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My thoughts on aging
By Emma Rydén

For as long as I can remember, the very idea of “getting old” has made cold shivers run down my spine. I’ve experienced a kind of anxiety or stress that manifests itself in physical reactions such as nausea just from saying the words "well, I’ve probably already lived a quarter of my life, it’s not long now until old age and death are knocking at my door.” For me, old age has meant the same thing as death. I imagine that my conception of old age sounds exaggerated and quite simply unfounded. My friends and family have not been able to understand my great fear of ”getting old,” thereby getting closer to the inevitable – death. In this regard, my religious beliefs have been different from most other people’s. Most people I know don’t view aging like I have, i.e., that once you’ve reached old age it’s just a matter of waiting for the end and for darkness to ensue. Once you’re dead that’s it, the end, and you will never experience life again. For me, death has always been definite and absolute. Only a few generations after your death, you are forgotten – simply an erased memory here on Earth.

As I said, very few people share my long-held conception of what aging and death really mean. I’ve heard many counterarguments to my ideas on ”getting old” and dying, such as: "Emma, it’s only the body that dies, the soul lives on in something or someone else,” or "Getting old doesn’t mean you’ve reached the end” or "Of course we don’t just disappear completely after death, I’m sure there’s a new dimension where we are resurrected” – and then there is the classic comment: "I believe in a life after death, we will be resurrected.” Considering how far these beliefs are from my own convictions, one can perhaps have a greater understanding of the feelings I’ve experienced at the mere thought of old age. Please don’t misunderstand me: I have certainly thought it would be a tremendous relief and so wonderful to share other people’s conceptions of old

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age – that life as an elderly person can be grand and that death is not the end. No one, however, has been able to convince me.

Yet something marvelous happened inside me on January 25, 2005. A lecture by Gerontologist, Professor Lars Tornstam made me see old age – which I had always feared – in a completely new light.

Based on empirical studies and interviews, Tornstam has developed a theory inspired by a mixture of Eastern philosophy and Carl G. Jung’s ideas about there being two life periods (Gerontologi, 2000; Ove Dehlin & Bo Haberg et al., p. 180). Like Jung, Tornstam considers that the second period of life is qualitatively different from the first period, in which people’s focus is on the material plane, for instance on having children, functioning as part of the labor force and trying to understand the world. According to Tornstam, the second half of life is instead about getting to know yourself and aspects of yourself that have been concealed until now (L. Tornstam, lecture, Uppsala University, Jan. 25, 2005).

Tornstam calls his theory Gerotranscendence, which is simply a model for understanding positive aging and the step into the second half of life. According to Tornstam, however, many people are unfortunately unaware that there actually is a second half. Instead of allowing themselves to reach this transition to something qualitatively new, many people hold on tight to the first, superficial, body-fixated and material half, which prevents them from, as Tornstam says, "entering a new dimension marked by ego-integrity and harmony." If you allow yourself to go through the process toward gerotranscendence, changes will take place in your definition of "the Cosmic Dimension," "the Self" as well as "Social Relations" (L. Tornstam, lecture, Uppsala University, Jan. 25, 2005).

If I had the space I would share, with great enthusiasm, everything I now know about these three areas, but instead I will provide a summary of the basic ideas:

- **Cosmic transcendence** refers to the notion that when you reach old age and gerotranscendence, time is no longer as important as it was before. Then and now flow together. Fear of death decreases. Death is no longer seen as absolute, because you see yourself as a link in a long chain of earlier and future generations. You are no longer a single isolated point, but instead
transcend your Self and become part of something greater – you are part of "the universe." You even allow yourself to not understand everything – the mystery in life is accepted.

By Self or ego transcendence Tornstam means that you experience decreased self-centeredness. You are no longer the most important thing in the world, but you can laugh with relief at yourself. Transcendence of the body occurs, i.e., you are still aware of your body’s small flaws, but they aren’t as remarkable to you as they were. Many people’s thoughts return to childhood and childhood is revised and understood in a new way. You see everything in a wider context, and inner reconciliations with people from the past are not uncommon. A sense of coherence across life phases increases with age, making the entire life more meaningful.

Last, but not least, the theory of gerotranscendence concerns social relations and how they change. There is an increased need for positive solitude. Superficial contacts lose their importance and warm and close relations become even more important. Many elderly people enter a "mature childishness" that manifests itself in their transgression of social rules and norms and their allowing themselves to be foolish and mischievous. They simply "lighten up" about life, which causes freedom and choice to grow (L. Tornstam, lecture, Uppsala University, Jan. 25, 2005).

Immediately after Professor Tornstam’s lecture, I did something I’ve never done before. Filled with energy and indescribable calmness I’d never before experienced in connection with thoughts about becoming old, I called my 83-year-old grandmother. I have been cross with her many times when she has laughed at my complaints about my appearance. I’ve been angry with her when she has lost track of time. When I was younger I’d get cross when she, as I saw it, made a fool of herself in front of my friends, joking around and being generally childish. I have often failed to understand why such small things make her happy, for instance when you remember her birthday or call her on the phone. I’ve wondered whether she just wasn’t pretending to be happy to make others happy (now I know better!). At the same time, I’ve always been envious of her serenity in the face of "being old." When she and I have talked about death, she’s always done so with humor and with a twinkle in her eye –
something I’ve always admired considering the anxiety and fear I felt during these conversations. "Forgive me Grandma,” I said to her when I called her after the lecture. I told her about what Lars Tornstam had said and that the pieces of the puzzle had finally started to fall into place for me. I continued: "You’ve just allowed yourself to enter the second period of life, Grandma. All the things you’ve done that have irritated me and other people are normal for older people who are going through gerotranscendence. I’ve had no right at all to get mad at you. The person you are and how you behave is just as normal for older people as complaining about small body flaws is for me and the younger generation.”

My grandmother cried, and I remember very well what she replied: "Oh Emma, you can’t imagine how nice it is for me to hear this. Finally somebody understands what I’m always talking about. Do you understand now why it’s so easy for me to forget the time? I’m not forgetful, I’m just me.”

I am almost convinced that the more people who have a chance to study, or at least hear about, Lars Tornstam’s ideas, the more people will accept and even long for the second half of life. Right now, I have already almost begun to look forward to it myself. Just imagine how nice it would be to not care so much about your appearance and other material things – things that play such a large part of young people’s lives today. I also believe that spreading this theory among the older generation would reassure many of them and at the same time save them from bitterness and anxiety. Through the theory, they would hear about behaviors that are common among the elderly, but that we young people see as pathological. Yet such behaviors are actually normative for older people.

Thank you Lars Tornstam, today I am no longer afraid of getting old.

"It’s not how old you are that matters, it’s how you are old”

Emma Rydén