



The Autumn of Life

by Susan Olson

Several years ago I wrote an article for this newsletter entitled “Lilacs in September.” It was a reflection on the “third half of life,” which begins at about age 50. Now, having passed another major milestone and embarked upon my eighth decade, I am reflecting again on the stages of life, as described by Jung in a 1930 essay. At that time he was 55, just entering the autumn of his own life, not knowing that he had 30 more years ahead of him. I often wonder what he would have written about life’s “stages” from the vantage point of a 60, 70, or even 80 years old. The last decades of his life were marked by illness and loss, but also by renewed creativity, closeness to nature, and extended periods of quiet spiritual reflection. Like Jung, we have no way of knowing what awaits us as we pass our major milestones. But his life offers hints of what can emerge in the Autumn of our days.

At age 69, Jung suffered a near-fatal heart attack and lingered for weeks between life and death. During this time he had a “near-death experience,” including ecstatic visions of the mystic marriage. Finally the image of his doctor appeared to him in a vision, instructing him to return to life and take up his unfinished tasks. From Jung’s letters, we learn that for the rest of his life he lived with compromised health and could not travel, work, or lecture at his former pace. But in his final years he revised many of his earlier writings, dictated his memoirs, wrote about alchemy and the coniunctio, and continued, as always, to record his dreams. He spent more time at his Bollingen retreat, often in solitude, where he painted, sat by the lake, carved in stone, and enjoyed his “feeling of kinship with all things.” (MDR, p. 392)

Instead of envisioning life in only two stages, as did Jung in his 50’s, I am beginning to imagine it as a cycle echoing the rhythm of the four seasons. In Spring we are fresh and tender, just budding into the plants we will eventually become. Summer brings full blossoming as we take shape and produce the

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leaves that nourish us, the flowers that delight our senses, and the seeds that will ripen into fruit or produce new plants. Autumn is the season of harvest, when we flame into glorious color and gather in and store what we have created. But it also heralds Winter, as light fades, barren branches shake with cold, and the ground beneath our feet glistens with frost. But in this bleak season, deep within the frozen earth, seeds lie dormant and await the warmth that will coax them into life again.

In human life, the arrival of Autumn is often announced by a sudden frost—an event that pierces our hearts and chills the blood in our veins. Often it is an experience of loss, or of a grave illness like Jung’s life-threatening heart attack. Many of us who have lived long enough to enter this season are managing chronic illnesses that will be with us for the rest of our lives. Others are mourning the loss of a child, a spouse or an ex-spouse, or formerly satisfying work. For some of us, life energy is eroded by the cumulative stress of long-standing marital discord, the emotional fallout from a nasty divorce, or the ache of loneliness. Sometimes an old loss raises its head again, reminding us that there is more grieving to be done. Of course, such events occur in all seasons of life. But the losses that herald the arrival of Autumn foreshadow the ultimate loss that is to come. Heightened awareness of the inevitability of death focuses our attention on the time that still remains. How are we going to spend the rest of our days? What really matters to us? What do we need to give up, and what inspires renewed energy and commitment?

The film that we watched in August, “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel,” is the story of seven aging Britishers who ask the same questions and respond by seeking new life in a hotel “for the aged and beautiful” in India. The chief character, endearingly portrayed by Judi Dench, is a recent widow whose husband left her in dire financial straits despite his promise to

take care of her. A distinguished judge, who gradually reveals to the other pilgrims that he is gay (but does not reveal that he suffers from a serious heart condition), returns to India to find the lover he abandoned in his youth. A married couple, having lost their retirement nest-egg in an ill-advised loan to their daughter, seek in their journey the solace that they cannot find in each other. A bitter woman (played to crusty perfection by Maggie Smith), stocked with an ample supply of xenophobia and pickles (her own special comfort food), travels to India to have the quick hip replacement surgery she cannot obtain at home. The company is rounded out by two aging Lotharios, a man and a woman, who are looking for love to quench their loneliness. This retinue of pilgrims, inspired by online images of Shangri-La, meets for the first time in the airport when their connecting flight is cancelled. As they board a crowded bus to their destination, which turns out to be a shoddy hotel on the verge of bankruptcy, their autumn adventure begins.

The rest of the story follows the characters as they adjust to the new life they have chosen. Some plunge right in and venture into the unfamiliar world to find a job, explore ancient temples, search for a lost love, or seek a new one. Others are beset by anxiety and hide out in the hotel, refusing to engage with others or even to try the new food that has been prepared for them. The theme of death announces itself in the first scene, in which the Judi Dench character is coping with the sudden loss of her husband, and appears again in comic and tragic moments throughout the film, culminating in the death and funeral of one of the seven pilgrims. By the end of the story, it is clear that most of the characters have what it takes to survive in their new environment, while one does not. One dies in a state of grace, having accomplished what he set out to do. One returns to England, and the others gain the new life they were seeking—but not in the form they had imagined. In a series of unpredictable



events, the dilapidated hotel is refurbished and its aging residents enter into the fullness of the Autumn of life.

As I reflect on this story, I find myself asking, “What is it that makes the difference?” What enables most of the characters to thrive in their new situation, even if it is difficult at first, while one character cannot adapt? I think the distinction lies in the ability to let go of the past, to embrace the present, and to imagine a radically different future. The characters who “make it” are able to slough off their old, outworn attitudes and to adopt new ones. With little left to lose, they allow their old ego-orientation to “die” so that a new one can come into being. The Judi Dench character puts it well when she compares her new environment, with its onslaught of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes, to an enormous wave. To resist is to be swept away, she observes, but “if you dive right in you’ll come out on the other side.”

Caring relationships, often found in unexpected places, also nourish the formation of new attitudes. The old housekeeper played by Maggie Smith discovers that the people of color she initially rejects are also people of heart who treat her more warmly than the former employers who dismissed her after years of service. Her transformation begins when she identifies with the “untouchable” woman who keeps house for the hotel, accepts an invitation to her home, and accepts food from her hand. From a frightened, bitter old woman furtively munching on her hoard of cookies and pickles, she gradually evolves into the observer who notices everything that is transpiring at the hotel, devises a plan for its survival, and becomes its savvy and congenial manager. When she rises from her wheelchair and stands on her own two legs at last, she claims the new stance that will support her for the rest of her life. By opening up and receiving nourishment from the “untouchable” housekeeper, she learns to touch and be touched by the warmth that surrounds her.

Near the end of the film, the pilgrims mourn the loss of one of their own and celebrate the love and forgiveness he found before his death. As they grieve and reflect on the brevity of life, it is clear that they have evolved from a motley crew of isolates into a fellowship of kindred spirits, connected to one another and to the cycle of life and death. Gathered around their friend’s funeral pyre, each is alone, yet linked to the new community they have created. Mourning for what is dead and gone liberates them to claim the new life that awaits them, whatever it may bring.

In the film, the individuation path of the young hotel owner and his sweetheart, who overcome family resistance to their blossoming relationship, leads to new vistas and visions of the future. They are at the vernal equinox of their lives, when the buds of Spring are opening and life seems full of endless opportunity. In contrast, the aged and beautiful pilgrims have passed the Fall equinox and are nearing the Winter solstice. The fruits of their labors are gathered in, their vistas are narrowing, and their windows of opportunity are closing. Like Jung in his old age, their pace is slower and their options are limited. But like him, they also discover that their creative juices are still flowing. At the end of the story, they find the courage to begin new relationships and to embrace the richness of their new world. As we see them joyfully engaged in life once more, it is not difficult to imagine the Autumn of life, with its falling leaves and golden light, as a season of luminous beauty and rare delight.