

Wisdom in Later Years

Margaret Silf is an author and spiritual guide.

If our souls had traffic lights to direct our inner journey, they would be signalling amber now: prepare to slow down and stop. As we age, this might catch us unawares through illness or injury, or we may make a more gradual descent from life's mountain as we slither down the rocky gradient.

Ageing, there's no denying, brings limitation, diminishment and the challenge of facing our own mortality. There may be days when we feel forsaken, nursing regrets and grievances as life rushes on without us, but there will be other days when the rising sun warms our hearts, kindling grateful memories and ripening our life's harvest. Whether the grievances or the gratitude prevail depends largely on our own attitudes.

We may so feel helpless to change most of the situations in our lives or in our world that we lose sight of the one choice that can never be taken from us: the power to choose our attitude in responding to whatever happens. To exercise this choice, intentionally and mindfully, is to practise the art of discernment and to live more fully the wisdom years to which our long lives have brought us. When we embrace them as such we begin to see ageing as a blessing as well as a challenge.

So where does this wisdom come



from? Formal education conveys knowledge, but knowledge is not the same as wisdom. Jesus' teaching overflows with wisdom, which he communicates by appealing to people's lived experience. Understanding deepens as we reflect on our own lived experience. It's in the process of reflection that experience ripens into wisdom. So a prime task of our later years is to reflect consciously on what is happening, and has happened, in our lives, and observe our reactions.

This practice helps us notice, and, if necessary, adjust our attitude to whatever life throws at us. Take, for example, the realisation that there are places and people we will never see again, things we will never do again.



This can seduce us into the mire of self-pity and an unhealthy tendency to live in the past, alienating us from friends and family, who really don't want to hear, yet again, how much better things were in 'the good old days'. A healthier attitude is to relish the memories of past adventures and encounters, gratefully acknowledging what a tremendous gift it has been to have known the places and people we remember. Grateful memories are a powerful antidote to bitter regrets.

The regrets don't just melt away. We have to work on letting them go, which brings us to the need to develop the art of detachment. Detachment is about sitting lightly enough to fully enjoy created things

when we have them but not fall apart if we lose them. We might regard these losses as 'death rehearsals' as we learn to let go of things we have cherished – people we love, health, independence, material security, a sense of usefulness – knowing that in a relatively short time everything we think we have will dissolve into the mystery of death, and it is helpful to think of death as a mystery rather than a finality.

Jesus uses the metaphor of the seed to reveal our mortality in the light of the new possibility it releases, as a seed dies in order to yield new fruitfulness. The wisdom of detachment asks us which we desire more: to cling to the one life we know or to let ourselves fall into oblivion so that the 'grain' of who we are bears fruit we cannot begin to imagine. A friend, facing a terminal diagnosis, remarked that he was now going to be engaged in 'the serious business of dying', letting go of all that was still holding him and attending to unfinished business in his life and relationships. Getting older is not, it seems, about settling down with pipe, slippers and rocking-chair. It involves some serious inner work for which we were not equipped in earlier years.

The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner asserts that 'the Christian of the future will be a mystic, or will not exist'. Discovering our inner mystic is part of this inner work. The butterfly has much to teach us here. As she flies over the forest where she first hatched and experienced her metamorphosis, she gazes down on her descendants, still crawling along the branches as caterpillars, munching their way through everything the forest offers, with no idea of what

lies ahead. It's all about feeding and self-defence. The butterfly sees the bigger picture. She knows caterpillar life is not the end of the story. She knows the forest is not all there is. She knows that just when you feel you are helplessly disintegrating, something amazing may be about to emerge. She knows the reality of transformation.

When you can see the bigger picture, everything changes. Things that once seemed so important you can now hardly remember. You have lived through recessions and economic crises. You know that everything passes and the human spirit survives. You have seen the view from the hilltop and realised that failure and success both contribute to the full story. You see life from a



different perspective. You are looking through the lens of the mystic. This isn't just a vague dream. Your ability to see the bigger picture can help the younger people in your life deal better with and perhaps see beyond the passing struggles of their own lives.

As he looks upon the infant Jesus, Simeon declares that he is now ready to depart, for he has seen the fulfilment of God's dream. Like

Simeon, you have climbed your life's mountain. You can see the broad horizon, with its beauty and its dangers. You have seen the power of God at work in your own life. And even as you approach the point of departure from everything you know and love, you, like the emerging butterfly, are standing on the threshold of transformation.