

No Longer Kicking and Screaming

By

Gary Toub

It is a funny thing writing about being old, because in some ways I don't feel old at all. I used to think of my elderly friends as being old, but not me. But now that I am starting my seventh decade, I think I'd better start being more honest with myself.

My denial has, I suspect, been with me for quite some time. I recall that around 12 years ago, I had a health emergency while dining in an upscale restaurant. I just wanted to go home, but I physically could not stand up, let alone walk to my car, even with the assistance of my wife. So, an ambulance was called and there I was on the floor of the restaurant looking up at several of the restaurant staff and EMTs trying to help me. To my amazement, they all looked very *young*. They looked like kids to me.

That was my wake-up call, at least one of them. Yes, they were indeed young adults and, lo and behold, I suddenly realized I was the one who had gotten old. I wasn't young anymore, at least not as young as I thought.

Another sure sign that I had gotten old was realizing I was now doing what I'd always seen "old folks" comically depicted as doing—talking with each other about their aches and pains, constipation, sleep problems, and assorted health problems and doctor visits. I have to say, though, I now know what a comfort it is to talk about these things with friends who understand. Misery loves company!

I've noticed for a long time that my spirit continued to feel pretty young. That is, I felt young *inside* even though my body was aging. I still do not *feel* my chronological age, but I have to admit the younger spirit held captive in this aging body is also experiencing a decline. I can't remember things as well as before, and it has gotten harder and harder to concentrate and multi-task, the very things I took for granted in my earlier years. I have less energy and get fatigued much easier than in the past. I don't sleep well and I am often less sharp and creative than I remember being in my "heyday."

Where once I was lithe and athletic, I am now physically limited ... in oh so many

ways. Gone are the days I could go on long runs, play tennis and racquetball, work in the garden, and carry heavy shopping bags loaded with groceries. Now, washing a few dishes can literally be a back-breaking chore. Just getting out of bed some mornings is a challenge!

So, what do I make of all these changes? Begrudgingly, I have come to understand that the aging process has become my teacher. It forces me to be attentive to my limitations. It tells me it is a time in my life that I am to learn to slow down, do much less, and let others do things for me. Out of necessity, I am required to sit and rest more and let others, much younger and energetic than me, go on with the busy-ness of life.

I resisted these lessons for a while--and to be honest, I still do. I was always a pretty independent, self-sufficient kind of guy. I prided myself on being able to take care of myself and had learned to be a jack of all trades. If my car needed a tune-up or an oil change, I figured out how to do it myself. When things broke at home, I could often fix them. I felt proud of the fact that I could lay down a new bathroom floor, install ceiling tiles, plant an organic garden, or repair broken vases or furniture.

But something very interesting has happened to me over recent years. I began realizing it wasn't so bad to get help. In fact, I started to *like* getting others to do these things for me. This meant paying a handyman, a gardener, a repairman, or mechanic to do the things I had once done all by myself. It also translated into asking my wife to drive the car or carry heavy objects, things I once easily did myself. I got over my self-consciousness—taking myself so seriously—and have gotten used to being helped, served, and assisted.

This reminds me of a similar story told by the widely known author and spiritual teacher, Ram Dass. After he suffered a debilitating stroke, he could do very little without assistance. He describes having the same kind of discomfort I experienced having to depend on other people to do things for him, like push him around in his wheelchair. But then he had an epiphany. He began thinking of himself as extremely fortunate to have loving helpers to wheel him around in his mobile “throne.”

Interestingly, 30 years ago I published an article, “The Usefulness of the Useless,” which discussed a Taoist tale about a useless old tree. Among other things, I interpreted the story as teaching that when we are too “useful” to the world, it is next to impossible to become our true selves, to individuate, as Jungians call it. In the story, the tree explained that if it had been useful to others, they would have stripped it of its fruit and cut off its limbs. But since it was considered useless with its gnarled branches and limbs, it was left alone to grow into its full stature. I didn't realize that all these years later, in my old age, I would literally live out this very teaching. I am more useless than ever now, and, paradoxically, I feel more whole and more complete. I am learning to accept and embrace both my strength and weakness, my independence and dependence, my competence and incompetence, and my usefulness and uselessness.

Of all the psychologies and philosophies I have studied over the years, the one that

resonated with me most profoundly was the psycho-spiritual teachings put forth by Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung. Like Jung, I have come to believe that wholeness is one of the central goals and tasks of life, particularly in the second half of life. It was helpful, too, to hear Jung posit that the task of the second half of life is spiritual development. Jungian psychology provided a compass for me, as well as practical tools I could employ as I aged. Jung emphasized the importance of discovering one's *mythos*, or personal meaning in life, and developing a connection with one's divine inner center, what he called the Self, a concept he borrowed from Hindu philosophy.

The central means I've used for connecting to the Self and learning about my *mythos* has been a regular and ongoing study of the messages from my unconscious, particularly in my dreams. With the aid of my talented Jungian analyst, Jeff Raff, I have found exquisite guidance in my dreams, guidance that has helped me learn about myself, who I really am and who I need to be to live my own authentic and unique life. I've been using this method for the last 40 years and it has made a huge impact on understanding myself and my life.

Jung felt we could continue to develop and mature throughout our adult life, right up until we die, and that there were very important challenges for the later stages of life. I have found this to be very true in my case. In 2015, I decided to semi-retire from my Denver-based Jungian analyst practice and move to a simpler life in picturesque Eureka Springs, Arkansas. I imagined a relaxing life in a beautiful, artistic, small town nestled in the hills and woods of northwest Arkansas. I delighted in the fact that it was populated by a considerable number of artists and retired hippies. I soon found that it wasn't going to be that easy, however, and that what the Self had in mind for me was something much different. I knew I was in trouble when I started having dreams of aliens invading and blowing everything up.

When I was younger, I didn't have any trouble with change. In fact, I embraced it. I relocated a number of times, moving from one job to another every few years. I also married and divorced a couple of times. Oddly enough, this time I was surprised to find myself having a lot of resistance to moving and letting go of the life I had been living in Denver. And after I moved, I seemed lost and unsure of how to live my new life. I found that while I was ready for some things to change, I still wanted a lot of things to stay the same, especially things that I thought nourished me and supported my identity. I should have known better!

I have learned the hard way that life is impermanent and ever-changing. I knew this was the case intellectually, especially having been a serious student and practitioner of Taoism, which emphasizes this very thing. But knowing things in your head and integrating them in your life are entirely different things. I knew from my dreams that my unconscious was telling me that things would be changing and that I needed to align myself with that fact. Jung once said that we had two choices in life: we could be dragged along our path kicking and screaming, or we could get up and walk on the path

before us. Well, my wife can attest to the fact that I did my share of kicking and screaming! But with the support and urging of my analyst, I slowly—and I do mean slowly—accepted that life was changing and that I needed a new outlook and understanding of who I was and how I needed to live my life *now*.

Among other things, I stepped out of my typically introverted lifestyle and got much more active politically. My marriage was changing, too, and I found I needed to find new friends and new ways of nourishing myself. I started going to drumming circles and music concerts. I took art classes. I joined a Buddhist meditation group. I attended the local Unitarian Universalist church. After having experienced burnout with the teaching and training I'd done in Denver, I found new energy to teach and lecture on my favorite Jungian topics in and around my new community. I also started writing, painting, and doing crafts I liked.

But it wasn't just outer, extraverted activity that was new. I was able to utilize meditation and active imagination (a Jungian form of imaginal inner work) to connect with new and deeper parts of myself. My dreams introduced me to several new spiritual figures with whom I was able to commune in these introverted exercises. Spending regular time in these states of reverie and ecstasy became essential for my sense of happiness and wellbeing.

No longer kicking and screaming (most of the time!), I am walking on a much different path than I ever expected. I know now it is the way it must be, the way it is—at least for me, but surely for others too. Having had the help of Jung's wisdom has made all the difference for me navigating the unexpected twists and turns of my life, including my aging. I do not know how it would have been had I not had that compass and those tools to help keep me focused on my life's path.

Gary Toub is a diplomate Jungian analyst practicing in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, where he provides dream interpretation, spiritual direction, and assistance in self-actualization. He has over 40 years of clinical experience. In addition to his private practice, Dr. Toub is a Senior Training Analyst at the C. G. Jung Institute of Colorado, where he has supervised and trained clinicians and taught numerous classes to the general public. Dr. Toub has published numerous articles on Jungian psychology. His popular article on Taoist philosophy and Jungian psychology, "The Usefulness of the Useless," was published in *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature* (C. Zweig & J. Abrams, Eds., 1991). In his free time, he likes to take long walks, meditate, read, write, listen to music, hang out with his two cats, and work on various art projects.