

Dreams and The Coming of Age

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AARP, Academic Affairs

Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, (43:2), July, 2011.

It has been said that “In our dreams we are always young.” But this is true only as long as we fail to look beneath the surface of our dreams. Our dream life can offer us compelling clues about what "conscious aging" might promise for the second half of life. Psychology for the most part has focused chiefly on the first half of life , while gerontology has largely focused on decline instead of positive images of age (Biggs, 1999). Among dream researchers later life has not been a focus of attention, although the small empirical literature on this subject does offer hints for what to look for (Kramer, 2006). Here we consider dreams about aging, offering suggestions for how our dream life can give directions for a more positive vision of the second half of life.

Elder Ego and Elder Ideal

Our wider culture offers contrasting versions of the self in later life, what I will call here the "Elder Ego." On the one hand, we have images of vulnerable, decrepit elders—the “ill-derly,” images all too prevalent in media dominated by youth culture. On the other hand, we have an image of so-called Successful Aging, which often seems to be nothing more than an extension of youth or midlife: the “well-derly.” These opposing images-- the 'ill-derly" and the "well-derly" populate our dream life as they do our waking world.

Yet these are not the only images of the Elder Ego. There is also an archetypal figure Jung called the Wise Old Man (*Senex*) and Wise Old Woman (Hubback, 1996). Think of Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* or Obi Wan Kenobi in “Star Wars.” Think of Merlin in King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table (von Franz, 1998). As guide figures, the Wise Old Man or Wise Old

Woman may appear in dreams in periods of confusion or uncertainty, especially at times when we need help in decision-making. Carl Jung spoke of the wise old man as an "archetype of the spirit" and the "speaking fountainhead of the soul." Dreaming about the Wise Old Man can express aspiration toward awareness of larger meaning in later life.

This image of the Elder Ideal is needed by both older and younger generations. All over the world we find this repeated pairing of the young hero with the Wise Elder. For example, in Greek mythology, Apollo was matched with Poseidon, together representing the opposites of youth and age, polar opposites but also complementary. In the Hebrew Bible we find Joshua and Moses; in Roman mythology, Aeneas and the Sybil of Cumae; and in Gaelic myths of ancient Ireland there is Cuchulain and Skatha the Wise. Beyond the Western world, in Hindu mythology we find young king Rama meeting the old hermit Agastya. A similar process appears in fairy tales (Chinen, 1989). In "elder tales" we see the decline in later life, but also the hope of psychological and spiritual growth, just as we see in dreams.

Different images of the Elder Ego appear in dreams at different stages in life, as we see in the following example (Luke, 2000, p. 247). The dreamer is Lisa Van Susteren, 52, a psychiatrist:

COMING UP CLEAR

[In her dream, the dreamer] is coming up through the water from the bottom of a river. The water is clear. But on her body are leaves and mud. Clear water, encrusted body.

The dreamer in this case recognized that the image of dead, fallen leaves heralds the end of her long hot summer of middle age: that is, the ending of one phase of life and the beginning of another, the coming of age. There is a saying that fifty is the old age of youth, and the youth of old age. Now in her early Fifties, this dreamer is already beginning actively, if unconsciously, to enter into dialogue with the Elder Ego within herself. The Elder Ego here

includes both negative and positive dimensions: on the one hand, leaves and mud encrusting the body; on the other hand, clear water, symbolizing purification and nurturance. It is natural for us to encounter negative images of age since our culture reminds of that unceasingly. But a positive image of age, the Elder Ideal, is represented by clear water, the promise of new growth in later life.

At times the Elder Ego makes itself felt in the smallest of ways in dreams, announcing its presence in a subtle fashion. Robert Langs (Lang, 1988, pp. 71-72) cites the case of Priscilla, a woman in her mid-forties who reported a very short dream in which *she is throwing away some spoiled prunes*. That was the entire dream remembered by this dreamer. What could such a dream signify?

The dreamer's initial association to this dream was to her own aging: she had started to notice wrinkles on her face, like wrinkles of a prune. Priscilla also reported that she had begun to worry about the possibility that her elderly aunt was developing symptoms of Alzheimer's Disease. These associations led the dreamer to recognize that she had become more and more concerned with her own aging body: with lines around the mouth, joint pains after exercise, putting on weight, and so on. This very short dream and its intimations of coming of age in her body enabled the dreamer to work through some of these issues, to a point where six weeks later she had another dream in which she had been chosen "Mrs. Universe," a symbol of celebrated youthfulness.

It is not unusual for people to have such dream intimations of aging at significant moments of life: for example, on a birthday. Concerning such dreams, we can say, along with the Freudian psychologist Charles Rycroft (1979, p. xi.), that such dreams indicate "the existence of some mental entity which is more preoccupied with the individual's total life

span and destiny than is the conscious ego with its day-to-day involvement with immediate contingencies, and which not uncommonly encounters blank incomprehension from an ego which is unprepared to admit that its conception of itself may be incomplete and misguided.”

Patricia Garfield tells of a middle-aged American woman who dreamed about a couple who visited her at home for dinner (Garfield, 2001, p. 99). When they left, they towed her whole house away, leaving the dreamer in frustration and anger. Still later, she dreamed that this same thieving couple had completely destroyed her house, burning it to ashes. This middle-aged woman was fully conscious that her house dream was actually about her own aging, including a feeling that her youth had somehow been “stolen.”

Edwin Edinger (Edinger, 2002, p. 109) discusses the case of one of his therapy patients, a woman in her fifties who had lost some of the energy of youth but was unable to accept the challenges of the second half of life. After two years of therapy she began having dreams about long trips or ocean journeys to unfamiliar places. Then she had the following dream:

ECLIPSE

She and her sister were returning to the town in which she had spent her childhood. They knew they were on the right road but abruptly it came to an end in a field. Down the hill and to the left she recognized her home town. As she went downhill, the sky darkened until it seemed to be night, although it was only nine-thirty in the morning. The dreamer was terribly frightened but attempted to reassure herself by saying, ‘It must be an eclipse; it will pass. I will hold on and not be afraid.’

“Eclipse” is a dream about a journey to an unfamiliar place: namely the town of the dreamer’s childhood, the place of her youth. This dreamer is carrying into the second half of life the same attitude she had previously, so she is convinced she is “on the right road.” Following “Eclipse” this dreamer had no further dreams about journeys but instead began having a series of dreams of giving birth, although without any clear sign of success. Later she had the following dream (Edinger,

2002, p. 111):

THE GIFT OF TIME

She was given a gift by an eminent doctor, a man who at one time had awakened her out of years of torpor, and with whom she had fallen in love. The gift consisted of a round plastic bag containing everything necessary for life, including Time. Time was represented by an umbilical cord in a circle which surrounded the bag.

The “years of torpor” are, again, an expression of the dreamer’s attitude toward the second half of life: decline, boredom, emptiness. Note that the round bag contains “everything necessary for life.” Extended longevity, the gift of time, is part of this gift, represented in this dream by an umbilical cord wrapped in a circle. Here too is a powerful archetypal image of time as a circle rather than a line.

The umbilical cord is what connects the dreamer to this Eternal Now, to Eternity beyond time. The last dream in the series cited by Edinger suggests a degree of completeness or totality (Edinger, 2002, p. 112): “The dreamer saw the plan of her life being woven from bands into a large mat. Each band had a distinct and highly important meaning.” This archetypal dream invites us to ponder the question: “What is the real gift of time?” Does extended longevity, the great achievement of modern society, represent a new possibility for growth? Or will it be merely an extension of torpor and decline?

Anxieties about age are never far away. Karen Signell (Signell, 1990, p.66) reports the dream of Lorraine, who had entered psychotherapy with strong fears about growing older: she wondered, would she become "an old hag" or even a bag lady? As Signell notes, such fears about old age often revive fears of abandonment and neglect experienced in childhood. Here is Lorraine's dream about the coming of age:

THE BOUNTIFUL OLD WOMAN

I was with an old woman-- gray, dowdy, frumpy. She opened her closet and showed me her beautiful fabrics and beads. They were all different shades and colors. They were beautiful! I asked her why she didn't use them herself. She said, 'Because I'm going to give them to you.' I asked her, 'Are you sure that you want me to have them?' She said, 'Yes, I want you to have them.' But I wasn't sure that I'd take them. I wasn't sure I'd know how to use them.

Karen Signell relates Lorraine's dream to the story of Cinderella, neglected by her stepmother but offered beautiful garments by a fairy godmother, the helper figure who could magically transform her life. In the original Cinderella story, the heroine waits with longing for her prince, then meets him for a single evening only to lose him after the witching hour. In the original fairy tale the prince ultimately finds Cinderella once more and the two of them live "happily ever after." But as Alan Chinen put it, the big question for the second half of life is, What happens after Cinderella finally gets married to the prince? Will this marriage last? Is there hope for genuine psychological growth "in the ever after?"

In her dream Lorraine was offered beautiful gifts, like Cinderella. But the dreamer could not believe her good fortune: after all, how could a "gray, dowdy, frumpy" old woman offer her anything of value? This skepticism, , after all, represents the collective dilemma of our culture in its worship of youth. Age may offer gifts, but each of us, like Loraine, is uncertain about accepting the gifts, because, in the dreamer's words, "I wasn't sure I'd know how to use them."

We don't know how to use the gifts of age because, as a culture, we lack guidance for growth in the second half of life. Yet our dreams send messages that promise something to us, as the dream of "The Bountiful Old Woman" has promised gifts to Lorraine. Jung put the matter well when he wrote: "An inexperienced youth thinks, indeed, that one can let the old people go, because in any case there is nothing much that can be done with them: life is behind them,

and they cannot be considered as much more than petrified pillars of the past. But it is a great error to assume that the meaning of life is exhausted with the period of youth and growth...

The afternoon of life is just as full of meaning as the morning, only its meaning and purpose is a wholly different one."

Dreams about the coming of age do not come only to those who are beyond midlife. On the contrary, in world mythology, as we have seen, we find repeated pairing between the young hero and a hero who represents the Elder Ideal. The following is the dream of a young man who was seeking direction in his life (Krippner, Bogzaran, & de Carvalho 2002). He had gone alone to camp on Mt. Shasta in California where he was preparing to practice nightly "dream incubation," a custom familiar to the ancient Greeks and revived by some as a modern ritual (Reed, 1976; Tick, 2001). On the fifth night on the mountaintop he had the following dream:

THE OLD MEN IN THE CAVE

I am in a cave with a group of old men. They are drinking water from an old bowl that is being passed around. As the bowl comes closer towards me I realize that this must be a dream. An old man with dark skin and dark hair sitting next to me hands me the bowl. I take it and drink the water. I suddenly hear a humming sound and as I look up the men have disappeared and a beautiful white deer is walking in the light in the far distance. I awake feeling ecstatic.

This young man considered his lucid dream to be an initiatory experience. Apart from the dreamer's individual psychological associations, there are features of this dream that are important for understanding the place of dreams over the life-course. In many respects, "The Old Men in the Cave" is a dream about initiation during youth. The dreamer goes alone out into the wilderness, as would often be the custom for a Native American shaman seeking dream initiation (Wallace, 1958). Among the Plains Indian the dream was treated as a significant event, occurring

on different planes of reality. Thus, among such groups the "vision quest" was also known as "crying for a dream" among the Lakota (Devereux, 1969). Among the Iroquois it was understood that the spirit world could communicate with individuals through these "Big Dreams." A Big Dream could be a healing for the whole community, conveying revelations or warnings to be heeded.

The young man who dreamed "The Old Men in the Cave" was not a Native American shaman. Yet his dream quest was a passage into the unknown world of a cave, to discover something wild and untamed. Caves symbolize what is deepest and oldest in the psyche. The oldest art works of humanity—the cave art at Lascaux – are cave drawings from our remote ancestors. Cave dwelling evokes a primordial condition which can be understood as the context for this dream. The dreamer at first is not alone in this cave but is with a group of old men, as if to suggest that the process of initiation itself is a connection between youth and age. As in the ritual of the Eucharist, in "The Old Men in the Cave" a bowl is passed around and, just as the dreamer is about the drink, the dream becomes lucid. The image of an old man with "dark skin" and "dark hair" suggests an element of darkness or shadow belonging to the dreamer, who has now drunk from the initiatic bowl. From that moment on the old men in the dream disappear and the dreamer is once again alone. The circle of aloneness is complete.

The cave drawings at Lascaux depict magical animals and in "The Old Men in the Cave" the dreamer now sees another magical animal: the "white deer walking in the light in the far distance." This vision of an illuminated animal symbolizes the distance this dreamer has already traveled and must still travel in the process of initiation. The dreamer has now been granted a holy vision and he wakes up ecstatic. The word **ek-stasis**, in Greek means,

literally, “standing outside oneself,” as this dreamer has gone outside himself.

“The Old Men in the Cave” is the dream of a young man seeking guidance. But where can youth find guidance today? As the poet Robert Bly has argued, our society today is one where age is devalued, leaving young people adrift (Bly, 1997). It is not surprising that young people crave some kind of initiation or viable path into adulthood. Because we lack any journey into the wilderness, or a genuine ritual for reconciling aloneness with society, we end up forcing young people to behave in ways disconnected from the adult world and from the self they might become. The image of the elders in “The Old Men in the Cave” expresses a longing for such guidance and direction in life, but that longing too often remains unfulfilled.

This challenge of initiation is not limited to young people. At every transitional, or “liminal” stage of life we need guidance. So we turn to stories, myths, fairy tales or other symbolic statements that respond to our hunger for a “rite of passage” helping us move through the stages of life. Dreams with initiatory symbolism may appear at critical or transitional points in the life course, such as, marriage, death of a parent, and moving in to retirement. When it comes to offering initiatory symbols or experience, our culture remains impoverished.

Thomas Moore has described our impoverished condition as a lack of “soul.” As Moore understands the problem, “soul” is not strictly a religious term but rather “a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance.” Moore tells of a case in his therapy work of a young woman in distress, with ambivalence about being a woman. She was going on binges and vomiting, displaying distressing psychological problems in her relationship to food. Then one day she brought to Moore the following dream (Moore, 1994, 11):

OLD WOMEN AND THE STEW POTS

A group of elderly women were preparing a feast outdoors. They were stewing a great variety of food in huge pots over fires. The dreamer was invited to join the cooking and become one of the women. She bristled at first—she didn't want to be identified with those old gray women in peasant black dresses—but finally joined them.

This dream, like “The Old Men in the Cave,” presents an image of an Elder Ideal, promising the “fulfillment of soul” craved unconsciously by a young person. Moore suggests that the dream of the old women and the stew pots served to confront this dreamer with something she was deeply afraid of: namely, her own deep feminine nature. Like “The Old Men in the Cave” the dream of “Old Women and the Stew Pots” conveys something of the quality of initiation into a mystery, in this case with activities clearly related to the dreamer’s ambivalence about food.

There are also powerful dreams where the image of the Elder Ideal shows itself in decisive terms, as in the following dream of 45-year old Brugh Joy (Joy, 1990, p. 156):

EMBRACING THE ELDER

I am facing a deep, dark pool of water. Slowly, from its depths, rises the body of a man. At first, he is floating face-down and seems to be dead. He then becomes animated and I see that he is actually a healthy older man in his seventies or eighties. He stands on the water's surface, smiles, and embraces me as I smile and embrace him.

Brugh Joy interpreted this dream as the birth of awareness of the "Elder within," related to the image of Christ walking on the water. In this case the water symbolizes the unconscious level of the self which supports the Elder who is the dreamer's own future self.

Brugh Joy writes: "Elderhood is the shadow side of incapacitating old age. In the concluding phase of our life cycle, Elderhood brings us to the threshold of a mystery as profound as that of birth and procreation... the mystery of death and personal dissolution."

He continues: "Elders till and prepare the soil of the younger generations, guiding them into a successful relationship with Life and with Death. Elders are the sculptors and the guardians of culture and civilization. They are the great teachers of life, second only to the Master Teacher, which is Life itself."

Jung points to a report (Jung, 1970, cited by Joy, 1990, p. 31) in the ethnological literature about a Native American warrior chief "to whom in middle life the Great Spirit appeared in a dream. The spirit announced to him that from then on he must sit among the women and children, wear women's clothes, and eat the food of women. He obeyed the dream without suffering a loss of prestige."

Ultimately, the task of development in the second half of life is to bring together the Elder Ideal with the energy of youth, or what Jungians call the archetypes of the Senex and the Puer (Hillman, 1970). We need to pursue this developmental task collectively but also as individuals. To fulfill the task requires that we pay respect to the virtues of solitude and inwardness, but such veneration is not easy in our contemporary world. On the contrary, in contemporary society, with its emphasis on speed, energy, and outwardness, we are living a world which celebrates the archetype of the **puer aeternus**, or "eternal boy." Think of the popularity of botox or plastic surgery, the celebration of youth in media and advertising: James Hillman put the same point slightly differently, when he remarked that we live in a hyperactive society, where anything less than mania is considered depression.

Whether rejected by the wider culture, or repressed by those who cultivate speed and "anti-aging medicine," age will have come back, as the "return of the repressed," in our dreams. Psychotherapist David Gordon (Gordon, 2006, p. 6) describes one of his clients, Beth, whose life was filled with distraction until one day she had a fateful dream. In her

dream Beth found herself in a room with old telephone switchboards connected with lines and plugs. Then, at a certain point, workers came in to tear up all the equipment and cut all the phone lines. Beth woke up with her heart pounding, deeply afraid. Later she had another dream:

IN THE BACKYARD

I find that an old crone and young woman are living in my back yard and I start to think how I can get them out into the world so they can have more support because they must be lonely--- then I realize that to learn from each other, they need to be left alone.

Beth had reflected on her telephone switchboard dream, which symbolized her own distracted life. Her second dream takes place in the “back yard” of her own psyche, not the front yard where she faces the world in all its distractions and busy-ness. In this backyard, she finds the two images of youth and age. Her initial impulse is to bring them out in to the world, to imagine that they must be lonely, which is often the way we think of old age. Beth’s progress in therapy is reflected in her eventual realization that youth and age can only learn from each other by being “left alone:” that is, kept apart from the distractions that prevent genuine growth.

Lewis Richmond, a Buddhist meditation teacher, tells of a woman in her fifties who recently told him about a dream she had (Richmond, 2009):

THE CANDLE FLAME

In the dream she was at a party and saw a tall, attractive man in his early thirties standing alone with a drink in his hand. The woman went over to talk to the man; in the dream she was young again and single, and this situation meant a possible romantic opportunity. With a winning smile, she tried to engage the man in conversation, only to find that his gaze had alighted elsewhere, and with a curt nod and a polite smile, the man excused himself and moved away. The scene shifted and the woman found herself in the bathroom, looking at her fifties face in the mirror. She started to cry.

Lewis Richmond comments on the dream as follows: "There is a part of us that ages- our body, primarily- and a part that doesn't. The part that doesn't age has something to do with the mind, but it isn't the mind as we usually think of it; our mental faculties of memory and concentration begin to slowly subside with age just as the body does. But our primary or innate awareness, our feeling of being alive, of just being here, doesn't age." He compares this primary awareness to a candle flame that puts out steady light, no matter whether the candle is new or used up. It is the flame that represents our true inner consciousness or innate awareness, which does not age

Gerotranscendence

The struggle between positive and negative sides of the Elder Ego appear repeatedly in dreams. The following dream is from one of psychotherapist June Singer's patients (Singer, 1990, pp. 26-27), here called "Laurel:"

THE BIG AQUARIUM

There is a big aquarium in the house of some very ordinary people, and also a small aquarium that has some defect in it. It is necessary to transfer the fish from the small to the large aquarium, or else they will die because the small aquarium is gradually losing water. The big aquarium is self-sustaining, as it has a system that aerates and filters the water and plants and there are secluded places in it for the fish to breed in.

Laurel's dream depicts aging as decline. In fact, Singer reported that Laurel's associations with this dream were a sense of the small world of the small aquarium gradually running down, "the way people lose energy when they get old." The dreamer herself even mentioned the second law of thermodynamics, or the tendency of physical systems toward greater disorder and entropy. By contrast, the second, larger aquarium seemed to this patient to suggest generativity and hope. From Laurel's point of view, we are confronted with a complete dichotomy between the "ill-derly"

and the "well-derly," between negative and positive images of age.

Singer herself interprets the small aquarium as a metaphor for the visible world. But we can also understand the symbolism of the dream in terms of lifespan development. In the first half of life, we establish a firm sense of ego identity and mastery in the world. In doing so, we adapt to the world, and so our "house" or sense of self belongs to "ordinary people," as in the aquarium dream. The fish in this patient's dream represent those living elements in us that need to survive and grow. But the "small aquarium" established in the first half of life will not permit this growth: aging means that this aquarium is "gradually losing water."

What is needed in the second half of life is a shift toward what can be called "Conscious Aging," here represented by the second, larger aquarium. In contrast to the sense of a bounded ego, the larger aquarium is described here as "self-sustaining;" the aquarium is constantly cleansed and regenerated. More important, there are "there are secluded places in it for the fish to breed in," an intimation of our connection to future generations. The aquarium, in short, is a symbol for a transpersonal dimension of the Self, something evoked for this dreamer, even a movement toward "Conscious Aging." What is required for Conscious Aging is a degree of disengagement ("seclusion") so that new life can emerge. In quietness or contemplative space, it may be possible for the fish to breed: in short, for real being to develop in the second half of life.

Creative Aging

Dream life can be a time of creativity and creative activity can extend into later life, as Gene Cohen has documented. There has been little study of creativity in dreams and dreaming in the later years. One of the most important contributions to our understanding of dreams in later life has come from Swiss researchers led by Arthur Funkhauser and his colleagues, who confirm that the frequency of recalling dreams seems to decline with age. The largest decrease happens in

early middle age and is therefore unlikely to be connected with aging effects.

Funkhauser and colleagues observe that persons in extreme old age often feel as if they can contribute little to the world around them. Persons towards the end of their lives, whether through old age or incapacitation, often feel they have little left which they can contribute to the world around them. Yet frail or bed-ridden individuals “may still be able to tell what they have been dreaming, though, and this activity could help them retain a sense of self-worth and usefulness.” In short, the inner dimension of dreams may prove a valued compensation for outer losses. Once we see this connection, it may open new possibilities for creative aging, as George Bouklas (Bouklas, 1999) has shown in his study of psychotherapy among the oldest-old.

The initial challenge of age may be the need to let go, as we see in this dream of the noted psychologist Robert Johnson (Johnson & Ruhl, 2007, p. 159-160) at age 83:-

ZERO POINT

I drive to San Francisco in my old Volkswagen Beetle. I park it. Then I forget where I have parked it and, though, I can't find my car, I have to go home again. I walk till I am exhausted. I'm feeling desperate, then I find my wallet is gone; I remember a friend in San Francisco had a wallet stolen, and he ended up at a Bank of America branch, which is also my bank. He had no identification or money, not even change to phone someone for assistance. He got help when they phoned back his branch and verified that he had an account and then gave him a couple of hundred dollars, which pleased me greatly in my dream. So in the dream I thought, 'If I can just find a Bank of America, they will bail me out from this difficulty.' I begin walking again. I cannot find a branch of Bank of America (though, in outer reality, there are many in San Francisco). Finally I am completely stuck, and from that stuck or zero point I suddenly realize the basic life principle that I am exactly where I belong, that I don't really need anything, not a car, not the Bank of America. I realize this with great relief and joy.

This dream begins with a moment dreaded by so many older people: forgetting the location of your car. But Robert Johnson's problems in this dream only multiply when he loses his wallet:

his source of identity. Magical thinking comes to the rescue in the fantasy that the Bank of America will “bail him out,” but he cannot even find a branch of that ubiquitous institution. It is the final confirmation that the dreamer, facing his own aging, is truly lost, at a “zero point,” which gives him the insight he needed: he is exactly where he belongs. The final emotions of the dream are relief and joy at this recovery of his true identity, despite the process of disengagement documented in the dream.

Johnson tells us that later that same night he had another dream (Johnson & Ruhl, 2007, p. 160). This time he was in a medieval city where he is trying to find his way out. But every street in this city was leading him right back where he started. His search continues but he always ends up at the same point until, in exhaustion, he surrenders and realizes that “all streets go both directions simultaneously and always take you back where you started.” This, he finally understands, “is the nature of reality.” Johnson had been struggling for months with pairs of opposites and also with recognition that the world around him was deteriorating: an experience of disillusionment not unusual among older people. In the months leading up to this dream he had greatly reduced his lecture schedule. In his outer life, as in the dream “Zero Point,” Robert Johnson had been intentionally going through a process of disengagement, but he did not find it easy: “I needed to stop fighting both the inner and outer process including the limitations, of growing old.” In both dreams he needed to reach a point of exhausting alternatives: “Only at the point of exhaustion did a revelation set in and the totally irrational conclusion was reached that this is wonderful! Was I gaining some piece of enlightenment in my declining years?”

The poet Rilke once spoke of the dread of dying “with unlivable lines in my body” and this fear, Johnson believes, is evident in the dreams he had and in his own struggle with disengagement. The Theory of Disengagement in gerontology was developed in the 1960s

to acknowledge the way in which both individuals and society gradually encouraged older people to withdraw from the world around them, not only through retirement but through a changing attitude, a separation or distancing from others (Cumming & Henry, 1961).

Disengagement Theory was later roundly denounced by many gerontologists, who instead favored what they termed Activity Theory: the idea that older people would be better off if they continued to be engaged through work, hobbies, social ties, and so on (Hochschild, 1975). But proponents of Activity Theory missed something important about the idea of disengagement: namely, a spiritual or contemplative dimension, the way in which disengagement could truly be a hint of enlightenment in one's declining years, as Robert Johnson phrased it. Eventually, Swedish gerontologist Lars Tornstam would emphasize an ideal of positive disengagement, which became the basis of gero-transcendence (Tornstam, 1989).

But the true creativity of later life demands not only letting go but a discovery of something positive, as we saw in the dream "The Big Aquarium." The positive vision is given to Robert Johnson in second dream, set in a medieval city, symbolic of a place far remote in time, just like that "place" in us from which we can find a positive approach to aging. But again, until exhaustion sets in, the dreamer could not recognize this truth. The streets of the city are to the dreamer like a maze until he realizes, as Lao Tzu put, that the way up and the way down are one and the same. This insight into the nature of reality is beyond the understanding of the rational mind, preoccupied, as Johnson was, with opposites and dualism. But in the world of dreams, opposites are unified in a positive vision of creative aging.

The following is the dream (von Franz, 1997, p. 341) of a 60-year old woman, a

dream which preceded a remarkable burst of intellectual creativity:

A NEW LANDSCAPE

I see a landscape in darkened light, and in the background the crest of a hill sloping gently upward and then continuing on the same level. On the rising line of the horizon moves a square pane that shines like gold. In the foreground is dark, unplowed earth, which is beginning to sprout. Then suddenly I see a round table with a gray stone slab top. At the moment I become aware of the table, the gold-gleaming square pane is on it. It has disappeared from the hill. Why and how it suddenly changed location, I don't know.

What is the meaning of this darkened landscape? Marie-Louise von Franz suggests that the darkened light here means that the brightness of day has now diminished. This darkening could mean different things. One the one hand, it could mean a loss of sensory of physical powers with advancing age. But a loss can also be a gain. The darkening of the landscape can be a conscious movement into the experience of age and a “descent” into the underworld of the unconscious. In fact, this dreamer had long been making efforts to document and understand her dreams. In the imagery of “A New Landscape” there is a contrast between different geometric images: a square pane and a round table. Both images come together (circle-in-the-square) symbolize a more complete “coming together” in the total Self. Von Franz alludes to the “round table” that was the customary meeting place of King Arthur and his knights. The Knights of the Round Table were more than just adventurers in chivalry. They were agents in a quest for the Holy Grail, a symbol for the completed self, for new growth. In this dream the earth the unplowed earth “is beginning to sprout,” like the soil in us that could bring forth new growth. The square pane on the horizon “shines like gold,” suggesting the possibility of something precious (gold) that appears in unexpected places. Could age itself be a time for new growth of something

previous?

The following is a dream of a 75-year old woman, a teacher whose life in old age displayed joy and productivity (Koch-Sheras, Hollier, and Jones, 1983), p. 217. Then she had the following dream:

NO BED, ONLY STANDING ROOM

A young student of mine has won a contest with the finals to be held in Chicago. She asks that I make her reservations. I call and do so. I am told they will have no bed, only standing room. I try to call again, but the alarm wakes me up.

In this case, the dreamer understood the message of the dream: “This dream reminds me that I don’t need to feel so old that I need to take to bed. I don’t feel old—I have to look in the mirror sometimes and see my wrinkles to remember.” The dreamer is a teacher and in her dream there appears one of her young students, the promise of life in the future. But the teacher herself is still needed (“I make her reservations”) and her life is far from over. Like the elderly couple in “The Shining Fish,” the dreamer has found a deep connection with her own creativity and with future generations.

Ego-Integrity versus Despair

Erik Erikson understood the psychological task of later life as a struggle between ego-integrity and despair. A key point to remember is that, for many older people, the natural disillusionment of life can too easily give way to complete loss of hope, as in the following dream of a widow in her late seventies (Garfield, 1991, pp. 330-331):

ROTTING FLOORBOARDS

A man named Frank lives in a kind of hillbilly home with his three children. He sits all day on the porch in his rocker, dressed in his shabby old tweed suit with the leather patches on the elbow and smoking his pipe and reading while the floorboards rot in the porch.

Someone tries to fix them but he just goes on reading while the old house falls apart. Two of the children go to take a nap. I notice my red cooking pot sitting on the shelf.

It is not unusual for older people to have dreams of their house falling down or other deterioration, as we see her in “Rotting Floorboards.” But the dreamer here has conjured up an image of old age which seems utterly without hope. The man named “Frank” (honesty? Truthfulness?) dwells in a shabby home, like Philemon and Baucis. He is dressed in shabby clothes and does nothing but sit in a rocking chair. The floorboards are rotting beneath his feet, but he is distracted by his reading. The old house, like an old body, just “falls apart.” The next generation, suggested by the two children, are of no help: they “go to take a nap,” implying unconsciousness and unresponsiveness. The dreamer identifies with Frank because she sees her own kitchen utensil sitting on his shelf. In this dream, evidently, it is not ego-integrity but despair which seems to have won the day.

The following dream was told to Carl Jung (Jung, 1976) by an old soldier traveling in a train compartment with Jung, who was a complete stranger to him:

THE OLD GENERAL

I was on parade with a number of young officers, and our commander-in-chief was inspecting us. Eventually he came to me, but instead of asking a technical question he demanded a definition of the beautiful. I tried in vain to find a satisfactory answer, and felt most dreadfully ashamed when he passed on to the next man, a very young major, and asked him the same question. This fellow came out with a damned good answer, just the one I would have given if only I could have found it. This gave me such a shock that I woke up.

The old general's dream displays a contrast between youth and age. The dream begins with the old general on parade with a group of young officers. Traditional Jungian

analysis would describe this dream as "compensatory:" that is, expressing an aspiration toward development of an underdeveloped side of the dreamer's personality. In interpreting the dream, Jung himself asked the old general what the young major looked like, and the general replied "He looked like me, when I was a young major." Jung in turn said to him, "Well then, it looks as if you had forgotten or lost something which you were still able to do when you were a young major." The general "thought for a while, and then he burst out, 'That's it, you've got it! When I was a young major I was interested in art. But later this interest got swamped by routine.' "

This dream's manifest imagery, and the general's own reaction to Jung's comment, illustrate Jung's aphorism that "the dream is its own interpretation." Indeed, the old general's dream here illustrates an important idea of compensation along with amplification of a dream image by the dreamer's own interpretation. But there are other points to be made about the old general's dream, whose meaning is broader, even universal in its implications. The old man here dreams of himself as a younger, seemingly lesser version of himself: a major instead of a general. In fact, one idea of "lifespan development" hopefully suggests that we move through life acquiring higher levels of growth: e.g., greater wisdom. But aging also involves loss and decline: in this dream, the general's loss of his earlier interest in art and creativity.

All characters in his dream are aspects of the old general himself, including both the commander-in-chief and the young major. Note that the dream begins with judgment: the commander-in-chief is inspecting the troops on parade. But instead of asking an ordinary or technical question, appropriate to a military setting, the commander-in-chief (or a higher level of the self) asks a profound, archetypal question: a definition of the beautiful. The general "tried in

vain to find a satisfactory answer" but could not, just as he could not do so in his own life, despite age and experience. This is a disturbing moment of realization: chronological age does not bring progress. It poses for us another question: What is it in us that can truly respond to these deepest questions of life? Evidently, age itself did not give the capacity to answer. Instead, it was the young major-- the younger version of himself-- who was able to answer this archetypal question.

In the General's dream, the younger version of himself gave "a damned good answer," "just the one I would have given if only I could have found it." The wording here suggests that the aging General already has within him a hunger for authenticity: "the person I was meant to be." Yet he cannot find his answer to this deep riddle of life, and so the dream itself is a wake up message, a Call reminding the General that time is running out: "This gave me such a shock that I woke up." In the second part of this book we shall see how such a Call can be the trigger that launches a deeper spiritual journey.

Erikson's classic formulation of age as a struggle between ego-integrity and despair underscores the fact that, in psychological terms, there is often "unfinished business" to be done in later life, as in the following dream (Hollis, 2006, p. 56):

HALFWAY UP THE MOUNTAIN

The dreamer, in his seventies, is a self-made man, who is described by his therapist as one who "for all his achievements...remained haunted by the sense of deficit:"

I am at the Harvard Club for a meal. Strangely, everyone is unable to be fed because their tie is in a strange knot. I am able to touch my knot and it is released and everyone can eat now. I realize that the club is halfway up a mountain. I climb up the rest of the mountain, go over the top. I then run down the other side in joyous leaps and get to the bottom. I see a peasant with a cart, and the cart is empty.

The dreamer here is prepared to dine at the Harvard Club, symbol of Ivy League achievement and prestige. But neither the dreamer nor anyone else can be fed because their

neckties are bound in a strange knot. In a gesture of magical thinking, the dreamer is able to loosen the bondage of the neckties and thus make it possible for everyone to be nourished in this elegant club setting. But the dreamer realizes that the Harvard Club, symbol of achievement, is only halfway up a mountain he must climb. The mountain symbolizes the true task of lifespan development. So the dreamer proceeds to climb up the rest of this mountain, even going over the top.

On the other side of the mountain, rather than being in bondage the dreamer is able to run free down the slope "in joyous leaps." At the bottom of the mountain another symbol stares him in the face: a peasant with an empty cart. The peasant belongs to the most impoverished strata of society, the very group the dreamer has hoped to escape by worldly accomplishment. So the dreamer, a self-made man, has been admitted to the highest level of society, has freed himself and others from bondage, has even climbed up and over the tallest mountain, only to be confronted at last by what he tried to escape: the reality of deficit and inadequacy.

What the dreamer discovers here is just what Charles Foster Kane, central character in Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane," discovers at the end of his life. Despite great achievements, Kane dies with the uncomprehended word "Rosebud" on his lips, a token of childhood dreams and a lifetime of deficit and inadequacy. This discovery on the other side of the mountain is a powerful message for those in the second half of life who have fulfilled their youthful dreams only to find less satisfaction than they expected in the goal.

Dreams of old age as a time of deficit and loss are not unusual, as the following examples confirm. These two dreams are from Elizabeth, a widow in her late seventies, who also had the dream "Rotting Floorboards" discussed earlier (Garfield, 1991, pp. 334, 343):

BIRD DREAMS

I find an exhausted little white bird. I hold it gently in my two hands and wonder if I can keep it alive.

I am driving a car, being shown the right way to go by a low-flying bird that flies just ahead of me. There is a highway on my right and an abyss on my left.

Elizabeth's "Bird Dreams" reveal a still deeper confrontation of her struggle of ego-integrity versus despair. The little white bird represents the hope of integrity in the last stage of life. But the dreamer wonders if she can keep this fragile hope alive. In the second dream, she is driving a car, as the ego does as long as we can be in charge of our lives. Yet control (driving) is guided by another bird, this one a low-flying bird that "flies just ahead of me" showing the way forward. On the right side lies a highway, the straight path of successful movement. But on the left side, there is an abyss. The left-hand side is often an image of something ominous, in this case the threat of despair and loss of hope.

The imagery of birds is evident in another dream, this one of Nanette, in her late seventies:

I am in a room in a house, probably the dining room. There are several white doves fluttering against the window, with light coming through it. I am very carefully not to open the door. I am very concerned that they shouldn't go out of the house. They should stay. I feel very happy. I love it.

In this dream Nanette's birds present the dreamer with a very different feeling than we saw with Elizabeth's birds. Nanette in the dream finds herself in a house, a symbol of the self. This house contains several white doves and the dreamer is taking care to be sure that these birds don't escape, as if they were last contents of Pandora's box. Nanette's birds are "fluttering against the window" as if moving toward the light. The dream ends on a note of very positive feeling: her feeling "I love it" contrast sharply with Elizabeth's dream where she is unsure if she can keep her

bird alive or again where a bird guides her traveling on the highway near an abyss. The dreams of both Elizabeth and Nanette evoke different images of hope. Elizabeth wonders if she can keep her little bird of hope alive, while in Nanette's dream the birds of hope are maintained in the house (of the self), giving the dreamer happiness.

Patricia Garfield (Garfield, 2001, p. 230) cites the dream of a Romanian-American woman in her late seventies:

GOLDEN EARTH AND WHITE DOVES

[She] dreamed that she was lying down in a prairie, where the earth glittered like gold. She thought how lovely it would be to make a dress of the sparkling material.

The next night she had her favorite dream:

Several white doves fluttered against a sunlight window, with shafts of light flooding the dining room. She was careful not to open the door to let the birds out.

In the first dream, the dreamer is preparing the cloth herself in what Sufi mystics call the "body of light" fashioned out of gold. In the second dream, the white doves represent the transcendent soul seeking to be free

The coming of age is a paradox. At the level of the body, in the last stage of life we become, in Yeats' words, "but a paltry thing, A tattered coat upon a stick." The countervailing image is not the body but the soul, which can "clap its hands and sing." Aging, in short, entails a duality, of both vulnerability and strength. As May Sarton (Sarton, 1982, p. 56) put it, "Old age is not an illness, it is a timeless ascent. As power diminishes, we grow toward the light." This duality is apparent in the dream of Charlotte, an elderly woman, the day before she was scheduled to have an operation:

THE OLD RUSSIAN REFUGEE

There are some tattered Russian refugees in the back of a truck. I'm eager to see them, curious about them. I walk rapidly over to them, and help an old lady down from the back of the truck. She has dark, bright eyes and looks frail and wise. She puts her hand over my arm. We have a feeling of good humor, and we smile at each other.

I find that it will take all my strength to support her! Then I realize that my smile is too bright. I suddenly have doubt, from fear and from my false eagerness. As soon as I realize that, however, I have a surge of strength: I feel responsible and know that I want to do it! I'm no longer afraid.

Karen Signell (Signell, 1990, pp. 278-279) explains the figure in this dream in terms of the archetype of the Wise Old Woman, the feminine version of the Elder Ideal. The elder here is a refugee, but the dreamer feels connected to her: “we smile at each other.” The vulnerability is there: “it will take all my strength to support her,” but then the dreamer feels “a surge of strength.” In the end, the dreamer is no longer afraid. A similar figure appears in one of the dreams of Sheila Moon (Moon, 1983, p. 136), in her late fifties:

BURST IN THE DARK NIGHT SKY

I am in a lovely large home, with a friend of mine, a woman artist, and we are doing feminine things like dusting, making beds, etc., to get ready for some event. She and I and an unknown woman, old and wise, are on a balcony looking at the night sky and stars. My friend speaks to me some visionary or prophetic sentence. I reply that is how I feel when I write fictions—it takes hold of me and I go flashing into space. This is how it is with the artist, I say, gesturing as I speak. I almost see something burst in the dark night sky.

For many people in our time, aging means moving into “the dark night sky” depicted in Sheila Moon’s dream. In a culture without any shared Elder Ideal aging can truly become a “dark night of the soul.” Without a positive image of later life, age is seen to be decline and darkness, as depicted in the “decline narratives” so prevalent in literature and our popular culture (Gullette, 2004).

This dark side of aging is present in “Burst in the Dark Night Sky” but something more is present, too. In Sheila Moon’s dream the night sky is illuminated by a burst of light, related to the illumination of this dream as Moon herself approached the age of 60. The dream begins, like so many “house” dreams, in “a lovely large home,” which is of course the habitation (self) of the dreamer herself. Two aspects of feminine identity are combined in this setting: domestic tasks and artistic creativity. If the house is the self, then these domestic tasks involve what Thomas Moore would call the care of the soul. The dreamer and her friend the artist stand on a balcony looking up at the night sky. They are accompanied by the Wise Old Woman, a figure perceived by Sheila Moon to be a helper and a source of energy, someone who presides over magical events.

The artist, also the voice the dreamer, is the source of visionary or prophetic truth. Paradoxically, this truth coincides with fiction: the same fictions that Sheila Moon herself would produce, as she did in writing children’s books in her later years. The dream seems to assure her that such creativity need not decline with age but will go on “flashing into space” and illuminating the night sky. More than a year later, in her early sixties, Sheila Moon would write in her journal (Moon, 1983, p. 160): “I feel more and more alone as I get older, especially when I am doing inner work, because through this work I am increasingly aware of my absolute uniqueness—an almost incomunicable uniqueness. Love becomes more rich but more wordless.”

In the dream “Burst in the Dark Night Sky” the Wise Old Woman still remains an “unknown woman.” She does not yet speak in fullness to the dreamer. But she is already a helper and so the dream conveys an optimistic attitude toward the coming of age.

Journey into Old Age

When does the journey into old age begin? There is no fixed chronological age. But it is true that certain ages—60 or 70 (“three score years and ten”)—tend to have symbolic significance. These special birthdays may awaken in us the awareness of beginning a journey into old age. Consider the following dream of a man, a married professional who had this dream just before his seventieth birthday (Glucksman, 2007, p. 129):

UNINVITED GUESTS AT THE PARTY

I was with a group of friends at a dinner party. We were engaged in lively conversation and having a good time. Suddenly, several strangers appeared among us, and interrupted our party. Then, I noticed two men, both dressed in black, who seemed rather menacing. They came toward me, and I walked away from them. I was afraid they were going to harm me, and I started running. As they ran after me, I noticed my dog running beside me. I was hoping he would somehow protect me, when he suddenly changed into a German shepherd. He snarled at the two men and began to attack them. They ran away, and I felt very relieved.

The dreamer in this case was quite able to interpret his own dream. He pointed out that one of the friends at the party was precisely his age (same day, month, and year) and were talking about their feelings about aging. He remembered that two of his friends had actually been dressed in black at the dinner and they made a joke about it. The color black of course is worn at funerals and in the dream the two men dressed in black are felt to be “menacing.” The dreamer himself felt that these two figures clearly represented his own future death. They were truly “uninvited guests” in his life at age 70. A dog of course is “man’s best friend” and commonly appears in dreams as a protective figure. In this dream, the animal changes into a powerful attack dog, a defense mechanism against threat of oncoming age.

Here is a dream, this one from an eighty-five year old (Johnson & Ruhl, 2007, pp. 222-

223), someone who had long been youthful but gradually began a transformation characteristic of the “old-old:”

ANOTHER WORLD

I dreamed that I awoke in another world that was entirely new to me. It was like a sudden arrival in the next world, a term frequently applied in my Baptist grandmother's religious monologues, carrying attached to it images of golden chariots, winged angels, streets of gold, divine choirs, and cherubs playing honeyed harps. I carried this vision of heaven too far into adulthood and paid a severe price for its promised happiness. The facts of my adulthood were very different from this golden motif and plunged me into different images. The dream visitation at age eighty-five placed me in a modest and even primitive house made entirely of brown adobe. It was earthen, with not a single straight line in its construction. There were a few people with me, all dressed in brown robes, standing about and not knowing who they were or what to do. I arrived in this world initially in a similar state of confusion but shocked enough to know that I must pull out of this cloud of unknowing. I brought all the tools I knew to bear on this oblivion and quite suddenly awoke to who I was and the need to take responsibility for my situation. I went from one person to another, each as caught in oblivion as I had been, and I managed to arouse each person into his present identity.

This brought about a great happiness and capacity to see the beauty and great dignity that we were in. I then left this group and wandered about through many rooms, discovering unexpected beauty and contentment. It was all characterized by the earth-brown color of the material of the building and our clothing. It was not entirely without gold. There was brilliant golden sunshine everywhere, inside and out, but no specific source of light. Everything seemed to give forth its own radiance and power. The dream had no end, and it left me exploring brown/golden radiant world.

In traditional religions the “promised happiness” of an afterlife is found in “the beyond.” But in the contemporary world old age itself may become a sort of afterlife, as in the dream “Another World.” Instead of an imagined paradise, this 85-year old dreamer finds a “primitive house made entirely of brown adobe.” This primitive dwelling, including the earth colors through the dream, is a vivid image of the last stage of life. The dreamer’s own interpretation is revealing: “The insistence on brown color (simplicity and

naturalness), the absence of overwrought decoration, and the lack of any straight lines (straight being the symbol of a patriarch, law-dominated culture), were the elements I needed to cure one-sidedness in the vision of paradise.”

Significantly, the other characters in the dream—all parts of the dreamer, as we understand—do not know who they are. But the dreamer is impelled to find a way out of this oblivion and confusion, so the dreamer helps enlighten each of these companions about their present identity. He tells them who they are, responding to the deepest question of selfhood: Who am I? The result is “great happiness” and a recognition of “beauty and great dignity,” despite dwelling in primitive quarters. The journey into this undiscovered country of old age is met by illumination, with “brilliant golden sunshine every” even without any specific source of light. The dream is a numinous evocation of enlightenment itself, of heavenly brilliance brought into contact with earthly habitation, a vivid image of ego integrity and supreme life satisfaction.

The dream, “Another World,” is cited by Robert Johnson, a noted Jungian psychologist, who tells us that, at the age of 27, he himself was an “unhappy youth,” in Zurich, undergoing analysis with Yolande Jacobi (Segaller & Berger, 1989, pp.49-50). At that time he had a profound, “epoch-making” dream, “really a summation of who I am, and what I am for, and what I am on the face of the earth to do.” He told the dream to his therapist, Dr. Jacobi. But she responded, “You’re a young man, that’s an old man’s dream, and you should dream dreams like that,” and she refused to discuss the dream further. But Jacobi’s response was not the last word. Robert Johnson’s dream came to the attention of no one less than Carl Jung himself. Jung said “I don’t care how old you are, you have to live that dream now.” Jung’s comment reinforces a point made earlier describing the

“Elder Ideal,” when I argued against the idea that “In our dreams we are always young.”

The archetypal totality of Robert Johnson’s dream, like the dream of an 85-year old, responds to ultimate questions about identity that can arise in youth or in old age.

We have seen at earlier point in life how the positive image of old age, the wise old person, appears in dreams. Here is another dream where the archetype of the Wise Old Woman appears prominently, this time to psychotherapist and writer Helen Luke (Luke, 2000, pp. 109-110), when she was among the “young-old,” at age 68:

THE WISE WOMAN

I dreamed that I had been with someone who had been a great help to me, but now I was in a large public building attending to some business or other. As I was about to leave, an acquaintance said to me, speaking of the person who had been so helpful, 'She will always be there at need.' I emerged from the building at the top of a long flight of stone steps and saw 'her' sitting in the raised driving seat of a horse-drawn wagon, holding whip and rein and waiting for me on the road.

Just then a policeman went up to her and told her to move on. She called a greeting to me merrily, saying, 'That's life-- moving on,' and with a shake of the reins she drove off. I was puzzled about it all, wondering why she had waited for me, since I surely had no need of her then, and wondering why she hadn't seemed in the least concerned about leaving me behind. Then suddenly I remembered that my child was playing outside the building and I had temporarily forgotten that she, being so young, might have been in trouble without someone to keep an eye on her. Then in the dream a feeling of great happiness and freedom came over me.

Helen Luke at age 68 is moving fully into the last stage of life, as if she has been preparing for this all of her life. The dreamer is met by a figure who has always “been a great help to me,” namely, the figure of the Wise Old Woman, or the Elder Ideal. This figure “will always be there at need,” she is reassured by an acquaintance. At the opening of the dream, the helping figure is already waiting for the dreamer. But then a policeman comes up and tells her “to move on.” The policeman in this dream may represent a

punitive voice, but the dream helper is undeterred by this negative element: “That’s life—moving on.” At that point, the dreamer remembers another figure, the Eternal Child, who needs “someone to keep an eye on her.” No matter how old we grow there remains in each of us this childlike element, the impulse of play, the possibility of new growth. Here is the “emancipated innocence” evoked by Allen Chinen as the goal of elder tales. Helen Luke’s dream concludes with “a feeling of great happiness and freedom” arising from the encounter with these two figures in herself, an image of Age and an image of Youth.

Can we generalize about the dreams of people of advanced age? Empirical studies have been done on this point but they have limitations. For example, a classic study of dreams among people over age 65 was carried out in 1961. The subjects were all living in a nursing home and most had symptoms of severe physical decline. Barad and his colleagues (Barad, Altshuler, & Goldfarb, 1961) described the dreams of this sample as almost without exception displaying “a preoccupation with loss of resources.” They went on: “The dreamer is represented as weakened, lost, frequently unable to complete an action, frustrated, vulnerable and threatened by loss of his previous control over himself and his milieu.”

But the results of this study should be approached with caution. Fewer than 5% of people over the age of 65 are living in nursing homes, so their profoundly negative dream content should not be generalized toward the other 95%. By contrast, when Barad and his colleagues went on to study a group of relatively prosperous and active elders, they found no such themes of loss and decline. On the contrary, “Their dreams were more richly elaborated, detailed, and varied. The dreamer often saw himself as active in pursuit of a goal...” I would imagine that if we systematically studied the

dreams, say, of Elderhostel participants, we would find a very different picture than what Barad and his colleagues found among nursing home residents.

Here is a dream of Helen Luke, age 80, recorded in her journal (Luke, 2000, p. 232):

UNDERGROUND JOURNEY

I dreamed I had been on a long journey underground. A number of individuals were on the same way. There was no sense of underground trains, just empty dark ground on which we had walked. Now after a last stretch we were moving towards the surface at the exit nearest to 'home,' which was our goal. A brief last bit of rising ground was ahead.

I was waiting, however, before going on because I thought my mother--- who had not traveled with me for the last part of the journey, having chosen another way-- would want to be reassured that I had arrived safely at this point where the alternative ways met. It felt as though many traveled on this underground way, but each was alone--- though there was a sense of comradeship.

I waited awhile and then I saw my 'mother' arriving. She was slender, dark-haired, middle-aged-- she recognized me and nodded a greeting and walked on. I was relieved and released to continue my way to the exit. She was wearing a trim suit of natural-colored moire silk or perhaps linen. All the others I had seen were in darkish dress. She did not physically resemble my memories of my mother.

This dream recalls the ancient Near Eastern tale of the goddess Inanna and her descent into the underworld, the realm of the dead (Perera, 1981; Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983). To reach the underworld she must pass through seven thresholds and at each stage remove an ornament from her body: crown, earrings, necklace, and so on. These "ornaments" represent aspects of the conventional self that mask the true self, "the face we had before we were born." As the dream begins, the dreamer has a sense of homecoming. It is at this point that she meets her "mother." But the dream image of her mother does not physically resemble her memories of her actual mother. Physical resemblance, like the ornaments of the self, belong to the world of appearances: clothing, masks, coverings of all

kinds. In this dream the mother is dressed in a more "natural-colored" garment, while the other figures were "in darkish dress," perhaps befitting the underworld.

Marianne Kimmitt (2000) would see in Helen Luke's dream a confirmation of a profound mythic understanding of female life transitions. Kimmitt argues that in our culture aging tends to be seen as a purely chronological or biological process rather than as a psycho-spiritual transition. In her view, the linear and "heroic" approach to the life-course cannot adequately account for female development. Beyond the linear time of our culture there is the image of a different kind of cyclical time which could promise rebirth.

This pattern is documented by Claire De Andrade (2001) in her book *Becoming the Wise Woman*, which depicts midlife as a developmental stage in a woman's life involving a transformation of identity, stimulated by events, planned or unplanned. These triggering events become metaphors for a "descent into the underworld" as displayed in myths and stories such as Inanna or Persephone, the classic Greek myth of Mother-Daughter encounter. The transformation invokes the archetype of the Wise Woman and can be traced in the life story of Helen Luke, culminating in her own book *Old Age* and expressed, most beautifully, in the filmed interviews of Luke herself, at age 90, "In Search of the Sacred."

Brenneis (1975) reports on changes in women's inner experience in dreams based on a comparison of dreams of older women (aged 40 to 85) in contrast to dreams from two groups of younger women (aged 18 to 26 and 16 to 17 years). Brenneis found a narrowing of internal personal involvement, a diminishing in concerns over aggression, and a decrease in the dreamer's sense of herself as central (ego preoccupation). Such

trends are consistent with what Tornstam describes as gerotranscendance in later life. Brenneis specifically notes a decline in negative emotions, a finding consistent with Laura Carstensen's theory of "socio-emotional selectivity" in the psychological process of normal aging (Carstensen, 1999).

The gifts reserved for age include something that youth cannot understand: the possibility of detachment with joy, as in this dream of Helen Luke (Luke, 2000, p. 247) at age 84:

A BURNING HOUSE

I dreamed of a house in which I was living, with other people living in other rooms of it. There was a fire in adjacent property and the firemen were at work, but it began to look as though our house was threatened. I was talking to a fireman and he asked whose house it was. I suddenly realized that it was not a place I had rented temporarily but my own house. I said so clearly, yet at the same time felt a kind of clarity and release, as though if it burned down no one but myself would be the loser, and it didn't matter to me much. There was no sense of danger to anyone's life in the dream, only to possessions.

As we have seen before, this dream image of one's own house can often symbolize the self or the totality of the dreamer's personality. In this dream the aged Helen Luke has recognized that the last stage of life entails loss: burning down or destruction of what she had taken her self to be. She "suddenly realized" that this life of hers was not "rented temporarily" but was indeed her actual existence, her "one and only life cycle, one that permitted no substitutions," as Erik Erikson phrased it. Erikson, of course, classically framed the distinctive psychological struggle of old age as "ego-integrity versus despair."

In "A Burning House," faced with loss, Helen Luke's attitude is far from one of despair. Her attitude at first seems perplexing. Rather than integrity or self-affirmation,

Luke feels "a kind of clarity and release" when her house is burning down. The feeling of the dream embodies a movement the great medieval mystic Meister Eckhart called "Gelassenheit" or "letting go." In this condition of detachment Luke can look upon herself and say "No one but myself would be the loser, and it didn't matter much."

In terms that parallel Erikson's last stage of life, Robert Peck (1968) framed the struggle of later life as "ego-preoccupation versus ego-transcendence." In this dream, Helen Luke's sees her own life-- her memories, her past, her very self-- as mere "possessions," which are indeed endangered by the fire. Her life in its ultimate sense is something more, and she has moved from ego-preoccupation toward a measure of transcendence, of letting go.

Finally, here is one more dream from Helen Luke, this one at age 88, recorded in her journal (Luke, 2000, p. 251):

WAITING

*I dreamed that I saw three (or perhaps four) tall containers of plain glass-- too tall for even the tallest flowers, not tall enough to be holders of umbrellas. They were of slightly varying heights but all were of clear white, smooth, transparent glass. They were **empty**, and all shininly **clean**, and I felt they were standing there waiting to be filled with that for which they were made. And again as I watched I felt they were a part of my life ready now to receive their meaning, their truth, and I was grieving that I did not know how to fill them or with what, but somehow knew, in T.S. Eliot's words from 'The Four Quartets,' that 'the faith and the love and the hope are all in the **waiting**...'*

Eliot's poem is a meditation on age which ends with the words

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Helen Luke's dream, as the dreamer herself now understands, is about "knowing

the place for the first time:" that is, becoming clear or empty enough to be filled by-- by what? The dreamer cannot say. A lifetime of effort (until age 88) and the answer is still unknown: hence, the affirmation of faith. Above all, "Waiting" is a dream about patience, a message from Helen Luke to herself and a reminder to us all, who are also waiting as our own lives unfold.

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