

Moving Kindly through the Circle of Life
Verna Pollack - February 7th, 2010
Unitarian Church of Calgary

As we move with kindness through the circle of our lives I want to look at inviting Death as a Friend. I owe much of this material to my friend, Brede Murphy & John O'Donahue.

Now you young folk out there, I am going to talk a bit about dying and a lot about aging. Don't tune me out! I may have a kernel of wisdom for you to take along on your own journey through the circle of life! . I begin with a reading from, "Learning to be 85", by Elizabeth Welche, and I quote: " I remember the day I said to myself "You are old!" When I went to the mirror and looked myself straight in the eye and said, "You are old!" It became real. That day I learned something important about being 85 for oldness is very special and very precious. It is not to be denied.

I first met Bridget Murphy at my UU Fellowship in Toronto. I loved her from the very first time we met. She had come to speak at our Fellowship. A year later back she came to speak again saying, "Here I am The Crone Returned, a year older and even more aware of the friendship that can exist between the Crone or Sage and their Anam Cara or Soul Friend. As we become conscious of this wonderful place we will arrive at in our life, so too can we become more aware of our Soul Friend that person inside of us who has made this journey with us."

Brede was in her mid 70's at the time and after 50 years, she was preparing to return home to Ireland because she wanted to be among her kin when she died and she wanted to be buried in Irish soil. With this in mind she had become much more conscious of saying good-bye to a wonderful country and all the friends she had made in Canada. And so she spent that last year consciously connecting with people, telling them how much she appreciated their presence in her life and relating the immense values of their journeys together.

It was Brede who introduced me to the poet priest, John O'Donnahue and his little book called "Anam Cara". Brede was very, very Irish so you can deduce that this talk will have a distinct Irish flavor, but such a good one, and so I invite you to look at these ideas in this way. In the ancient Celtic world as in the world of our own Aboriginal people here in North America, Elders were honored. For a long time in our North American experience we have been worshipping at the shrine of youth. But in recent years the Elder is being restored or reclaimed and churches etc. are holding Crone Ceremonies and Sagings to honor the Wise Women and Wise Men among us.

So this is about that old person within us, ... the wise person that has grown old with us from the beginning, and the question is - When we get there, how do we want to enter the decades that follow our 60th year or 70th or 80th?

There is a wonderful book on this subject called - forgive me, any Psychologists in the congregation this am but this tile just cracks me up! "We Have Had A Hundred Years of Psycho Therapy and the World Is Getting Worse". In this book the famous James Hillman and Michael Ventura are dialoguing about what they call the Break Through Theories - and Ventura says: - "You do feel other people in you that are older and they talk to you. They talk to me at any rate. I

have an old man in me who talks to me every day, quietly, usually kindly, tolerantly - sometimes sternly when I am F---n' up, but always with humor.

I like him enormously. He seems the best part of me and I never thought about him in this light before."

Then Hillman says: "I think I know what you are getting at. I know several men like me in their 40s and they say, "My body is beginning to betray me" They even dye their hair and lie about their age. And I know women who I never thought would do this - getting breast implants, tucks, that kind of thing and I am afraid for them because they are deeply insulting the older people in them. So when they finally turn 65 that 65 year old has been so insulted and weakened that he or she may not be able to do the job!"

Well we all need to take a look at healing our old person within us. Going within ourselves no matter where we came from, what country, or whatever happy or unhappy childhood we had or did not, we are all damaged in some way and we have to know that. There is healing to be done. So like we have heard ad nauseum, about healing the child within, we have not heard too much about healing the elder within and perhaps we have to do something around that - something about the joy and blessing of memory and how we can reintegrate these things. This is our time of Harvest and we all have individual gifts that we have brought to life. We should give ourselves time to allow past joys to surface but also the hurts and in so doing be compassionate about it.

We should be gentle with ourselves, and kind!

This can be a great time to learn more about ourselves and have those moments of understanding that allow us to forgive past hurts. Forgiving hurt frees us to the joy of the present. The expression that Brede always used was "soul searching". We need to take time for soul searching. This is about the healing of that old person within us, that person who has grown old with us from the beginning. Some people take up writing to do this. There is a wonderful Irish blessing for that - It says: "God keep you safe till the word of your life is fully spoken."

Loneliness is part of growing old. That is also part of the healing and quite different from taking time to welcome solitude or being still. Loneliness comes from not knowing our inner voice -- when we haven't been able to be true to ourselves - or we haven't been able to find another voice to hear us - or when we have not become aware of our own soul friend. One important thing we can do is be a soul friend to each other and also be our own light or our own gift to our own being. This is not narcissism. That woman who looked in the mirror and said, "I am old." opened herself to who and where she was.

While we are being kind to our inner self, and being a friend to our soul, we should also be kind to our bodies. Proper food and exercise keeps us well. As we age we cannot be as physical as when we were young. So regarding exercise, it is important to also be gentle with yourself and it is all right not to be too demanding.

But life is real and sometimes harsh. So then, how shall we approach such things in this time of our life? Today's world is so busy. We are often surrounded with many negatives, lots of noise, and gluts and gluts of information, most of it pretty bleak stuff. Filter it! I repeat that! Filter it! Accumulate the wisdom of each day. Enjoy the beauty around us and the gifts of friendships. Be aware of the negatives as well, but remember, wisdom is the art of balancing the known with the unknown, the search for the sacred, the openness to the moment at hand. Sometimes it is hard to love life. But perhaps we just need to be able to share it and draw on the wisdom of others who have gone before us as mentors. This process allows us to become mentors to others. We need to be celebrating life even in dark times.

In looking at wisdom, at friendship, and at consciousness, we come toward that companion of having lived life fully - which is death, the final moment. If we have been conscious to our life or even arrived at consciousness later on, then it is just another meeting with a companion that has been with us since the day we came forth from the womb.... from nothingness to nothingness. In the Celtic way of thinking this is just another way of being. It means coming home to ourselves - coming to fullness - completing the circle. Each of us needs to think about this and translate it for ourselves. Each of us must find that place that validates our life. Find what validates our life and embrace it. Sometimes we just need to look in the mirror and realize it is now just the way we are.

Many of you have shared my recent journey with cancer, a serious illness. It can be rather numbing news. On the path of healing it has been for me, as my life always seems to be, a big learning curve of awareness about family, friends, fellow travelers, and myself. Some of us of us will die, not a natural death of old age, but an unnatural one from disease or from a terrible disaster such as those in Haiti's recent devastating earth quake. How do we cope?

I have one more story to share about a personal friend of mine - a very young friend, who prepared for her own death. It was about 40 years ago. We were all young marrieds then with very young families. She was a victim of cancer and was given only a brief time to survive after too late a diagnosis. It was September, as I remember, and being a young wife and mother, she used the time she had left and her depleting energy to shop for her family and wrap the Christmas gifts she would not be there to see them open. It was the last thing she could do for them before she was gone. Now that has its own kind of sweet courage and love. She had prepared herself well for this part of her life.

People get very quiet about dying but I think now a-days we realize much more that we can get ready for this. There is no need to deny death - it is our companion. We can prepare for it. People are planning their funerals and making living wills and directives so they can die consciously and with dignity and that is a good thing.

And so I come to John O Donahue from County Clare, poet, writer, philosopher, teacher, and beautiful man. The last word of his life was spoken in January 2008. He was 53 and he left us much!

So I close now with this passage from his book 'Anam Cara' on Autumn and the Inner Harvest:: Autumn time in a person's life can be a time of great gathering. It is a time for harvesting the

fruits of your experience. This is a lovely backdrop against which we can understand aging. Aging is not about losing of poise, strength and self-trust. Aging also invites you to become aware of the sacred circle that shelters your life. Within the Harvest Circle, you are able to gather lost moments and experiences, bring them together and hold them as one. In actual fact, if you can come to see aging not as the demise of your body, but as the harvest of your soul, (that friend that grew old with you); you will learn that aging can be a time of great strength, To the young, old people seem ancient. When you begin to age yourself, you recognize how incredibly quickly time is moving. The only difference between a young person at the height of their exuberance and a very old person, who is frail and physically wasted, is time. Is there a place where our vanished days secretly gather?

A medieval mystic once asked -"Where does the light go when the candle is blown out?"

I believe there is a place where all our vanished days secretly gather. The name of that place is memory.