

Growing Older Usefully

Many years ago, one of the senior inmates of the Āśram observed, “When you are young, all you need is your physical strength and you can be of use. But when you become middle-aged, unless you have developed your intellect, you won’t be of much use to others. And when you reach old age, unless you have developed your spiritual side, you won’t be of much help to anyone.

This was obviously meant from the social or work point of view. When we’re young we have strength; we can be of use. Most of that strength has gone by middle age; we need intellectual capacity to make a significant contribution. But in old age, most of our thinking belongs to the past, and unless we have developed spiritual qualities, we won’t be of much use to our friends, family, or society.

However, there is another way of looking at what this senior inmate said, and that is from our own personal point of view. At the same time, we also need to be aware of the illusions about age that most of us suffer from. The first illusion comes when we reach middle age. It is impossible to convince a person in their late forties that they physically cannot do as much as they could when they were in their twenties. It is a universal phenomena, a universal illusion, which is obviously not true; and the number of physical breakdowns—heart attacks, strokes, exhaustion—that happen in the forties is evidence that it is not true.

Therefore, our image of ourselves should gradually shift from our physical ability to what we can contribute at a mental level; otherwise, we are apt to end up with a health breakdown in middle age. Similarly, it is very difficult to convince a person in their seventies that they don’t know as much about their lifetime occupation and aren’t just as competent as they were in their fifties; but objectively it is simply not true. New things are constantly coming along that the older we get the more difficulty we have in understanding, let alone keeping up with. Therefore, very often as we get older, instead of admitting that we can’t keep up, we start criticizing the new ways.

However, if we have developed our spiritual side, we will start to function in a new way. But this is where we have to understand spirituality in the way it is meant to be understood. We have to manifest the presence

of God, not just chant His name, not just know all about Him, not just worship Him. He has to become a living presence for us, and that comes about only through depending upon Him, surrendering to Him, taking refuge in Him. There is nothing we can do with our feelings and our intellect to bring this about, except to offer them to God.

The truth is that in old age we no longer have much physical strength and our intellect cannot keep up, but our intuition can always be fresh. If we are surrendered to God, He will guide our paths. We won't need our physical strength or our previous mental ability. Our surrender to God will keep us fresh and alive and of use—not only to others, but to ourselves.