

THE NEW LONGEVITY



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*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *As you Like it*, 2,7.

*All journeys have secret destinations
of which the traveller is unaware.*

MARTIN BUBER, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*.

INTRODUCTION

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HISTORY, THERE IS A LARGE and rapidly growing group of men and women over 65, currently approximately 14% of the population of most developed and many developing countries. These are people with an average life expectancy of at least 10 more years, in relatively good health, functional and in society, and potentially open to new opportunity and experience. We call this burgeoning life

stage *longevity* and its member's *longevites* (as opposed to *seniors* and *the aged*). The new language is meant to deemphasize the mainly negative collective projections that have previously defined this age group while highlighting the vast positive potential available to this large, influential, and rapidly growing group.

In Part I, we will begin by revisiting the life stage of longevity as others have described it in the past. Then we will discuss this stage of life by emphasizing the centrality of the encounter with death. In Part II, we will discuss the pairing of death and ecstasy that is fundamental to longevites' experience. Collective and individual rituals will be presented to enhance the understanding of the longevites' psyche in greater depth. The longevites' dance with death is a time to unlock the artist's form in the face of suffering and limitation. To facilitate this, a larger integrative symbol is required, and for us, poet and playwright Federico García Lorca's articulation of the *duende* provides a key to loving life within the shadow of death (García Lorca, 1998: 48-62).

PART I: LONGEVITY AS A LIFE STAGE

Dividing the human life cycle into stages of development has a long and venerable history from both the artistic and psychological perspectives.

Shakespeare's *Seven Ages of Man* is the English language's most eloquent and pithy description of stages in human life:

*All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women
merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances,
/ And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts
being seven ages.*

He goes on to describe longevity as decline and loss:

*Into the lean and slippered pantaloone, / With spectacles
on nose and pouch on side; / His youthful hose, well
saved, a world too wide / For his shrunk shank; and his
big manly voice, / Turning again toward childish treble,
pipes / And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all, /
That ends this strange eventful history, / Is second
childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes,
sans taste, sans everything.*

Before the Bard, Sophocles used the Riddle of the Sphinx, as posed to Oedipus, to embody the mystery of human development:

What creature walks on four legs in the morning? / On two at noon, / And on three in the evening?

The famous answer to the question is “man.” A most poignant effigy that defines old age (a three-legged creature with a cane or crutch), as the heroic Oedipus would be at once blind and old, full of wisdom and despair.

In our own time, psychologist Erik Erikson posited seven “psychosocial” life stages, each with a development task defined in polarity. The final stage of life, which he called “maturity,” spans age 65 to death and defines a stark contrast between integrity and despair. “Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfilment,” he wrote. “Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.”

These samplings of art and myths to describe aging are magnifying mirrors of how societies define what behaviours are deemed life-stage appropriate – e.g., when to begin having sex, when to raise a family, when to retire from work, and how many resources should be spent on children or the elderly. These decisions create a structure of behaviours within age groups, and through law and custom they regulate conduct and attitudes in family and society.

The amazing demographic change in the duration of life span has already affected prejudice and other cultural assumptions about aging. Longevites need no longer depend on others to describe their own experience. The challenge for the emergent older population is to fashion a new self-definition of longevity, one based not primarily on the fantasies and projections (and often self-serving hopes) of younger people but on their own here-and-now experience.

One of us (A.C.) is a longevite in good health who is currently living an active professional life. Recently he helped found a study group for international leaders, the members of which were 15 to 40 years younger than he. To describe the value of his age, as it was different from theirs, members of the group routinely used affirmative characterizations such as “sage,” “revered teacher,” “wise elder.” These labels, positive in themselves, were also remarkably limiting, effectively shutting off other attitudes and ways of being. Expressions of passion, competition, aggression, or worldly ambitions were subtly and not so subtly branded as somehow unsuitable for a man of his age. His own efforts to diverge from what was considered age-group-appropriate behaviour were met with confusion, strong opposition, and even anger by younger group members. Over and over again, he was told behaviourally and verbally

that he was denying his age and thereby infringing on their territory. He was left with either accepting the group’s controlling definitions or becoming an outsider and potential scapegoat.

Many longevites will recognize the potent effect of such strictures and possible misperceptions. Dylan Thomas’s powerful poem about death ends with the much-quoted passage: *Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rage at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

This passionate romantic portrait of what old age *should* feel like was written at the death of Thomas’s father when he, the son, was just 37! Does this address the mysteries of the longevite by experience?

REDEFINING LONGEVITY: THE DANCE OF DEATH

As Erikson suggests, each new life “stage” both integrates and transcends previous development. This is certainly true of longevity – “We will die as we live” is a truism for most longevites. However, unlike other life stages, longevity is characterized by an ultimate discontinuity, the fact of terminal illness and death. No matter what hopes and plans longevites may have for their final years, and they are understandably abundant, the process of dying – and the denial or acceptance of death itself – is always the primary consideration, even when not present in ordinary consciousness. In fact, it is this combination of otherworldly transcendence and experiential immediacy in our dance with death that provides this stage of life with its awesome intensity. Another way of saying this is that ecstasy and longevity occupy the common ground of death.

Ecstasy as a purely psychic state is defined by the transformation of death and rebirth. In psychological terms, achieving ecstatic states requires a death of the ego – in other words, an extinction of ordinary consciousness. It entails extinguishing that day-to-day ego reality that allows us to function in the world. Rebirth begins with the sense of finality and opens into a newly born consciousness with a more multidimensional, capacious, and expanded awareness of life. There is always an encounter with death in the ecstatic, be it transcendent love, religious and sexual awe, a visionary experience, a psychedelic drug state, or a near-death experience. The longevites’ dance with death replicates psychic movements of death and rebirth present in all ecstasy.

Many of the attitudes and behaviours of longevites derive from their uniquely close connection with their own ecstatic underpinnings. That is, longevity is always lived at the boundary of death. We never

know when we are going to develop a fatal illness, succumb to a heart attack, or have a stroke in our sleep. Some who believe strongly in a life after death may live out this phase in preparation for that other world. But for all but the most devout believers, it is the death itself that guides our behaviour and focuses our consciousness. This explains why longevity is most often unlike more-worldly life stages when acquisition of status, effects, children, relationships, holds sway. Longevity moves most of us to psychological states in which becoming is secondary to being. Completing ourselves in the very shadow of death, transforming what we already know of ourselves into an intensely present-centered yet vastly altered reality, is the paradoxical task that an ecstatic consciousness and longevity both define and share.

PSYCHIC REPERTOIRE OF
LONGEVITY—ITS COLLECTIVE
INTELLIGENCE
PATTERNS

Those of us who have reached longevity are veterans of a multiplicity of psychic experiences, with more to come. Some of these experiences have been traumatic, others joyful, with a vast continuum in between, but all have added to a growing appreciation of the way the human condition is a collage of involvements, sensitive to and dependent on our stage of life. We know more about how to witness the moving plots that are our life.

The limitations of longevity are well chronicled: the threat and actuality of waning energies, decreasing muscle strength, chronic pain, depression, memory loss, debilitating illness, and loss of loved ones, to name the highlights! But there is also a corresponding list of strengths we bring to this state: added value derived from what we have already learned and experienced in our earlier life, including the fruits of accomplishment and the attendant emotional, mental, and spiritual growth. The challenge of this stage of life, as of every stage, is valuing the present while continuing personal development; but here it is less about goals, production, or accomplishment and more about imminence, appreciation, and the ecstatic and contemplative that best serve the last years and moments of our life.

Perhaps the most powerful consequence of all this experience is an enhanced and more capacious knowledge of patterns we hold in us: the weaving of our psyche, the way we interact and participate in shaping ourselves in the world, our continuous drama. That is, the patterns of our own behaviours – love, aggression, loyalty – are imbedded mysteries until we live and relive their variations and gradually

come to understand them with a measure of surety based on ongoing reflection and feedback. The same is true of our potent interactions with groups and community. For example, politics is no longer seen only as the chronicle of corruption, and the product of chance and mistakes, after years of living through and reflecting upon its persistent cycles and regularities.

In our work as clinicians and consultants, we often see parents struggling to understand the behaviour of their children. It is almost impossible to explain to them how little knowledge they, or any parent, have of the unfolding of a child's life without having lived that role at least once. Self-help books, expert advice, and memories of their own parents and themselves at various stages of childhood are useful but barely a beginning for coping competently with one of life's most difficult jobs. The challenge for many longevite grandparents and parental advisors is not seeing what is going on – they most often do – but figuring out how to transmit that knowledge without undercutting and antagonizing the primary caretaker.

From the hard-won vantage point of longevity we see the same natural configurations played out again and again: in the expectable way our body hurts and heals; the stereotypy of repetitive patterns in relationships and sexuality; the regularity of weather and business spirals; the predictable cycles of war with the impermanence of peace; the power of revenge and the fragility of forgiveness. Longevites' ability to confidently see intertwining patterns that years before registered only as hints and hunches parallels the much-revered gifts of prophets. Intuiting the future, grasping the whole of things before they are played out, is one of the great gifts of this phase of life, a talent that is rarely given its full due by ourselves or those around us. It is a gift that punishes as well as rewards, seeding our consciousness with portents and worry. But our ability to finally grasp a portion of our patterns, to begin to know and see deeply into our own and others' trajectory, is precious. It allows us to plumb the depths of each and every moment from a new perspective. And it teaches us how to bear pain, illness, and loss, and also develop strategies and capacities to anticipate and prepare for what is to come. To know and reflect on the deep weaving of our personal life in its largest collective and spiritual context is the great wisdom we can bring to our culture and ourselves as we get ready for our final encounters.

TIME AND SPACE

The experience of time is altered during the longevity years. Pressured by the fear of death, it can vibrate like a taut wire, but more often it slackens to a seemingly inattentive drift that in effect is fuelled by some inner demand. A sense of time derived from the deepening

mirrors of consciousness and its complexities lengthens the way thought and behaviour are appreciated. Alterations in time's arrow define a new continuum of appreciation and involvement of what defines consequential units for creating meaning.

Of course, much of this will depend on ongoing changes in a given individual's mental status. Orientation to time is one of the first tests of limited cognitive capacity, but a decreasing concern with accuracy and detail may be misinterpreted as a deficit rather than a reconceptualization of a new internal reality. In general, longevites may be less concerned with schedules and punctuality and more interested in qualities that transcend time or place. Short social interactions may have little meaning at all, while adequate time for a lingering conversation that includes the rewards of silence and deep listening may acquire greater and greater emotional significance. Time develops a rubberlike quality, expanding and contracting with inner meaning rather than hinging on objective requirements of others, as imprecision takes on positive subjective value. There is a preponderance of subjective "nows": consciousness states that are often found in meditation and spiritual discipline are common experience.

Many longevites exercise using solo and repetitive physical activity such as hiking and swimming rather than group sports. In earlier life stages, activity is structured around competition, group sports, and personal bests, while introverted and subjective pleasures are often given second place. Longevites reverse that order. In later years, there is more bending time and space to relish the blending of sex, sensuality, and relationship; the renewing enchantments of weather, topography, and views; appreciating atmospheres, ambiance, and sensations that are generally more meditative in nature. For example, listening to music may focus less on keeping track of progressions of lyrics and melody and more on diffuse emotional states and poignant evoked memories.

The power of previous cultural definitions of aging again plays an important role in how longevite time is interpreted. If we allow younger and more objectifying observers and professionals to override these new and transforming impressions, these cognitive and emotional states may be labelled as the beginning of mental deficits rather than the ecstatic, soulful, enhanced appreciation of what is felt as truly valuable in our world.

REVERENCE, SPIRITUALITY AND TRUTH TELLING

Longevites are often described as rude, irreverent, and irascible. They may ignore conventional social restraints, thereby upsetting others, including loved ones. Their dress may violate conventional standards. Their speech and behaviour may

be viewed as erratic and embarrassing to others. Their political and social opinions may alter in directions that are novel and of concern. Some of these can be viewed through the lens of pathology: emotional lability, waning judgment, or full-blown dementia. But as we have discussed, what to some may seem crude and unmannerly behaviour can also be interpreted as a healthy regard for truth over form.

It is particularly difficult to make this distinction when longevity is stereotyped as synonymous with entropy rather a time for positive growth. Significant change within an individual is always threatening to friends and family and disruptive to community. Labelling them as still youthful may ignore the brash comments of an adolescent, even if they are spot-on. It is all too easy to scapegoat longevites for new and possibly disturbing attitudes. For example, young doctors finding life-threatening illness in their patients are notoriously circumspect about being upfront with agonizing prognoses. They may cringe when older doctors are far plainer in their comments about what the ailing person can expect. Is this clarity the greater self-knowledge gained from experience or an age-related disruption in empathy? Similarly, grandparents who talk about problems in their children and grandchildren's behaviour with great insight and truthfulness may be upsetting to an ongoing family system. It is easier to label their comments as "senile" rather than considering that the grandparents are simply being observant and perhaps actively attempting to change a system they care about.

A man of 83 began espousing negative views about specific subgroups that included warnings of radical political behaviours and terrorist attacks. These views were in contrast to his earlier "liberal views" and out of keeping with normative attitudes of his family and friends. He was first ignored, and then labelled paranoid behind his back. Much to the consternation of the offending group, he actively and frequently interpreted their insinuations and complaints as undercutting his competence. After a bit, he limited the frequency of his social and family group encounters, and then he was labelled as suffering from depression and was asked to seek help. Instead, he began developing a new set of social and community alliances, including some new close friends. When a terrorist attack of the dramatic kind he had predicted did occur, there was limited acknowledgment and certainly no apology.

If this man had developed Alzheimer's disease, his changing philosophy might have been ascribed to the early effects of an atrophied brain. Such was not the case. He lived and worked productively until 93 and died within a few months from rapidly growing abdominal cancer. At no time was there any sign of diminishment of mental acuity or emotional instability; on the contrary, his

life seemed richer in relationships and creativity than ever before.

In his last will and testament, he amply rewarded those friends and family who had remained supportive and retained curiosity about his thoughts, even if they didn't agree with his changing attitudes and ideas!

Views of aging that assume negative diminishment rather than positive development do not take into account the learning that occurs within the constantly challenging labyrinth of the dance of death. Philosophical discontinuity from previous norms should be expected and reckoned with, without assuming that it is a product of mental deterioration.

In fact, a whole new standard of ethics and spirituality at this last stage of development seems quite reasonable, even necessary. Our observation is that most longevites retain a sense of reverence for spiritual disciplines, though not necessarily for related religious practices. There may be a greater appreciation of interconnectedness; the blending of nature, collective expressions, and individual feelings; and less dependence on the so-called holy books or ancient rituals. Therefore, many longevites may appear irreverent. Commonly they no longer hold what they learned by rote in childhood and assumed was appropriate as adults; the bare bones of reality are far more engaging than how one is supposed to be or behave. They may break with the previously accepted wisdom of spiritual “gurus” they now recognize as artificial conveyors of the path. Similarly, what was earlier deemed socially appropriate may feel irrelevant and discarded. Honesty may trump secrets with attendant consequences for the people around them. Descendants are not automatically honoured with gifts. Genetic closeness includes more than brothers and daughters. Friendships may be true rivals for family loyalty. At their best, longevites may attain an attitude toward life more fuelled by curiosity and the desire for truth. And when their knowledge is ignored, lack of tact may be the only way they can step into the social breach and be heard.

In short, at this stage of life, the circle of who and what represents us is never closed, and even our immediate loved ones and most deeply held beliefs can provide only a cushion to lean on but never a bed to lie on. The only true resting place is death.

PART II: THE DANCE WITH
DEATH
CONSCIOUSNESS IN ILLNESS
AND ITS DANCE WITH DEATH

Aging, illness, and loss carry the endings and beginnings that are at the hub of the wheel energizing the last stages of longevity. The dance of death is always the central reality, though not necessarily

the dominant consciousness at all times. Longevites can seem to be living out a daily saga of ordinary activities often skewed negatively with inevitable visits to doctors and hospitals. For many, far more of life is taken up with the daily dramas of financial worry, chronic illness and life-threatening disease, body pain, and grinding emotional losses. For others, the time may be full of the joys and pleasures that go with continuing good health and work, leisure, supportive family relationships. But an invitation to tune in to the underlying ecstatic drama that is each person's inevitable march toward death tells a different story. We are witnesses to the final deadly serious variant of the archetype of initiation that is the hallmark of every human transformation: the closing drama of each of our lives, the curtain lowering on the final spectacle, the dance of death that marks the completion of life.

Everyone over 65 knows, and increasingly waits for, the moment that will forever change the trajectory of this final stage. Perhaps they will go to sleep and not wake up in the morning. Or they will wake up unable to speak or move their right side. Or they will watch occasional difficulty in breathing, mild chest pain, or the discovery of a lump transmogrify into deadly serious illness. In today's world, the march from diagnosis to the end stages of life is rarely straightforward. Emergency medical services have seen to that by frequently transforming acute potentially fatal episodes into treatable, chronic states, though with increasingly high morbidity for each individual. Our modern dance of death is a labyrinth of medical and surgical treatment options, a matrix of interlocking channels of alternative treatments, most of which are more dependent on inadequate data and emotional needs than on evidential clarity and clinical knowledge. This stance is full of hope, followed by disappointments; narrowing options, all moving inexorably toward the inevitable ending, follows new discoveries and opportunities.

We have both watched patients under our care struggle with long-term chronic disabling and probably fatal illness: metastatic cancer and AIDS come to mind. To the outsider, their lives seemed to be a horror story of radiation, chemotherapy, multiple old and new drugs, palliative surgery, all with its attendant risks, not to mention the corresponding emotional agonies of loved ones and trusted healers and caretakers. But the inner spectacle of archetypal death is always present in the unconscious life, in dreams, visions, and perceptions, all of which alter ongoing consciousness. Someone in the last stages of metastatic illness may wake up after a particularly devastating lab result or painful treatment with a new and intense appreciation of a beautiful sunrise, the song of a bird, a phrase of music, the line of a poem. A relationship previously taken for granted may

be infused with overwhelming love. Many experience these moments with a sense of the transcendent, an encounter with the divine. The moments may be as ecstatic as anything these people have experienced before and may lead to such deep life-changing feelings of joy that when people are in their most desolate state, the “ordinary” world of dying is simultaneously their finest moment.

Here is one person’s reaction to what it is like to live in this altered state of consciousness.

Think of a fire burning in a place far away from human sites of habitation. We see its light like that of a burning star. We are always in its presence and fashion a great deal of our life in relation to it. But as we grow older, that fire becomes more evident and more important. It begins to transcend all the things we do and transmutes their importance, the glitter of our pride. We suddenly realize that we are on a path, a conveyor belt with no escape. We will become that fire. We will be consumed by it. We will no longer exist. And as everything falls away and only the fire is in front of us, we understand that there has never been another meaning. Never anything else between it and us. And how we confront, tame, and shape the impending end, meandering, sauntering, and denying its fierce reality, determines how we turn to ash. That is all there is and has ever been. And if we can bear that knowledge, we are living in the fire, in the ecstatic.

DEATH AND THE DUENDE

In many world cultures, certainly in Western traditions, there has long been a taboo around observing the death process unless one is a medical professional. But recently movies and television dramas have subverted some of this distance. Also, extended treatment and hospice-like facilities, as well as assisted suicide, have increasingly allowed family members and friends to watch the end of life.

The death process itself incarnates creative force. Death does not come easy. Our one and only encounter with it invokes the deepest forces of life and creation. During the time leading to death, life clings tenaciously to the body. Even in the last moments, the process is remarkably full of energy. Creation requires an encounter with something or someone (which can be an inner being) in order to manifest. For some it is a lover, for others coffee or alcohol, for still others the paintbrush, the canvas, the musical score, the garden, the song. It matters not, as long as the relationship with the creative force can be maintained. The muse is the time-honoured creature most commonly used to explain this phenomenon. For example, we know her as Dante’s Beatrice, his guide in *The Divine Comedy*.

We have earlier invoked Federico García Lorca’s writings on the duende because the duende is the symbol that best condenses the ecstatic energies encountered during the longevite engagement with death. So what is the duende? Lorca describes it as a power that the gypsies in Andalucía, Spain, referred to when a dance, a song, a poem, and the like awakens a quality of reality so exaggerated that in its heightening it becomes unreal. For Lorca it is the spirit of the earth, dark and shuddering. Time becomes distorted as in a nightmare because it requires the performer to delve into the wound, for the duende wounds, and to engage with death, for the duende never comes until the spirit of death is present. The duende requires the hard work not just of mastering the artistic form but also of having the courage to delve into its deepest injuries and face it in hand-to-hand combat despite its violent power. When the conditions are met and the duende arrives, true inspiration has happened and something new and miraculous is discovered. The term is unique and untranslatable. The closest is Goethe’s “diabolical.”

Life is a stage indeed, and it behoves the longevite to have the courage, the attitude, and the willingness to struggle in the last staging of the play with the power awakened by the duende. Once the duende is active, it transforms the infused actor.

The aged and broken is nevertheless held by the winds of fate. The longevite is the quintessential initiate into the greatest rituals and mystery of all while he also lives through difficult yet mundane tasks of survival and confusing years of pain. The rituals and the duende released through them are too often obscured by the arduous daily struggles of existence, but they come directly from the deepest psyche, guiding and giving meaning to the journey.

THE RITUALS:

EXAMPLES OF THE DANCE WITH DEATH

Longevites live out their last years in the midst of a multiplicity of dying and death rituals. Some are structured to bring peace and harmony, and foster rules that contain pain, anger, and inevitable disappointments. Others emphasize the need for continued struggle against overwhelming forces. Humans are both carnivores and herbivores, and death and dying rituals capture this dual capacity to both fight and fear. History is our witness.

From the beginning of recorded time, human sacrifice has been the collective scapegoat dance with death. It is the oldest and most universal act of piety. These blood rituals, which continue today, have been the foundation of our social and military

organizations as well as at the core of our intellectual, artistic, and functional developments. The victims tend to be the poor and powerless, usually the young, though not always so. If they have some choice, they are seduced by their beliefs and ideologies to offer their lives to the gods they worship. The use of soldiers for war by longevite politicians and generals is the modern-day equivalent, and our news is riddled with the suicide missions carried out by Islamic youths trained and brainwashed into religious subservience, often by longevite leaders. However, also, far afield in the Peruvian Andes, at 18,000 feet, is the annual festival of Qoyllorrit'y. (Montero and Colman, 1997: 227-38). This festival is not only an extraordinary example of unacknowledged human sacrifice but pertinent to us because we were once present to witness it.

In the barren landscape of the Peruvian Andes, religious leaders participate in the selection of the brightest, healthiest, and most agile young men from the many villages that dot its peaks and valleys. These are the Ukukus, the semi-divine bear-costumed people who will be initiated or die in their overnight antics on the highest freezing glacier. Villagers crisscross their mountain home to converge on the traditional appointed mountainside at 16,000 feet. They bring their own small music ensembles and bow to the Stations of the Cross as they ascend. Approximately 70,000 people arrive every year and spend three days and nights drumming and praying with no available water, food, or sanitary facilities, but their traditional organization contains any potential problems. On the last evening, in initiatory trancelike mode, the Ukukus climb an additional 1,000 feet to the glacier and spend the night in nonstop "sacred" antics that include cabrioles, dances, leaps, etc. There is no light and oxygen is scarce, and the dancers know that some will end the night in a glacial tomb. At dawn, those who survive descend carrying large blocks of ice on their backs, reflecting the waking sun: these are the stars they bear as proof of their rites. The villagers have been waiting, ecstatic grimaces and worry painted on their faces. They all know that a son, lover, or colleague may not return. The stars are placed at the foot of the altar, built around a figure of the Christ emblazoned on the rock, and a priest holds a mass to commemorate the miracle; the local gods are sated with prayer and alcohol.

The duende power is in the Ukukus, called by their dance with death, the exhausted youths bent down by the stars, the heavy large blocks of ice on their backs. It is through this fortitude, courage, and commitment that they ensure the potential prosperity of the villagers and their night of transformation into the divine.

Perhaps the preeminent institutionalized dance with death is the bullfight, the deadly yet highly ritualized encounter between the human and the

fighting bull who represent the monstrous instinctual and destructive force that is death. Many people find a bullfight to be a horrendous and cruel abuse of an animal, and on one level it is just as longevite struggles with virus, cancer, and plaque are felt as abusive to humans. We need to point out that these are fighting bulls bred for the ring, where they get a death true to their nature, while other bulls encounter truly disgraceful and inhumane treatment in the slaughterhouse. Is it possible to make a parallel with the longevite who is dragged into death after passing years in front of the TV and the one ready to initiate a dance with death?

In the bullfight, death is dealt with head-on, with the certain death of the bull and the enormous danger to the matador. The ritual is highly stylized and needs to be done properly for it to work and the man to survive. The matador dominates the bull by knowledge, experience, and grace. He knows that the animal is seeking to kill him, that he must be very courageous (cowardly behaviour is jeered at mercilessly by the spectators and will terminate a career in time), and that he must be able to perform his art with grace and honour. In Spain, honour is very real and required of all professions (say, even between thieves and prostitutes, according to their standards), and most certainly of the toreadors. Honour means courage, self-respect, pride (it's important never to show cowardice), and uprightness.

The bullfight is a great spectacle that begins with the parade of the toreadors saluting the appointed president and the people in the stands, accompanied by music and blaring trumpets. But, as with every sacrament, its meaning as a death ritual transcends the show. The bull is the death coming head-on. To the cognoscenti and every conscious longevite, the meaning in every detail of the fight is a plot of the death experience.

The bullfight takes place in a ring surrounded by spectators, usually starting at 5 p.m. Therefore, from its start it is an event contained by place and time. The bullfighters do not choose their bulls; this is decided by drawing lots. If they are lucky, they get a good bull: not too large (even though they are all huge, bred for size and strength), not too strong or tall at the shoulders, with good vision, good reaction to movement and colour, and a brave and direct charge. A bad bull is too big, too old, and powerful, with wide horns, but defective in courage, with poor vision and viciously unpredictable when it charges. Thus the mixture of luck and skill dominates the encounter, one of the themes that haunt longevites, given that the course of illness, loss, and expected disasters is usually unpredictable.

The ring is emptied, and in the hush, the bull is released. The bullfight is based on the fact that the bull has never met a dismounted man. At this time, it is full of its own

strength, snorting and running about, confident and vigorous. The show belongs to this great doomed animal and the matador. But the ritual depends on the complex labyrinth that comprises the rules of the encounter. For example, the bull first sees one man dragging a cape, and it charges. The man races behind the wooden enclosure, his purpose accomplished, for the matador has now seen the attributes of his bull, including charging preferences and the use of the horns. He steps out with his large yellow and purple-pink cape and invites the bull to charge at it again and again, completing elegant and difficult specialized passes called veronicas. He is masterfully showing his talent with the cape, a most beautiful part of the dance, but he is mostly measuring the danger offered by that particular creature and what will be needed to dominate it and prepare it for the final death. This first phase includes many other stratagems: the entry of the picadors on horseback, their horses' bodies heavily padded to protect them when the bull charges and the men pierces its back with the javelin to lower its head and slow it down. Often the horse is gored and lifted by the horns. Strangely enough, this is the darkly comic part of the show, which every elderly patient knows too well. Here the horse hangs from the horns, looking ridiculous, and people usually laugh. It is a reminder of the joining of the comic and the tragic in our last years, when failing mind or deteriorating body makes others laugh (recall Shakespeare's description of the last stage of a man's life).

Next comes a man armed with *banderillas* (long sticks) who runs at the bull and cruelly punishes it with their points that rip into the skin. The surprised animal is full of rage, but its strength and confidence wane as it fails in its attacks. Four pairs of *banderillas* are placed quickly and accurately. This second act takes only five minutes, to spare the fighting spirit of the bull, but it is breathtaking, and the audience sounds terrified cheering for the *banderilleros* and their awesome courage. The fight with death, the bull and ours, is unfair, but it is a contest nevertheless. Here death is wounded as the *duende* wounds. The wounding is meant to even the playing field – a new cancer-fighting drug balanced by a more virulent metastasis – and sets the stage for the ecstatic drama of completion, the exact outcome still uncertain.

The final act is the execution: the bull and perhaps the man too! The more defensive the bull has become, the more dangerous it is. The matador comes into the ring with a sword in his right hand and a *muleta*, which is a red cloth held by a stick that has a point at one end and a handle at the other, in his left hand. He makes passes around the bull that cause it to keep lowering its head until he leaps to the side of the horns while plunging the sword deep into the bull's back through an opening the size of

a coin between the shoulder blades, a path that can go into the heart or cut its surrounding arteries. If all goes well, the bull falls to its knees before the man and dies. This is a hair-raising event. The bull has to be so close and turn almost in place as the man dominates its every movement, so that the horns could brush the matador's body. Here again, luck can determine the outcome, and the matador can die regardless of his skill and mastery over the animal. For example, an unexpected wind can lift the cape and expose the man's body, so that a goring is inevitable.

The last phase of the bullfight completes the journey we all face. Death is certain, but there are good deaths and bad deaths, in which luck and skill, courage and humour, and fate all play a part in a drama in which we are all players. In the sacred container of the bullring, this phase is the most difficult of all; and when done with grace, skill, and maximum risk to himself – with *duende*, the crowd would say – it takes the man out of himself and makes him feel immortal. It creates an ecstasy that is as profound as any religious ecstasy. The people in the ring identify with an increasingly emotional intensity as the matador plays with death, bringing it closer and closer to himself. All are at one with death, and for a brief moment, time and space are transcended.

Many of us would consider these last two examples as primitive and cruel analogy of our modern medicalized customs of dying, but only if they have remained distanced from the ways many of us die today, without honour, grace, or even comfort. As individuals, we want to die with those qualities we most respect. Mozart completed his great *Requiem* on his deathbed with complete consciousness of its personal as well as collective significance. Bach's last major composition, his greatest, was a compilation of early and recent pieces blended and cantered within the sublime *B Minor Mass*. Socrates' courageous suicide (as recorded by Plato) as an act against tyranny could be seen in the same light. These are epiphanies, human death rituals in which our highest human values are embodied. A painless quiet passing with friends and family gathered close is another kind of equally meaningful ritual we may all seek. Helping transform our cultures to allow such an end, if fate allows us this, is one of the purposes of this paper.

LOSS AND THE END

Throughout this writing, we have pointed to the importance of recognizing the ecstatic, symbolized in the energy of the *duende*, as an underlying presence in the longevite's journey. The drama of the bullfight, and the many other life initiations in which the encounter with death is both a metaphor and

real-life enactment, bring meaning and even uncanny vitality to a difficult and final passage. The reality of loss – body, mind, and soul – unimbued with this kind of energy brings hopelessness and suffering and feeds the depression hovering at the edge of this end stage of life.

Of the many losses that are possible and even inevitable, the death of a spouse or partner and the subsequent need to live alone is particularly poignant and difficult. The level of maturity of personality and the quality of the relationship are major factors in adapting, but there is also a predictable and independent syndrome and sequence to this new state of being.

When the life partner leaves or is taken away by dementia or death, at first there is an overwhelming confusion. The assault of the death bull is disorienting because it is always huge and terrifying and unfamiliar. No matter our individual state of preparedness, the charge always comes in a different and unexpected way. The audience at the bullfight looks to the matador's feet for his courageous readiness and noble stance. The feet betray cowardice because they are not in control when faced with this supremely fearful attack – they move, they want to run away, and the crowd jeers. The person grieving a recent loss wants and tries to run away from the reality of the event. Others watch how he/she holds the stands, no matter how authentic and generous they are with their loving accompaniment. It is not about malice; it is about the merging with that person's fear and grief that happens when there are extreme emotions that easily become unmanageable and all recognize that there is no escape. There is only the grace with which it is handled and diverse rituals that are enacted to protect from its violent onslaught.

Most longevites are overwhelmed by the absence of the person they lived with, often the bulk of their adult years. The centre that held two is broken, and the vacuum that takes its place persists for months, even years. This vacuum is accompanied by extreme sorrow and longing for the lost one. Some report the experience as a "lost limb" of the wounded amputee, the reaching for the hand, face, mouth, and embrace of the other, seeking the phantom shape for solace. It is unbearable pain when the upsurge of emotions takes over the whole person and leads him/her down the road of depression. But this darkest of ecstasies can also deliver the beauty that is inherent in life: the magnificent colours of the flower are magnified; the shades of dawn sparkle as never before; the music once shared titillates with the splendour of memories enhanced and idealized; the writings, the readings... However, the ecstasy of life wanes fast, and

the challenge of rebuilding a life out of the ordinary everyday can seem barren and to some impossible. Thoughts of suicide may arise. As one woman said, "How can I knit a life with no threads?"

The griever often responds with vexation and irritation to mundane tasks and to the loving attempts to bring solace by those near. An uncontrollable rage at one or more family members and friends may ensue. The projections range from envy of their current well being to accusations based on old injuries now experienced as larger than ever before. Those who are accosted by these emotions inevitably feel that they are largely out of proportion and unjustified. But to the mourner they are real, and they now attack mercilessly like the wounded bull. Also, a need for physical and psychological safety is much enhanced, and since these dependencies are not easily fulfilled, the grieving person becomes even more dangerous and defensive. Again, the bull in the ring comes to mind. All bulls find one or two spots in the arena, the *querencia*, where they can feel secure in the unfamiliar and/or threatening encounter with the torador. Here the creature is most dangerous because it will not charge but will gore anyone who comes near. It takes enormous patience and skill to slowly move the bull out of its *querencia* so that life and death in the ring can go on. Similarly, the attacked friend or family member has to remember that the thrusting horns of the person they love have to be endured until, in time, the person is capable of weaving his/her fate anew more clearly.

Longevites frequently report that children and friends now treat them as if they were the children, telling them how and what to do, whether or not this is required. This may lead to denial of the actual needs of the mourner by those who truly wish to be of help.

We have seen so many friends and patients who misinterpret the communication of people in the throes of what seems to them to be an ultimate disintegration of personality. It is hard to listen. It is hard to watch previously strong individuals who were good parents, grandparents, or friends now reduced to whining, angry people. Organizing households and providing food and money may be exactly what is needed or be an easy substitute for the hard listening required to fully appreciate the disabling pain of being alone. It is hard to know the extent of the need and the place where a balm of love and caring can be applied and be of real use. One distraught recent widow was happy to receive flowers, condolence notes, and even words of encouragement, gestures seen as loving examples of friendship. But her main need was to get out of her house, the place where she had spent years of marriage,

now a mausoleum of unendurable memories. She had placed her house on the market. To relocate, she needed the cash from the sale, but although she lowered the price, no bidders arrived. Her despair with her surroundings drove her to thoughts of suicide mixed with fury, knowing that some of her friends who offered meals out and feelingful phone calls (and incidentally were always feeling good about themselves) had great wealth and could have, with no impact on them, bought the house and given her time and the opportunity to relocate to a place where memories and feelings were not so acute. This type of denial is commonly based on social convention, and true generosity would require some secrecy to spare the widow a feeling of indebtedness. Of course, this woman never felt able to voice her needs, which is common enough in individuals robbed of their moorings and afraid of revealing their desperate neediness.

We have selected the loss of a partner for the example but could equally well have chosen so many other losses: the consequences of debilitating arthritis, cancer, blindness, or dementia all might have a similar impact. Loss is always a part of the drama of longevity, and the courage to temporarily surmount overwhelming onslaughts of damage and deficit often becomes the central plot – perhaps the only one. Longevites live with this vision even before it becomes a reality. It is the panorama of their particular play and the most common final scene, along with their funerary ceremonies, that they may imagine.



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