GROWING OLDER GRACEFULLY. GROWING OLDER GRATEFULLY\*

\*Sometimes changing as little as one letter opens up new possibilities.

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Aging is a time of mental, psychological and spiritual growth. We prepare for our future physical and economic health. Our psycho-spiritual health is just as important as we progress thru our life cycle. Understanding the psychology of aging provides a lens thru which we can view our lives and direct our growth in healthy ways. These ideas are based on Erik and Joan Erikson’s book, *Life Cycle Completed (Extended Version)*. He and his wife Joan wrote initially about childhood development and extended it to *Old Age* when they were in their 50’s and 60’s. Their discussion about *Old-Old Age* was written when Erik was in his 90’s.

We continue to grow throughout our life cycle, from infancy to old-old age. Healthy growth at each stage requires developing skills and attitudes as we face the challenges of that stage. The age ranges included in each stage are only rough approximations and vary from person to person. In *Adulthood* (roughly mid 20’s thru 50’s and 60’s) Erikson emphasizes that we must develop the practice of *Generativity* to avoid stagnation and self-absorbtion. We give to others by the services or products we offer, directing our efforts to the benefit of other people. Erikson describes this as developing the *Virtue of Caring.*

In Stage VIII, *Old Age,* (60’s to late 70’s) the task is to develop a different kind of *Integrity* and thus *Wisdom* to prevent falling into Despair or Disgust.He goes back to the etymologic roots of the words. *Wisdom* comes from the Sanskrit verb *Veda:* *to see, to know* and the Sumerian word *Enki: to hear. Integrity* comes from the Latin *tactus, to touch.*

“Wisdom belongs to the world of actuality to which our senses give us access. It is with our senses that we understand thru sight and hearing, as well as scent, taste, and touch. **The role of wisdom is to guide our investment in sight and sound and to focus our capacities on what is relevant, enduring, and nourishing, both for us individually and for the society in which we live.”**

Wisdom is an “informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself.” The opposite of wisdom is *Disdain:* a reaction to feeling (and seeing others) in an increasing state of being finished, confused, helpless. The other opposite to wisdom is “despair,” in contrast with the infant strength of Hope. The ultimate form of hope is *Faith.*

*Integrity* is based upon touching, “With our bodies we respond to the holy, the powerful, the wise messages of earth and the heavens. It is in actuality that we live and move and share the earth with one another. Integrity has the function of promoting contact with the world, with things, and with people. **“*Integrity* is a wonderfully challenging word. It demands no strenuous deliberation or performance, just everyday management of all major and minor activities, with all the steadfast attention to detail necessary for a day well lived. It is all so simple, so direct, and so difficult.”**

“Integrity offers a sense of coherence and wholeness, at risk because of loss of connections with social, interpersonal, worldly relationships. We almost need new word, “integrality,” a tendency to keep things together.”

Erikson died before he could write extensively about the last stage, *Old-Old Age* associated with the concept of *Gero-transcendence.* This is a relatively new word and concept. Research on aging revealed that certain individuals developed attitudes and skills that allowed them to go beyond many of the challenges of old age. The characteristics of gero-transcendence include:

* becoming less self-occupied and more selective in one’s choice of social and other activities,
* an increased feeling, attachment and curiosity with past generations,
* a decreased interest in superficial or unnecessary social interaction,
* taking care of the body continues without being obsessed about it,
* a decreased interest in material things and a greater need for “meditation”,
* positive solitude becomes more important,
* decrease in right-wrong duality is accompanied by an increased broadmindedness & sense of tolerance,
* the fear of death disappears and a new understanding of life & death emerges,
* an increased feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe,
* a redefinition of time, space, life and death.

Obstacles to the *Gerotranscendence* process include:

* job preoccupation or the inability to reorient to life so that identity is no longer dependent on previous work role;
* body preoccupation, being attuned to and fearful of every new ailment and being unable to transcend the body, nevertheless taking care of ones physical condition without focusing on it;
* ego preoccupation or the inability to reorient to the self as mortal and accept that death will come to us all.

It must be acknowledged that some individuals reach this stage of life at much earlier ages.