

## The Spiritual Adventure of Aging: Three Homilies

Reading: 'A Boy's Head' by Miroslav Holub

Hinduism knows human difference and accommodates it. There are a variety of ways to practice this wisdom tradition. There are spiritual practices for those who are intellectuals, those who let their emotions guide them, those who seek to find meaning in work. There are an uncountable number of gods in the Hindu pantheon, which many believe are all manifestations of the one God, all tailored to specific communities, specific experiences, specific cultures, specific needs.

Hinduism recognizes the differences of different stages of life. That our challenges and burning questions shift throughout our lifespan. So on this Sunday, as we have just sent our children and youth off to learn and grow together, I will share with you some of the millennia old teachings of Hinduism about the spiritual tasks of youth and young adulthood, middle age, and old age. The words in the Hindu tradition for these stages translate as student, householder, and forest-dweller.

These Hindu life stages teachings are not some esoteric idea. They are the lived experience of those who this tradition now. I have talked with a few folks raised in this tradition who said they learned this very early, that their life as a student was reinforced by their family's reminders that the shift to a new life stage was an important transition. And as we explore this wisdom today, we also know that what is true in general is not always true in particular. If your life does not match the stages I'll describe, it does not mean you're doing things wrong.

The first stage described by the ancients was the student stage. It began sometime between age 8 and 12 and lasted for twelve years. It crosses what we would call childhood, youth, and early young adulthood. The primary focus was to learn, to learn not just knowledge, facts, and skills, but to learn how to be a good person.<sup>1</sup> To learn to be virtuous, to acquire the habits necessary for meaningful and productive life, the skills of relationship, self-discipline, self-regulation, and self-efficacy that are necessary to successfully and happily exist in the world. These are the skills that we hope our children learn here and all children learn somewhere.

This ancient wisdom is echoed by others. Erik Erikson was a 20<sup>th</sup> century German-American psychologist. His description on the stages create a powerful conversation when set beside Hindu teachings. In adolescence, he writes that one of our primary tasks is to learn not just facts and skills, but our identities. It is the time when one's sexual orientation usually makes itself known and vocations are explored. Friendships, relationships, interests, hobbies and jobs are sometimes tried on and then discarded with almost blinding speed as we attempt to figure ourselves out, figure out what sort of life will hold the most meaning and joy. In this stage, young people need the adults in their lives to give them the freedom to figure out who they are, to not expect them to conform to the adults' ideas of them. May our youth have this experience here – and all youth have it somewhere.

As we reach the later stages of the student phase, what we would consider young adulthood, Erikson writes that the central task shifts. Having figured out who we are, we must figure out how to form loving relationships, including romantic relationships and intimate friendships. Writer Jennifer Senior describes

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Huston. *The World Religions*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991. page 51

this task as learning to love, rather than vanish in a midst of narcissism and self-protection.<sup>2</sup> This task makes me think of the song we sang earlier, welcoming the lover of leaving. There are times that we all need to leave – and leaving must not be our only response when faced with love. May our young adults be supported here as they learn to love – and may all young adults find that support somewhere.

One of the ways we can make sure that all the children in our community have safe places to learn and grow is by continuing our long partnership with Lincoln School. People's people tutor students there regularly – and this morning we all have the opportunity to support the school with our money. Please give generously.

Reading: 'Foreseeing' by Sharon Bryan

In the Hindu tradition, the householder phase of life typically begins with marriage. We know that moving into middle age might be marked by marriage or by many other things. A significant birthday. Signing a lease. Buying a home. Getting married. Having a child. Physical changes like an increasing numbers of gray hairs or thinning hair, or balding hair. For me, just over two years ago, in a two-month span, I had my first child, bought my first home, and started my first job that I didn't have a plan to leave, whether because it was a short term contract or because I just knew in my bones it wasn't forever. And when that whirlwind calmed, I said to myself, this is a new phase of life. This might be middle age.

The ancient Hindus called this stage being a householder and it was marked by the pursuit of three things: pleasure, success, and duty. For the ancients, marriage and family life was the area in which pleasure was pursued. Success was pursued through work and vocation. Duty was pursued through involvement with the wider world and civic participation.

Duty is an important part of middle age. For many of us, though not all, middle age is marked by living into the commitments we have already made. If we have had children, we keep parenting, day after day, whether we particularly want to or not. If we are married, we live into the promises we made again and again. Our career trajectory is often set and we dutifully do the work before us.

This is not to say that these earlier choices are irreversible. We know career changes happen. We know that people who once swore they never wanted children change their mind. We know that marriages and romantic partnerships end. We know that for many, here in our church and beyond, ending a marriage or committed relationship is a right choice, if sometimes a hard one. Sometimes, it is a choice that our partner makes for us and we do our best to live through it. Sometimes, it is a logistical nightmare to legally and physically untangle two or more lives that have grown intertwined. There are a lot of people in this church community navigating separation and divorce right now. We see you. We hold you in our hearts. We offer our support.

Being middle aged, looking ahead toward what we hope is a full second half of life, in many ways, means living into, or living in the shadow of, our previous commitments and finding our meaning and truth there.

In this middle part of adulthood, Erik Erikson tells us that our developmental task is to 'how to lead productive lives and leave something behind for future generations rather than succumb to inertia.' It is

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<sup>2</sup> Senior, Jennifer. *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*. New York: Ecco, 2014. page 229

about creation, about becoming generative, about creating something new. There are echoes of this in the ancient teachings about involvement in the wider world during the householder stage. What does it mean to be a generative adult? It means to commit to the wider community and larger causes. It means to remember that we are all in this together and all of us need all of us to make it. We saw an example of living a generative life this morning when we dedication our religious education teachers. These people are giving of themselves to creative loving, learning communities for our children and youth. That is taking the long view. That is planting trees whose shade you will never lie in. And we know there are many ways to do this.

Another white American psychologist, this one Dan P. McAdams, the chair of the psychology department at Northwestern, reflects on this. He writes, 'Highly generative adults invest considerable time, money, and energy into ventures whose long-term payoff is hardly a sure bet. Raising children, teaching Sunday School, agitating for social change, working to build up valued social institutions—these kinds of generative efforts often involve as much frustration and failure as fulfillment. Yet, if one's internalized and evolving life story—one's narrative identity—shows again and again that suffering can be overcome, that redemption typically follows life's setbacks and failures, then seeing one's life in redemptive terms would appear to be an especially adaptive psychological things to do.'<sup>3</sup>

In religious language, we would call this having faith. Having faith that what we do matters in the grand scheme of things even if we never live to see the results. Having faith that despite the frustrations, despite the reality that there might be more fun ways to pass time, showing up for one another and our community matters. Faith that our efforts will pay off in ways we may never be aware of, in ways we might not live to see. Here, we believe in the power of human agency, that each of us and all of us how the power to make the world better.

One of the ways that we show up for one another here is by taking time in our service to recognize the milestones in our lives. Today, we are going to weave sharing with song.

Readings: 'Wonder as Wander' by Sharon Olds  
'Poem on My 79<sup>th</sup> Birthday' by Peter Everwine

The third stage of life is old age. In the Hindu tradition, that begins with the birth of the first grandchild. In our lives, that might begin with a certain birthday, retirement, a child's milestone, or a physical change, noticing one day that our body doesn't work quite like it used to.

In the Hindu tradition, this stage of life is called being a forest-dweller. Retirement means not only retiring from paid employment, but retiring from many of the tasks of life. Traditionally, it meant retiring from family obligations and community obligations, leaving those tasks to the householders, the middle aged people. Then, the person entering old age would go live in the forest, to live in solitude and contemplation, focusing on spiritual development<sup>4</sup>. As comparative religion scholar Huston Smith writes, 'Retirement looks beyond the stars, not to the village streets. It is the time for working out a philosophy into a way of life.'

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<sup>3</sup> from McAdams, Dan P. "The Redemptive Self: Generativity and the Stories Americans Live By." *Research in Human Development* 3 (2006): page 93.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Huston. *The Illustrated World Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions*. New York: HarperCollins, page 40.

Hinduism includes a belief in reincarnation, so part of the forest-dweller stage is to gain the insight and wisdom that will make it possible to take steps toward ultimate liberation and break the cycle of rebirth. We hold many different ideas about what awaits us after death in this community, but we do share some ideas about how to end life well. We hope for ends of life where we are at peace with the lives we've lived. We hope we can look back on lives where we've learned and loved and made some small positive differences. This echoes again, the teachings of Erik Erikson. He says that the final task of life is to be at peace with all that has unfolded in our lives and not give in to despair or disgust.

What does this look like in modern practice? When it is not possible to leave everything and go into the forest? Last night I went to a forest-dweller initiation ritual held at the Sambodh Center. Anil and Durga, a local Hindu couple who had just turned was celebrated with rituals, with priests, and about a dozen people chanting ancient words. One of the vows Anil made last night was to have sweet words and sweet actions.

In modern practice, it is not a time to give up obligations to the wider world, but to become a teacher and share through words and actions all that they have learned. Anil and Durga were instructed to give more to the world than they receive for the next ten years. Modern Forest-Dwellers often visit a local temple or shrine every day and are in charge of the spiritual development of grandchildren. This follows the pattern that I see here, of the newly retired literally running this place, as they often have the time, energy, skill and commitment to carry on the important work of this church in the world.

As I witnessed the ceremony last night, I yearned for a similar ritual for our community. What would it look like for us to celebrate retirement and the new spiritual work that lay ahead? We have rituals for other life stages – we dedicate ourselves to our children, we celebrate our youth when they come of age and when they bridge into young adulthood – and then, if they marry, we have a ritual for that.... and then nothing until a memorial service. I don't know what a Unitarian Universalist ritual akin to a forest-dweller would look like, but I will be thinking about this and would love to explore it with anyone who is interested.

There is a fourth stage in the Hindu life-cycle now, an ascetic stage. This stage was likely added later as lifespans lengthened. This is the stage of giving up all and wandering, focusing solely on spiritual concerns. This stage has many of the characteristics of the traditional forest-dweller.

In all our stages of life, may we learn, may we love, may we create, may we serve, may we be wise. May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.