another.

Continuing with the Taoist view of change, the *I Ching* (the "Book of Changes") and the *Tao Te Ching* (the "Book of the Way") remind us that Yin is contained within Yang, and Yang within Yin. Within the ebb of an ocean's wave, flow is hidden, waiting to manifest itself. In the dead of winter, a Chan Buddhist monk can be heard saying, "Summer is here." In summer's green, snow is already on the ground. So too,

when our culture's linear view of time falls from my eyes, the moment of my death is here, right now, as is the moment of my birth, and all the moments of my life, past and future. All present, right now!

The world view of past and future being present in this moment, and polar opposites containing elements of one another is also found among the traditional views of many indigenous peoples of North America, whom we collectively call Native American. It is present too in the Hindu image of Dancing Siva who, representing the power that creates and sustains the world, bears in one hand of his multiple arms a drum, and in another fire. With the vibrating drum he creates, and with fire he destroys. He is Creator and Destroyer, Destroyer and Creator. Both aspects are part of the same dance, the same transformation, the same eternal act of creation. Destruction is wedded to creation; decay leads to growth of something new. Among our spiritual ancestors, it is more than a cliché that death and birth are inseparably one. If this is true, then aging and diminishment are the process of something new being born in us and the universe.

Regarding the power of being receptive, India's Dancing Siva and China's Yin-Yang are wonderful examples of how diverse traditions can have similar views and experiences expressed in dramatically different ways. Siva represents the power that creates all in the universe. However, he, as a male figure, is completely impotent without his receptive female

consort, Sakti, who makes him capable of creating. In this regard, she is considered even more powerful than he. It is she who makes creation possible. This view appears to be identical to the Taoist philosophy, noted a moment ago, about the relationship of Yin and Yang. This power of the receptive is also found in other traditions. One example, from the Christian tradition, is Mary's "yes," her fiat, her "be it done unto me according to your word" to the movement and invitation of the Creating Spirit to overshadow her so she could conceive, nurture new life within her and give birth to someone and something great. Meister Eckhart, a 14th century scholar and mystic cites this receptive act of Mary as a prototype of the soul and an example of the inner transformation possible to everyone.³ This receptivity, this taking in, this listening and receiving is fundamental to contemplation and prayer in the experience of our spiritual ancestors.

This view of change has great significance for aging. If I am receptive to the cosmic changes taking place within my own body, and am not fooled by drying skin, shrinking muscle mass, stiff joints, cracking bones and a host of ailments, I can see and seize my time of old age as an opportunity for creative growth and birth in ways I have not yet imagined.

Concerning change and aging, Buddhist tradition counsels us to reflect on impermanence as a central fact of life. Keen

³ Meister Eckhart, translated by Raymond Blakney, 1941, Harper and Row, N.Y.

awareness of change and impermanence seems to have sparked the transformative experience of Siddhartha Gotama, the Buddha, when he sat under a tree in India's pre-dawn light, six centuries before the birth of Jesus. Tradition tells us that in a flash (as so often happens in mystical experiences) time disappeared into eternity and Siddhartha knew with certainty the root cause of suffering and grief so common to the human condition. He later told his followers, in so many words, that suffering comes from living in denial of change and clutching and clinging to what is passing.

Thinking and behaving as though stability and well being are found on the surface of what I see, touch and feel is the great illusion referenced not only by Siddhartha, but by the nameless sages, or "seers," of his Hindu tradition. This is also a centuries old realization among mystics of diverse spiritual traditions. They too felt everything, absolutely everything in the world of appearances is passing and this fact of life should become an integral part of a person's world view and way of living. Mistaking the temporal for the eternal, and thereby clinging to it, is delusional and *the* source of suffering.

Lao Tzu (reputed author of the 6th Century B.C. Chinese classic, *Tao Te Ching*) left us these simple words, which capture the message of many sages and saints throughout the ages: "If you realize that all things change, there is nothing you will try to hold on to."⁴ It seems that the flow of change in my body

4 Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu, Translated by Stephen Mitchell, Harper Perennial,

and mind, called aging, naturally nudges, maybe even enables, me to follow the good counsel of this Taoist sage. In a similar vein, I'm further advised by an anonymous Hindu sage of the Upanishads not to grieve over what is unavoidable.

In Hindu tradition, there are four stages in a full life. Each one marks major transitions through identifiable stages of social, psychological and spiritual growth. The first stage is that of "the student," whose work is to learn how to become a member of society. The second stage is that of the "householder." This is the stage of involvement in the day-to-day responsibilities of employment, raising a family and pursuing a career. The third stage is that of the "forest dweller." It is the stage when one leaves the preoccupations of the "householder" and turns to what is beyond the mainstream dance of daily living. In this stage a person may find him or herself entering a physical, psychological and spiritual forest hitherto unknown. In our terms, this is the time of retirement and beyond.

Successful completion of the forest dweller stage (a spiritual stage as well as a situational one), leads to the fourth stage, the hardest to attain and the one that few people ever reach, short of death itself. It is the stage or the state of the "samnyasin." The samnyasin is a person who totally lets go and leaves all things behind, becoming virtually naked in every way, stripped of all physical possessions, thoughts, judgments, and even one's ego self.

As far as I can tell, the internal state of the Hindu samnyasin is similar to the ideal spiritual state described in different terms by Buddhists, Taoists, Sufis (from the mystical tradition of Islam), Kabbalists (from the mystical tradition of Judaism) and Christians as “emptiness,” “no self,” “annihilation of the self,” and the two Gospel phrases “he who loses his life will find it” and “it is no longer I who live...”

The forest dweller and the samnyasin stages of life are especially relevant for the experience of aging. Retirement and aging into advanced years appear to mirror the spiritual journey described by mystics of all traditions because they tend to strip a human being down and away from the everyday world and self identities that once adorned the younger person. This stripping away of familiar things, circumstances and identities *is* the forest one enters, and it is the realm of the spiritual wanderer where there are trails personally not tread before and few landmarks to help find the way. I recall here the words of Florida Maxwell, quoted earlier, about old age: “All is uncharted and uncertain, we seem to lead the way into the unknown.”

In this sense, the unstoppable current of aging can be seen as aiding the spiritual work of my own resisting will. Again, in Florida Maxwell’s words, “Age forces us to deal with idleness, emptiness, (and) not being needed...” While doing things to keep me healthy and vital both physically and mentally, perhaps I’m called on a deeper level by my retirement and advancing age to accept diminishment (however slow or fast) and

embrace it as an opportunity to follow the advice of my spiritual ancestors. In harmony with their advice, perhaps I should see all the changes and emerging circumstances I didn't plan for within a much bigger context and as an opportunity for freedom of a kind I have never known.

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