

The Heart's Path

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"A path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you . . . Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself alone, one question . . . Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't it is of no use."
— Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan*

I first read this quote by Carlos Castaneda about a path with a heart when I was in my mid-30's. I knew I liked what it said, but I couldn't at the time relate it to my life. Now, as I reach 70 years of life experience, I feel I am truly on my heart's path. My journey to find my heart's path began in earnest about 14 years ago, when I retired from a life-long career as a research scientist. Since that time, I have explored a number of paths, but over the years have now settled on one which brings me peace, joy and fulfillment—truly my heart's path. I'd like to tell you my story, but first a little background.

Doing and Being

Most of us spend the early years of our lives involved in “doing”—doing the work we need to do as students, parents, homemakers and workers. Driven largely by our egos and our need to succeed, this is the time when we work hard to create our identities in the world, growing from youth through adolescence to adulthood, probably developing a loving relationship with someone, perhaps raising a wonderful family and hopefully establishing a successful career, either in the work force or at home. In order to be “successful,” we put great intellectual, emotional and physical energy into creating the lives we think we want.

However, we pay a price if our success in life is based primarily on satisfying others' expectations. If we see our identity as “husband” (or wife), “parent,” “employee,” or “boss,” then who are we, really? Are we defined by the roles we play, as opposed to the persons we truly are? Do we buy success by giving up our identity, and largely playing roles established by others? In our early years, this may lead to success, but does it bring fulfillment? The good news is, in our later years we have another chance to find out who we really are, and to become the person we truly want to be.

When we get to the second half of our lives, we have the unique opportunity and great gift to spend time in “being.” At this stage in our lives, our children may be grown and gone and we may be considering retirement from the work force or have fewer responsibilities around the home. This is a time when we often feel called to begin our inner work, to begin to ask and answer important life questions, such as: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of

my life? What am I called to do next? How can I use my elder wisdom in the world? Our answers to these questions can help us to define the path we will take as we continue to mature and grow into elderhood. But how do we do the inner work that will help us to answer these questions?

Paths to Inner wisdom

Inner work by definition involves going inside to find answers to our questions. There are many possible paths to finding our inner wisdom. We may do this by meditating, by spending time thinking about no-thing. Emptying our minds of everyday thoughts may help us to bring up wisdom from our unconscious. The quiet of meditation itself may bring great peace. Meditation retreats may bring additional valuable perspective, through sharing the meditative experience with other seekers.

Another path to inner wisdom involves spiritual questing. As we enter our elder years many of us experience a particular yearning for a spiritual connection with a higher power or source of wisdom (God; Inner Elder), with nature (living things; the earth; the cosmos), or with other persons (humanity; community; family). We can explore our spirituality through formalized religion, through books or discussions with “gurus” or friends, by spending time in nature or with other seekers, and through meditation or prayer.

Inner wisdom and personal identity can also be explored through values clarification work, through time spent with counselors, coaches or therapists, through support groups, through deep conversations with friends and through participation in various retreats. Success in reaching new insights and inner wisdom is probably less dependent on the method we employ to get there than on the intention to do the work.

When will we know that we have attained inner wisdom? Of course, finding inner wisdom can be and probably will be a goal we pursue for the rest of our lives, but here are some guidelines. We have gained wisdom when we find we are less driven for personal gain and more interested in the welfare of others; when we find we have a compassionate heart, and our actions confirm this; and when we find ourselves filled with immense gratitude for this life we are leading, for our friends and family, and for the many opportunities that life offers us. At the same time, we acknowledge that there are challenges we must face as we grow older, and we do so with grace.

The Dance of Doing and Being

We don't simply go from “doing” in our early years to “being” in our later years. Actually, there is a second kind of “doing” in the second half of life, a “doing” informed by our developing inner wisdom. This new kind of “doing” is outwardly-directed rather than ego-driven. It is

doing for others rather than for ourselves. It is being of service to others, giving back after receiving much in life, working for causes that you believe are important, or being a mentor or role model for others.

Both “being” and “doing” are important in the second half of life, and you will likely find yourself in a dance back and forth between being and doing. Development of inner wisdom may lead you to engage in activities that reinforce or support the new ideas, values or answers that come from inner work. Conversely, participating in outwardly directed work may trigger the development of new insights that add to inner wisdom. It becomes a beautiful dance, with being stimulating doing, and doing encouraging being. The being and doing are synergistic, with the result being a vital, wholesome, fulfilling and productive lifestyle that can serve us throughout our elder years.

My Personal Journey

In 1997 at age 56, I retired from a scientific career. In 30 years at Sandia National Laboratories, I had accomplished most of what I intended as a research scientist and technical manager. The last of our children was recently grown and out of the house, and my wife Charlotte and I were ready for the next developments in our lives and our relationship as empty-nesters.

I can't emphasize strongly enough the vital role relationships can play in one's life path. In my own life, my most important relationship has been with Charlotte. During the early years of our marriage, our love had grown solid and we had become best friends as well as lovers. As I contemplated retiring and entering a new phase of life she was a cheerleader for me. Since my retirement, we have continued to grow and to support each other in our various interests. Charlotte's support has been critical to my growth into elderhood.

Contemplating retirement, I knew I wanted to take on some new challenges, although I didn't see clearly what those might be. Two activities that interested me strongly at that time were pottery and conscious aging. I had been a pretty good hobby potter for the previous 20 years, and wanted to see whether I could develop a successful studio pottery business. I had also just finished reading *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's groundbreaking book on changing the paradigm of aging, and was interested in exploring further what role conscious aging might play in my coming elder years. Additionally, I had begun thinking about ways I might use some of my new free time in volunteer activities.

When I retired, I went from being a full-time scientist working for a large corporation one day to a full-time self-employed studio potter the next. That was a bit of a shock, going from a largely left-brain (intellectual) job to a mostly right-brain (creative) activity essentially overnight. It was challenging and exhilarating to learn new skills and start a new business, and I found I loved the

challenge and the change of identity that being a potter represented. Charlotte claims that I became more centered personally as I worked at centering clay on the wheel. During the next several years, I honed my skills as a potter and developed a very successful business which I still pursue, although not with the same intensity.

By 1999, I was also becoming more involved in my inner work. Since then I have read voraciously in the areas of conscious aging, cultural anthropology and human potential development. I began to spend more time in nature, especially watching birds, and began to feel a stronger and stronger connection with all of the animals and plants that I share this earth with. I developed a sitting meditation practice and more recently have begun a Tai Chi practice, a form of moving meditation. I have taken part in many workshops on such diverse topics as Spiritual Eldering, Death and Dying, Men's Wellness and Deep Ecology, which have all engaged my growing interest in my life and why I am here.

At the same time, the inner work was stirring in me a desire to be engaged in new outward-directed work. My wife Charlotte and I both completed a training program in Spiritual Eldering, which led me to develop a third career as a Sage-ing Leader educator. My enthusiasm for this work led me to work with others to create a new national organization for Sage-ing Leaders, the Sage-ing Guild. From its inception, I have been one of the leaders of the Sage-ing Guild, and see further development of this organization as my principal work in the future. My goal is for the Sage-ing Guild and related organizations to become widely-recognized sources of knowledge about conscious aging that all persons can access for their own personal growth.

Interspersed with the studio pottery work and the sage-ing work, I have also engaged in volunteer work, first working the front desk at the local Nature Center and then teaching computer skills at my local library. For the past eight years, I have been a hospice volunteer, and the experiences I have had caring for hospice patients have been invaluable in enriching my own understanding of death and dying. Hospice was a form of outer work that naturally led me back into my own inner thoughts about life's meaning.

I recently had an opportunity to travel to Tanzania, Africa with Richard Leider and a group of elder men to "inventure," a form of inner adventure that involved sharing wisdom with each other and with indigenous elders, spending time in contemplation and taking long walks to experience our surroundings in the African savanna. This trip awakened in me a heightened sense of the beauties of nature, and of our responsibility to be stewards of our earth, not its exploiters. It has caused me to clarify many of my values and has been an important catalyst for new spiritual growth.

I am so grateful for having the experience of living in this time and place, with the many challenges and opportunities I have had, and for being able to give back in some small way and leave a legacy for my children, grandchildren and the next seven generations. These years of growing into elderhood, with its inner and outer work, have been the best time of my life without a doubt, and I expect the joys of living and growing to continue as I enter my eighth decade.

The Heart's Path

My path has of course been uniquely mine, but others could probably tell similar stories. It was a path I began fourteen years ago without a clear vision of where I was going, but with confidence that I was heading in a positive direction. It has been a path of tremendous growth, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. It has been a path that has allowed me to explore and clarify my values, especially those related to developing a community of elders that may yet help to save the world. I believe what the Hopi Elders say, "...We are the ones we have been waiting for."

My life has followed a path that has benefited others and me at the same time. It has been a path that has never left me bored or confused or frightened about my future. It is a path that continues to serve me as I follow it. It may not be leading me to a specific destination, and that is all right. It is the journey that is important to me, not the destination. It is a path I will continue to follow, even though I still do not know with any certainty where it will lead. Yet I have confidence that it will lead me where I need to go. My path has a heart. It is my heart's path.

I wish for each of you that you also find your heart's path and follow it wherever it leads. I promise it will serve you well. Enjoy the journey!

Exercises

Some exercises you may be interested in that can enrich your inner work are:

1. Life Review, Doing Your Philosophical Homework and other journaling exercises (in the book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, Warner Books, 1995)
2. Blind walk (Invite another person to work with you outdoors; each person takes about 5 minutes being guided around blindfolded, experiencing by touch and smell trees, plants, earth, branches and other natural objects)
3. Meditation and Tai Chi (there are many opportunities for learning meditation and Tai Chi in most communities)

Bibliography

1. *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller (Warner Books, 1995)
2. *The Teachings of Don Juan*, Carlos Casteneda (University of California Press, 1969)

Websites

Among the many websites that explore conscious aging thought are: <http://www.sage-ingguild.org/> and <http://www.secondjourney.org/>.