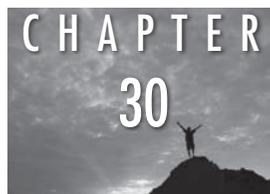


Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, rabbi, writer, and professor emeritus at Temple and Naropa University, founded the visionary Jewish Renewal and Spiritual Eldering movements. His Spiritual Eldering Institute in Philadelphia and his landmark book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* brought a whole new concept of elderhood to public awareness. A believer in the universality of spiritual truth, Reb Zalman has traveled the world and studied a range of traditions, learning with Catholic and Buddhist monks, Sufi masters, Native American elders, and transpersonal psychologists. He was born on August 28, 1928, in Zholkiew, Poland.

ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI



The Adventure of Age-ing

I didn't know what was happening to me when I got closer to my sixties. I wanted to continue to be the same workaholic I had always been, but it didn't work anymore. I couldn't keep up in the same way. I became aware of the diminishment that were happening to me. But unless you can admit this and say, yes, I am in this stage of life, it feels like a guilty secret. You can't let it out, you can't share it with other people, and then you have to keep on pretending that you can still do what you used to do.

My inner work had a lot to do with the form of mysticism in Judaism called Kabbalah. Part of the inner work of that is a nightly examination of conscience. You ask yourself: What was this day all about? What did I do, how did I feel, how did I relate to people? When you do this inner work, you begin to raise questions with yourself. You have a dialogue with yourself, and it became clear to me that, with all the spiritual practices I had been doing up to that time, they couldn't quite help me with the new season of life into which I had entered.

Seasons

It was then that I began to look at life from the point of view of seasons. When I sat and meditated to see the panorama of things, it looked to me that the biblical seven years was a very important period. I saw that if you project a lifetime over a year to make it more graphic for yourself and you begin with the feast of nativity, December 25, that's birth, by the end of January, you're seven years old. By the end of February, you are fourteen years old. By the end of March, you are twenty-one. That's the winter of life. Then comes the spring of life. By the end of April, when you are twenty-eight, you have what is called the Saturn return. It takes Saturn about twenty-eight years to go around the sun. And that means a whole new cycle begins in life. And then you go to thirty-five and to forty-two, and by then you are

at the end of June. That's the time of "What are you going to do when you grow up?" And you have July, August, September – that's when you make hay when the sun is shining, as it were. It's the time when you do the work in life.

When I looked, I saw that there is a script for all these ages. What do you do from one to seven? You're a toddler, you go to kindergarten. You have a script. What do you do from seven to fourteen, fourteen to twenty-one? You have a script. You have a script for all of life, but by the time you get to retirement age, from then on, no more script. It is very difficult to live without a script, without a defined role. Without a script, you have to play from sixty-five on the same games that you played before. We don't know what's the next thing we're supposed to do.

Now, in aboriginal and native societies that was simple. Because elders had a place and a role, and they sat in council together. Council is very important. In Native American society, women after menopause were the center of awareness, power, and decision-making. That was because they no longer had the role of childbearing, nurturing, and raising the children. So the role, the script, was there. And people were honored for that. When the roles were scripted for people and they knew what they had to do, it was so much easier.

In our society, it isn't so. Along with that, we have been given more years to live. We live with an extended life span and we don't have the extended consciousness that you need to have with an extended life span. Our society is suffering from social mobility and from the lack of models that used to come to us from grandparents. Today requires a new kind of elder. Society has not yet made room for that new kind of elder.

At the same time, in the last fifteen years, a way of thinking about life on this planet has come into its own. People are thinking more and more of Earth as a living being. Scientists have come up with the hypothesis that says Earth (*Gaia*, to use the Greek word for it) is alive. She's a living being and the rivers are her blood and the trees are her lungs. You get the sense of the planet as a being of its own, as having a life of its own. And we are not at the top of the ladder of being, but rather we are like cells, sometimes cancer cells, sometimes white and red corpuscles – it depends what choices we make about life. But we are cells of the global life, of the global body. Earth is trying to heal herself.

Meanwhile, time in our society has become a flywheel that is turning so fast today that we don't get an hour for an hour; we get twenty minutes for an hour. We don't live time in the more relaxed way of living with time. It's going so fast that the human body is not about

to digest, to work, to repair itself with the speed in which things are driving us today.

So here we have a problem: We have an elder population, more people of age than ever before; the planet is sick and is trying to heal itself; and time is speeded up in such a way that it is unhealthy for human beings and other beings to live at such a speed. This is why elders are needed.

Jung asked the question: Why should people be alive after they have reproduced? Purely from an understanding of evolution, we would say that once you have bred, you can die. Look at the salmon. They swim upstream, they lay their eggs, and then they can die. Alright, we'll give human beings a little more time until they can raise their kids. So they can live to be fifty. But we are now having a life span that's so much longer.

I can't imagine that this is just by happenstance. Something in the way in which Earth needs to heal herself produces more elders at this time. They need to do something to slow the pace of the planet and to infuse society with values. So this is our job, this is our task, and this is what I'm seeing all over the place, whether you call it Spiritual Eldering or Aging with Awareness. There are conferences and books being written. There seems to be a getting ready for the new huge group of people that are now entering the elder years: the baby boomers.

Harvesting

Those who are doing Spiritual Eldering work are beginning to create a shift in the template of what "old" means in society. Instead of thinking of old as worn out, we are bringing back the notion of long-lived. Instead of looking at it as a failure to be old, we look at it as a success. We made it to this time—how remarkable! How much experience we have!

Now, as we look at the cycle of the year, we see that October, November, and December of a lifetime have some very special programs, except we haven't scripted them before. So the work of Spiritual Eldering is for yourself and for people in society to script what it is that we need to do in the October, November, and December of a lifetime.

That's the harvest time. Most people when they get older have a big history of having plowed and sown the seeds, but don't have much history of having harvested their lifetime. No wonder there is such a dissatisfaction with elder years. As it says in Psalm 128, "he is

joyous when he brings in the harvest sheaves.” That’s what our situation is: We haven’t learned to harvest.

How do you go about harvesting a lifetime? You need certain tools. The tools are not external tools. The tools are internal tools. These are inner processes, these are things that add to awareness the

same way that more memory gets added to the computer. If you have more memory installed and you have it reconfigured so it can handle more memory, then what happens is that it can handle the more difficult program.

Let’s look at how memory works for us. Every day I have to go toward the future. As I walk toward the future, who do I see at the other end? The angel of death. Oy, I don’t want to look. So I back into the future. But what happens if I back into the future? I see the past. Oy, I remember what I did wrong then, and I remember the disappointment I had there. So I cut myself off from the past. What about the present? I don’t want to think about this and I don’t want to think about that, and before long, look at what I’ve done to my consciousness. I don’t have much memory of the past, I don’t have any free memory of going to the future, and I have very little present memory because of the diminishment that I don’t want to be aware are robbing me of awareness. In Vedanta, Indian philosophy, you call this sense *Avideya*, not wanting to know, intentional non-conscious being. There is such a category in the Baltimore Catechism [Christian doctrine]: invincible ignorance.

October

So the work of October is expanding awareness. In the Eastern and Western traditions, awareness was expanded via meditation, contemplation. These tools involve introspection, looking into the recesses of your mind and your motivation and your memory. Most of us don’t know how to do that. We are so subject to the flotsam and jetsam that happens in our heads. In the middle of one thought comes another thought; one bumps the other and they don’t seem to have any connection. Very few people can do mind steering. It takes a while to learn to steer consciousness and awareness, to hold the course, as it were. Because when you go inside yourself and start checking the past, you come to the places where you don’t want to look. Why? Because they make you anxious. That is the file in which you keep the failures – the things you don’t like, the things that are not yet reconciled, the things that are upsetting.

Anxiety keeps you away from there. You start to approach and say, “No, let me get a cup of coffee instead.” There’s always a distraction

that's waiting to pull you away from what you don't want to face. But in that file may be that which can make you rich today. You may have felt at the time what you wanted to do and didn't get to, and therefore the thing was a failure. But it was that very failure that moved you in another direction.

I found out when I checked out my failures that the fallout of my failures is where my successes are. The things that I didn't manage to do at that time steered me to other things. I'm grateful for those. That's what people mean when they say "Good grief!"

Reaching into places that may for a moment not feel so comfortable allows you to recover your memory. If you don't recover your past, if you don't recover time for yourself, you won't get to the wisdom. Wisdom comes from having learned from experience.

October is a time when we learn how to use the tools for harvesting life. We learn to do journal work. We learn to talk to one another. There are certain kinds of conversation that I call spiritual intimacy. It sometimes happens when you sit on an airplane next to somebody and you have a conversation in which something comes out of the closet, something you didn't like to talk about to family because of the landmines in the conversation. If you talk about it, there will be an explosion; people will get angry. In a conversation of spiritual intimacy, you can talk about such things and feel seen, heard, and understood. Hearing, seeing, and understanding the other is very, very precious.

Letting go of vindictiveness and doing forgiveness work is another tool for the harvest. To give you an illustration, the prisoner does his time in prison, but the warden does time in prison too. Whenever you hold somebody in the prison of your anger, the prison of your unforgiveness, you tie up vital energy in the grudge. Can you imagine what it would be like if you could let go of all the energy that's tied up in the prisons in which you hold people who have done you wrong in the past?

The work of forgiving self, forgiving others, and letting go of vindictiveness is hard work. Sometimes you cannot do this by yourself, inside of yourself. You need to have tools for that. The tools may be journal work or interpersonal work. Sharing spiritual intimacy and exploring with another gives me a safe place to look at my collusion with my hurt, my participation in being ripped off.

Another part of the work of October is expanding mind to include more of the future, more of the present, and more of the past. When I do a time stretch this way, I get in touch with an aspect of God that's called the Ancient of Days. An aspect of God that fits the younger

years might be “a vision of God who helps me in the battle of life.” But for the older, there is the Ancient of Days, the witness to everything that ever happened and ever will happen. That’s my companion for eldering. This kind of meditative work is what needs to be learned in the October season of our lives.

November

Imagine I’ve done my work. I’ve done my eldering. Now a more serene person, I don’t have as many long toes that explode if someone steps on them. I am a person who can see contradiction, what kind of compromise is necessary at times, and the paradoxes inherent in life. And then I do what Jimmy Carter did. As an elder citizen of the planet, I do conflict resolution. I build affordable housing for Habitat for Humanity. I fulfill the peacemaking role of elders. Can you imagine if instead of sending young people to Bosnia, we sent several thousand elders who have lived their lives, done their homework, and are able to talk to Bosnians and Serbs, to Muslims and Christians, and ask, with all the meaning of their life experience, “Does it pay to shed blood?”

As Martin Luther King said, “I’ve been to the mountain.” I have a contribution to make that is a deeper and richer contribution by my witness at the painful spots on the planet, and to intervene and say this is my work now. Earth needs a cadre of elders who have become conscious and aware of their task for healing the planet. People who have done their homework in October and who are now prepared to serve in November. To serve in schools in the neighborhood. To serve as mentors. To serve in boardrooms. To serve in so many ways that say, “I have accumulated wisdom out of life experience. I’ve synthesized it. I’ve made it something that I can give and share with people.”

One of the richest times I had at Temple University were the office hours. At the end of each semester, you have to fill in how many hours you did this, what percentage you did that, and I would put in “20% ear.” The dean wanted to know what ear was. “I give ear,” I explained. Students would come and talk with me about what had happened in class. When they were able to tell me what they thought and how they thought about it, that’s when it entered their consciousness. Mentors are very, very important and that’s a job you can do locally while you think globally. That’s what elders are needed for.

December

It used to be that life began at home and death was at home. Then we took both to the hospital, and now birth has become pathology and death has become pathology. Intergenerational healing has to be done so that people are not afraid of death, so that death is not pathology.

The work of December is to make natural again the exit from life. Can you imagine if we could get people who are not afraid of dying, who would tell the truth to their children and grandchildren and work with them consciously about death? To be able to say what is it that's unfinished for me and to be able to find ways in which the next generation becomes deputized to take the tradition on just one more step. If December work is done correctly, the work of grieving after a death will be easier. We would remove pathology from the whole process of eldering and, later on, dying and we would make a contribution to the planet. That's the vision of Spiritual Eldering.

As I say in From Age-ing to Sage-ing seminars, "If we don't have extended consciousness to match our life span, we are dying longer instead of living longer." Here are several helpful activities to practice in expanding your consciousness.

1. Learn a new language or a new skill if possible, not only with your mind, but also with your body. If you learn a new language, for instance, learn to write in that language and in that script. If you learn a new skill, practice it for about forty days until you find that your body has integrated it into its habit pattern. That will result in more of the synapses of the brain being connected and accessed, which equals some extension of consciousness.
2. Each time you read something in a book or magazine, or see something on the tube, set the source of your information aside and, relaxing and closing your eyes, imagine what happened before, what is likely to happen afterward, picture the setting and characters in your mind's eye, so that you almost feel it. The more you are able to do this, the larger your awareness will have expanded.
3. Make an inventory of as many of the experiences you have had that gave you pleasure and made you feel right about yourself as you can remember. Order them from the mildest to the strongest. In your mind, construct a rosary that you can tell at will so that, whenever you wish

to change your attitude and mood, you can consult that album of peak experiences. This will refresh your mind and your body, and will have the result that even your T cells (immune-related cells) will increase, as will the vigor with which you face even your diminishments.

4. Study the contemplative teachings of world wisdom traditions. Many a time you have had moments of inspiration and ecstasy, which, alas, disappeared from your memory. Though they are difficult to access, often because you don't have good concepts for them, studying one form of inner teachings as can be found in the Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, Sufism, the Vedanta, and Buddhism will give you a grid with which you can better recall those experiences. Then, using your imagination, paint on the inner canvas of thought and feeling a scene in which you are experiencing that ecstatic moment, that revelation, that theophany. Then, make for yourself a marker, a motto, or a gate through which you can reenter that experience at will.
5. Before you go to sleep, recall some of these ecstatic experiences and fall asleep as you hug them, expecting to have good dreams. If you remember your dreams upon waking, record them in your journal.
6. Mentoring and oral history. If there are some people in your family or friends who would be interested in some of your reminiscences, if they are younger and have a different map of reality from yours, then communicating with them is bound to expand your mind in their direction.
7. Find a piece of music you are fond of and then, with no one else in the room as you play it, dance to it in free form. Visualize yourself, on the inside, as a great ballet dancer, so even if you cannot fully execute the movements that you imagine, your imagination and what you can do will provide you with a way of expanding your consciousness, not only in your head and your heart, but also in your thighs and toes so that they, too, will become awakened.
8. When you enter the December period of your life, it pays to recall, in the most vivid way you can, loved ones who have passed on. This will open entrance for you into the regions you are bound to inhabit after you drop your body.