

Butterfly Covenant Group
May 14, 2014
Topic: Aging

Opening Words:

"To me, old age is always fifteen years older than I am." — Bernard Baruch

"The great secret that all old people share is that you really haven't changed in 70 or 80 years. Your body changes, but you don't change at all. And that, of course, causes great confusion."
— Doris Lessing

"I grow old . . . I grow old . . .
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?"
— T. S. Eliot ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock")

"Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light."
— Dylan Thomas

"Work not for a reward, but never cease to do thy work." — *Bhagavad Gita*

"The older I grow, the more I distrust the familiar doctrine that age brings wisdom."
— H. L. Mencken

Discussion Questions:

- 1) When does "Old Age" begin? Is it simply a matter of calendar years? Retirement from a full-time job? The onset of particular physical or mental limitations? Are there clearly identifiable stages to Old Age? How might they be defined? Are there particular pleasures or problems associated with these stages?
- 2) Does a thread of continuity run through our lives that validates Lessing's comment that our self does not change despite the years we have lived? Or is Lessing wrong: is it possible to live for 70 or 80 years without becoming essentially different than we were initially? If Lessing is right, is the "great confusion" felt more by ourselves or those who deal with us?

- 3) Prufrock's wondering about eating a peach suggests the question of appropriateness and old age. Why would someone of advanced age feel self-conscious about acting in certain ways? Should the elderly feel constrained from doing things they are physically able to?
- 4) Dylan Thomas counsels "rage" as a way of dealing with growing older; others might suggest peaceful acceptance or simply ignoring it. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these or other strategies? Is there a best way?
- 5) In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna advises Arjuna to always do his work. Traditional Hinduism divides the final two stages of life into Elder Advisor (48 to 72) and Ascetic (beyond 72). The work of the Elder Advisor is to retire from worldly attachments to lead a life of contemplation and meditation. The Ascetic is to totally detach from worldly pleasures, existing "almost without giving any thought to his being – with no desire for name or fame or recognition."
(<http://www.mailerindia.com/hindu/veda/index.php?fourstages>) While such ascetic spirituality is foreign to modern culture, studies show that even in the West, old age is often associated with an increase in religious/spiritual fervor. Is spirituality the "work" of old age? Has your religious life/spirituality changed as you have aged? Has it become more or less important? Why? Is there another "work" more appropriate for old age?
- 6) Is Mencken just being Mencken, or could there be some validity in distrusting the age = wisdom doctrine? For example, what do you make of the following: "Americans 65 and older have become increasingly Republican since Obama's election and currently stand as the only generation in which more people lean to the GOP than to the Democrats, according to Gallup's analysis of a year's worth of data, representing 18,000 interviews."
(<http://www.nationalmemo.com/age-race-correlate-strongly-political-beliefs-gallup-finds/>) Are there particular facets of life where the age-brings-wisdom doctrine holds more than others? What might cause this?