

FIERCE w/ Age

Welcome to Older, Wiser, Fiercer: the Self-Guided Conscious Aging Retreat

Hello Retreat Participant,

Under the best of circumstances, growing older represents a disruption of how things used to be. Any day can bring with it the realization that we do not have the power to make things go back the way they were. But the challenging times we are living in are not the occasion of individual crisis. They are societal, impacting us all.

Never before have there been so many in our generation struggling with both individual and societal disillusionment and a confrontation with our own mortality.

Given our current difficulties, it is clear that our world needs our wise elders more than ever. More than this, we who have lived long and well must *become* the wise elders. But how shall we accomplish this when at the same time, we feel so disoriented and anxious? Following are 15 lessons, intended to be followed by you every weekday for three weeks. However, you are free to go through them at whatever pace works best for you. The important thing is that you do them sequentially, however, as the exercises build on one another.

Between now and when you begin the retreat, be especially alert to your judgments about people your age and older who are facing the personal and societal challenges that are hard upon us with grace and dignity—those rare beacons of light who are lighting the way for us?

If you have questions/comments, feel free to email me at Corsborn@aol.com. For further study, you may enjoy reading my books on conscious aging including my newest book [Older, Wiser, Fiercer: The Wisdom Collection](#), (Available as Kindle eBook and paperback).

Here's to growing older, wiser and fiercer together!

Carol Orsborn

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Lesson 1

Today's Topic:

Appreciate your questions and concerns not as problems to be solved, but as the heart of the spiritual journey.

You have questions about aging, mortality and the future. We all do. As we confront both the possibilities and challenges of aging, the questions only accelerate and deepen. We, who are so used to drawing upon our wealth of internal and external resources to get answers to our questions, find ourselves uncharacteristically confused or uncertain about key issues. When we try to rely upon our traditional problem-solving techniques, or turn to even trusted advisers, we often find that our questions persist or even grow. It is as though we are suddenly in unexplored territory without a map. Some times this feels like freedom, some times this is just plain terrifying. But the fact is that it is not that you personally don't know what the future holds in store. This is not some shortcoming or missed stitch on your part. It's that none of us know.

It is natural to seek to maintain or regain mastery of our lives. . But our generation is living and aging in complex times, fraught with serious concerns. The military has come up with a term for

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the nature of the era in which we're living: "VUCA", for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. But VUCA doesn't only aptly describe our times in general, but even in the best of circumstances, what the very act of aging entails.

The older we get, the more apparent it becomes that even at its best, we live in a universe in which paradox abounds. Seekers throughout the course of time have discovered that the answers to questions about aging, mortality, meaning and purpose, are frequently shrouded in deep mystery. Clearly, as we age it is impingent on us to trade old conceptions of mastery for illuminating alternatives that will both motivate and inspire.

As Dr. Robert Weber and I share in our book *The Spirituality of Age*, it is no wonder that in the majority of philosophical, religious and spiritual traditions the notion of asking questions as spiritual practice predominates. From the Zen Koan and Socratic dialogue to Ignatian Inquiry and Talmudic discourse, seekers from across millennia, geographies and beliefs share this most basic of spiritual exercise in common.

The essence of this first lesson teaches that when it comes to achieving what most of us really say we want out of life—qualities like fulfillment, hope, resilience and resolution-- the questions, themselves, comprise the essence of the spiritual path. I am going to ask you to trust that by the mere fact of questioning, you are already being taken ever nearer to the answers you seek. Your questions brought you here today and will serve you well for the duration of this retreat. In fact, your questions will enrich the quality of your journey every step of the way. Today, I ask you to honor your questions and concerns: they are not problems

to be solved, but the very heart of the journey to the freedom, wholeness and fulfillment you seek.

Today's Assignment:

As you consider your judgments of individuals your age and older, who do you think is an example of someone who is aging well, even when face-to-face with ultimate concerns—and someone who is aging badly? What I'd like you to do is make a separate list of characteristics for each of your examples. What adjectives, qualities and characteristics best describe the essence of the individual you chose as someone who is aging well? On a separate list, what adjectives, qualities and characteristics best describe the essence of the individual you chose who is aging badly? Keep these two lists close at hand because later this week, we will revisit them to mine what for many will be unexpected gifts of self-knowledge.

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Lesson 2

Today's Topic

Set an intention worthy of you: To what are you being called?

Over the many decades I've been teaching decision-making techniques, I've repeatedly witnessed that even as we rely on our rational minds to approach and solve problems, it is our subconscious minds that are actually doing the heavy lifting.

As we age, we benefit greatly from developing capacities that have been underutilized in the past. Balancing out our reliance on will and drive, the potential exists to short-circuit traditional problem-solving techniques. Quoting John Adams, by "leaving our minds loose", we allow our intuitive wisdom to provide us with clarity.

Today's Assignment:

The very impulse that moved you to begin the Older, Wiser, Fiercer retreat means that you are ready to confront, transform and transcend limiting beliefs about aging. Ironically, this will not come about by "working at it", doing more or even better. This will, rather, be a function of relaxing your mind.

What I'd like you to do is find a comfortable place to sit where you won't be disturbed for at least 10 minutes. Have paper (or better yet a journal) with you, along with a pen. At the top of the page, write this question: "What is an intention for the duration of this retreat that that is worthy of me? To what am I being called?"

For the next 10 minutes, write nonstop whatever comes into your mind. "Forget" about the question at the top of the page, and allow your stream of consciousness to take you deeper. Don't stop to correct mistakes or worry about grammar. If you think "this is a stupid waste of time", write that down. The only rule is that you refrain from judging or censoring your train of thought. This is not an opportunity to lead your thoughts. Your assignment is to follow them.

At some point, many people experience that their thoughts begin to flow, tapping inner resources in unexpected ways. Trust that even if this does not happen for you in this first effort, you are giving your subconscious mind permission to play a bigger role in your life.

Today, regardless of your results, assume a stance of receptivity and prepare to be surprised.

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Lesson 3

Today's Topic:

Progressing towards Spiritual Maturity: What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Adapted from "The Silver Pearl" by Drs. Jimmy Laura Smull and Carol Orsborn

Telling the truth about your strengths and vulnerabilities is the entryway into progressing towards spiritual maturity. Like the archeologist ready to go to work with shovel and pick, the first critical task is to figure out where to dig.

This inventory will help you assess the progress you are making towards not only growing old—but growing whole--by showing you the stage that best describes your attitudes about challenges and issues you face in seven key areas of your life. This will be a touch point for you throughout the course as you identify areas in which you have already achieved the peak of the developmental period, and areas where there is the potential for growth. This inventory is based on original qualitative research conducted by Dr. Jimmy Laura Smull and myself of over 100 women transiting beyond midlife through old age who identified themselves as fulfilled in multiple areas of their lives. (You can read more about this study in our book "The Silver Pearl.")

Today's Assignment:

Keep track of the answer that best completes the sentence for each of the following seven issues that applies to you. You may record more than one answer. When you're finished, you will be provided with the key to understanding the stage that best describes your response.

Spiritual Growth Inventory

With regard to...

Preparing for the future, I:

Stage 1 Worry about what lies ahead, allowing myself to be manipulated reactively to fear-based messages

Stage 2 Am obsessed with what I need to do, or deny needing to do anything even about obvious, practical matters

Stage 3 Combine faith and planning to address realistic possibilities knowing that by allowing myself to have my authentic feelings, I am best equipped to make the best out of whatever comes my way.

Unfinished business, including both regrets and unfulfilled goals, I:

Stage 1 Am unable or unwilling to address past issues, or think it's not worth trying

Stage 2 Feel open-ended guilt, shame or regret

Stage 3 Find closure by making appropriate amends when possible, while devoting my vital energy towards finding and progressing towards new, achievable goals.

Health, I:

Stage 1 Think of illness as a shortcoming or punishment

Stage 2 Fret excessively over what more I can be doing, or become neglectful of my body's needs

Stage 3 Do what I can to stay healthy, knowing that while some things are out of my control, the best possible outcome is always something for which I can aim and hope

Meaning, I:

Stage 1 Remain dissatisfied, wondering what's wrong with me that I just can't be happy with what I have

Stage 2 Rage against my sense of meaningless or ignore my deep, diffuse yearning

Stage 3 Cultivate an appreciation for life's mysteries: "the courage to change the things I can, the strength to accept the things I can't, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Love and Relationships, I:

Stage 1 View toxic relationships with past, current or potential mates/friends/children/relatives as the norm

Stage 2 Try too hard and settle for less than I deserve, or generally turn my back on the possibility of loving again

Stage 3 Make choices that are loving and forgiving, but self-protective. Meanwhile, I enjoy the abundance of love that is available in my life open to giving and receiving love from unexpected sources

Ultimate Concerns

Including caregiving, loss and mortality, I:

Stage 1 Relate to decline and death as personal failure

Stage 2 Become hyper-vigilant, or deny others' as well as my own mortality

Stage 3 Take time to mourn the losses and even if feeling fear, sorrow or anger, trust that in time I can grow to embrace the shadow as well as the light

Creating a Legacy, I

Stage 1 Believe life is measured by external standards

Stage 2 Deny or aggrandize the impact I make every day

Stage 3 Recognize my potential to influence the world as my ordinary self, without concern for praise or credit

When you gave yourself Stage 1:

You have taken the courageous first step of admitting to yourself that you have buried important parts of your original, authentic self beneath the beliefs, judgments and limitations imposed upon you by others. You no longer want to trade your own freedom in exchange for the illusion of security. Know that the moment you make a conscious effort to recognize the hidden messages embedded in your response, you begin making up ground.

When you gave yourself Stage 2:

You have already come to realize that the messages you received earlier in your life are not always in sync with your own beliefs and values. You know you have become “dis-illusioned” when you recognize that your new beliefs and behaviors are primarily a response to influences you no longer want or need in your life. Whether you go into rebellion or denial, it is the fact of your reactivity that determines that while you have progressed, you have not yet arrived at your final destination.

When you gave yourself Stage 3:

You have realized that the essential task of spiritual growth is not to ignore, forget or react against the past, but to make peace with your personal history and reclaim an experience of life and spirit that is both authentic and unshakable. You are now charged with a sacred task: to attend to the fulfillment of life’s promise and to continue to pay heed to the deepest behests of your heart.

When you gave yourself multiple stages:

Like most of us, you are in transition. That is, in fact, the essence of the spiritual path, which is more about progressing than arriving. The key is to refrain from judging yourself harshly for behaviors and beliefs you incorporated into your life as the best response you could muster at the time, but rather, to make peace with your personal history. Celebrate your spiritual progress, the

leaving behind of old beliefs, behaviors and situations that no longer serve, acquiring new depths of understanding about who you are and to what you are being called.

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Lesson 4

Today's Topic:

What is a psychologically and spiritually healthy vision of conscious aging?

Today's Lesson:

In your first lesson, I asked you to think of an example of someone who is aging well—and someone who is aging badly.

The essence of today's lesson is this: the lists you came up with say as much about you as it does about the person you selected. The list that describes someone who is aging well gives you a vivid, concrete profile of the aspirations you hold in regards to aging. Not every adjective you put on the list may apply to you, but the list—as a whole—will provide you with interesting insights about yourself.

The list that described someone who is aging badly also provides you with insight, but in this case, you are provided a portal into what it is you most fear about aging: your concerns and your issues.

Today, we are going to be concentrating on mining the wisdom from your list of attributes for the individual who is aging well. We will, however, be revisiting the list of attributes for the individual who is aging poorly tomorrow, so make sure you save it.

Today's Assignment:

Please pull out the list of adjectives, qualities and characteristics you used to describe the individual who is aging well. To mine the lesson from this assignment, go ahead and circle every item on the list that is NOT necessarily dependent on one's circumstances. This is an important factor to consider as you develop a spiritually and psychologically healthy vision of aging. You will want to make sure that the blueprint you will be building for yourself through the course of this retreat is based on a vision of aging that holds the potential of going the distance, regardless of the circumstances you may face down the road.

As you circle the items that are not dependent on circumstances, keep in mind that the items you choose to circle will often require a judgment call on your part. For instance, we can probably agree that a person can have a great sense of humor more or less regardless of whatever else is going on in their lives. If you agree, you would go ahead and circle "great

sense of humor.” Items like “resilient” and “has an optimistic attitude” would fall into this category.

Now let’s take another example: “Has a great job.” Having a great job is not always a matter of personal control. People get laid off or retire, companies merge. Individuals develop a disability. Yes, we can do whatever we can to keep our jobs or make ourselves as employable as possible, but we cannot guarantee that we will have great jobs for the rest of our lives. I would suggest that you not circle this item.

How about “healthy” or “athletic.” Yes, we can influence our health and level of physical fitness—but we cannot guarantee that we will never develop an ailment or face some manner of physical challenge down the road. I would suggest that you NOT circle “healthy” or any of its variations.

If you are confused or conflicted about any particular item, don’t circle it.

What you are left with is two buckets. In the first bucket are all the circled items: items that you admire and that you are clear are under your control to cultivate in yourself regardless of the circumstances of your life now and down the road. In the second bucket are all the uncircled items that are certainly or potentially dependent on circumstances beyond your control.

Knowledge is power. Your original list provides you with a vivid and concrete picture of your aspirations for the future. Chances are you will be graced with the good fortune of aging as graciously as the individual who you have identified as aging well. You are way ahead of the game, knowing what it is you would like for yourself, and using this as a spur to do whatever you can to make this vision your reality.

But here's something important to think about. The more uncircled items there are on your list, the more likely you are to be feeling unsettled about the challenges you are facing now, let alone the future. If this is the case, it is because on some level, you already suspect that you are placing faith in that which is ultimately undependable. Of course we should do whatever we can within our power to influence the circumstances of our lives, but there is a cost to denying that our power is limited. The good news is that once we break denial, we gain immediate access to the entire range of our abundant internal as well as external resources, to begin to build a spiritually and psychologically healthy vision of aging that can be counted upon to go the distance.

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Lesson 5

Today's Topic:

Why is it so hard to wake up, and to what are we awakening?

Today's Lesson

Yesterday, you were asked to circle attributes that are not dependent on external circumstances, and to leave those that are conditional in any way uncircled. If you had a number of uncircled items on your list, it is entirely understandable. We live in a society that privileges will, drive and mastery above all. However, this emphasis on power and achievement over life circumstances makes more sense for us when we are young. Degrees get earned, careers established, cities built. But as we age, we have the opportunity to cultivate qualities that tend to be undervalued by modern society. Those of us who have invested time in spiritual practices, and who have understood the importance of nurturing our innate creativity and ability to nurture ourselves, are better prepared to face the challenges not only our age, but our times, are bringing our way. We may have struggled to separate ourselves from our earlier identities, swimming upstream in our society's dominant judgment that taking time to develop one's inner life, to self-nurture or simply having fun for fun's sake is self-indulgent or

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unproductive. We see this in how older people are portrayed in advertisements and in the media all the time. In this romanticized notion of aging, the individual who is most admired has the stamina, sex-appeal, health, looks and proclivities of someone ten or twenty years younger.

The flip side of this picture is how badly the individual is portrayed who falls short of the ideal in any area of their life: the “losers” who are “a drain on society”. These include individuals who may be dealing with issues that are beyond their control, such as illness—suffering from “underlying conditions”, the loss of physical strength or youthful beauty. (And any of the items that went uncircled in the exercise above.) But individuals can also be judged harshly on issues that are a matter of choice, such as the growing desire to cultivate internal characteristics like the ability to simply be as the calm in the center of the storm, or artistic qualities that hold no apparently marketable value. It is as if as we age, we have only two choices: we either tow the line and are admired or we fall from grace and are reviled.

Today's Assignment

Today and throughout this weekend, be especially and critically alert to images and messages about aging that you get from advertisements and the media.

In formulating your attitudes about aging, have you inadvertently been influenced by images such as these that either romanticize, marginalize or, especially in our fraught times, revile aging? After you've seen enough, take a fresh look at your two lists through this lens and see

if and/or to what degree you have unconsciously bought into the stereotypes. And more to the point, freeing yourself from judgment and fear, begin to ask yourself what would a spiritually and psychologically healthy vision of aging look like for you? Next week will be all about not only formulating this vision for yourself, but turning it into actionable steps.

Congratulations on completing your first week of the Older, Wiser, Fiercer Retreat. It is an important task for individuals transiting beyond midlife through old age to continue to grow in our spiritual lives, replacing notions of aging that have been imposed upon us to join with those of us who are co-creating new visions of aging that take into account both shadow and light. You have made an excellent start.

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Lesson 6

Today's Topic:

What qualities did you neglect in the first half of your life that you are now free to develop?

"The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand."

--Joseph Campbell

Welcome to Week Two of the Older, Wiser, Fiercer Retreat. Today, we make the transition from the groundwork you laid last week to explore your strengths, aspirations and areas for growth in relation to aging. This week, we will be building upon this solid foundation in order to construct a blueprint for this new stage of your life, one that is guaranteed to deliver on its promise now as well down the road.

In order to do this, you will need to continue to question the conceptions you've been holding, often unconsciously, of who you thought you were in order to re-energize your vision of who

you are becoming. You may discover that there are aspects and qualities about yourself that you want to retain, expand or deepen. In fact, I'm sure you will. But you may also discover something unexpected...that this precious moment of time is an opportunity to explore new ways of relating to the world. In fact, many who have mastered certain ways of being are curious and eager to experience the exact flip-side, at least for awhile. What has been most interesting to me is that the flip-side is different for everyone. Someone who has always been quiet and supportive of others realizes he would like to experience what it's like to be the center of attention and feel powerful in his own right, for a change. At the same time, someone who has already mastered being powerful and gathering attention to herself, may crave exactly the opposite.

Over time, most return to retrieve some of what they had thought to leave behind forever in order to thoughtfully meld together something authentic, original and unshakable. This is the essence of what many of us say we want most out of life as we age: an expanded experience of freedom and an abiding sense of resolution and fulfillment. And this, too, is the very definition of not only growing old, but growing whole.

Today's Assignment:

Every one of your strengths, areas of mastery and ways you have traditionally related to the world has its opposite. Today, find two colored pencils and take a look at the chart below. You will see a list of characteristics paired to reflect the dynamic tension between divergent tendencies. In each pair, think about where you now fall on the continuum between extremes. With one of the colored pencils, circle the number that reflects your current experience of yourself in regards to how you relate to the world. Five is highest, one is lowest. When you are done, with the second color, go back and circle the number that reflects your degree of interest in exploring or developing qualities and characteristics at the other end of the spectrum. If you are content with where you stand in regards to a particular pairing, circle the same number with both pencils. Feel free to think of additional pairings particular to your own life.

Ambitious 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Content

Acquisitive 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Satisfied/Grateful for What One Already Has

Attention-Getting 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Intentionally in the Background

Busy 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Relaxed

Driven 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Patient/Paced

Pursuing Perfection 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Accepting of Imperfection

Pragmatic 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Spiritual

Rational 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Creative/Intuitive

Status Conferred through Externals 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Status Irrelevant

Proactive/Powerful 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Trusting/Receptive

Serving/Pleasing Others 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Self-Referential: Pleasing One's Self

Industrious 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Laid-back

Solicitous of Others' Feelings 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Genuine

Supportive 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Assertive

Voicing Opinions 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Tolerant/Accepting

Proud of One's Self 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Humble

Complex 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Simple

Cautious/Careful 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Risk-Taking

Responsible 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Carefree

Leading 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Collaborating

Pushing One's Self Physically 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Taking it Easy

Youthful 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Grownup/Mature

Innocent 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Sophisticated

Untested 5 4 3 2 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 Wise

What other pairings can you think of to add to your list?

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Lesson 7

Today's Topic:

What is Your Vision for What is Possible?

There is an important difference between giving voice to a compelling vision--and fantasizing. Fantasizing is born out of denial. Lacking both roots and wings, fantasies can flip from hope to fear at the slightest breeze. A well-grounded vision, on the other hand, springs organically out of the very fabric of your being. The vision you will be building for yourself this week is unshakable because it is not contingent on factors that are beyond your control.

You earned this right to envision what is possible for you because of the hard work you did last week. Through the five days of assignments, you surfaced the stereotypes and limiting beliefs about aging that were generating fears, old habits of thinking and outgrown ways of being that you no longer want or need in your life. To whatever degree you had been in denial about aging and mortality, you can now trust that you have been awakened to the possibility of a more authentic life, a life that holds the promise of delivering to you the fulfillment you seek regardless of the circumstances you face.

Assignment:

Last week, in Lesson Two, you did a writing exercise titled “Setting Your Intention”, in which you followed rather than led your thoughts. Today, your assignment will be a visualization that will follow the same general principle. Rather than “think about” your vision of what is possible, you are going to “receive” images, thoughts and feelings. You can trust that this vision spontaneously takes into consideration all that you have been learning about yourself over this past week, to help you begin to construct a blueprint for this new stage of your life.

I am going to give you the script of this guided visualization in the paragraphs that follow. Read each paragraph then close your eyes to pause to imagine, journal or draw your responses capturing the images that arise.

Don’t judge or worry about whatever it is you imagine during this visualization. You do not need to consciously understand or know the meaning of the images that emerge. Trust that you have begun a process of deepening that will reveal new levels of understanding over time.

In fact, you will be building this blueprint over the course of the next two weeks and it will

continue to unfold for you over the months and even years to follow. In the coming days, you will have a number of opportunities to engage both your intuitive/unconscious as well as rational/decision-making faculties as you progress more deeply into this new stage of your life.

The Visualization:

Get yourself into a comfortable position in a quiet, private place where you won't be disturbed, and make sure you have paper and a pen nearby.

Now, imagine yourself walking through a lovely meadow. You hear birds chirping, a gentle warm breeze caresses your skin. You are following a path that leads to a thicket of trees. Just as you enter the thicket, you see a sign that reads: "Welcome to the unexplored territory beyond midlife. Just ahead: Your ideal life."

As you walk through the thicket, you are tingling with anticipation. What will you see on the other side? As you move the last branch aside, the first thing you see is where you are living. There it is! Where are you? Is it some place you already know and love, or is it something new, unexpected? Go inside and look around. What do you see? If you are in a room, what is in the room with you? If there is furniture, what kind of furniture do you see? What else is in the room? Are there things you enjoy doing? Books? Art supplies?

What do you sense in this room? What do you smell? What do you hear? What is the quality of light? The temperature?

How do you feel? Do you feel excited and rushed, or relaxed and peaceful? What other sensations and feelings are you experiencing? How do you feel physically? Emotionally?

Are you alone, or are you with others? If you are (or were) alone, how do you feel about this? If others are with you, or you'd like to invite others in, who would they be? Go ahead and see who, if anybody, you'd like to be sharing this experience with.

If there are others present, what are your relationships like in your ideal life? What do you appreciate about them? What do others appreciate about you?

Now, I'd like you to imagine if there are others rooms to explore, and when you've visited any of the others rooms in your ideal life you'd like to explore, see if you'd like to go outside.

If you are outside now, where if anywhere would you like to go? Would you like to take a trip or visit family or friends? Would you like to find a place to work or a place to play? Would you like to find a lovely spot in nature and just sit for awhile—or take a nap? Is there a place in your ideal life that you consider sacred—a place you feel at peace in the universe, that life is meaningful and fulfilled?

What, if anything, have we forgotten? What is important to you to have, do, be or experience that you have not yet imagined. Now's the time to do so.

When you're done, I want you to walk back through the thicket, past the signpost and into the meadow. When you're ready, grab your paper and pen to answer the questions below.

Visualization Questions:

1. Where did you choose to live? Was it a surprise to you? Was it bigger or smaller than you would have imagined? Fancier or simpler?
2. What was most important for you to have with you? Were there lots of things—or just a few? What was the nature of things you chose to have with you? Were they artifacts from the past? Status symbols? Items that spoke to your spirit allowing you to enjoy or create?
3. Who, if anybody, was with you in the space and what was the tenor of the relationships? What did others appreciate about you? If you were alone—how was that? Did you have to be reminded to invite others into your space or were they already there?
4. How did you feel in this space and when you left the space to explore other rooms and to go outside? Were you rushing around, or was your pace slower than usual? Were you excited/peaceful or what?
5. How did you get from place to place. Did you walk? Did you drive? If so, was the type/kind of car important to you?

6. Where did you go and what did you do when you were free to explore on your own?

Did you instinctively go to places to work, play, relax—places where you felt calm and fulfilled—or did you only go when you were reminded?

7. What other takeaways from this experience do you want to take the time to record?

Trust that your unconscious mind is surfacing messages to you to build into your blueprint for your vision of what is most important to you. You don't have to understand or take action on anything you imagined. In fact at this, the conclusion of this exercise, it is more than enough to simply note and release. However, it is also possible that you have learned something that you will want to keep in mind as you continue through the next two week's lessons in which you build a blueprint for yourself of a spiritually and psychologically healthy vision for your experience of conscious aging.

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Lesson 8

Today's Topic:

What is Your Blueprint?

By now, you are ready to begin putting your blueprint for what is most important to you into words. You may be relieved to know that this next exercise asks you to put your normal rationally-based decision-making processes to work on your behalf. You can do so now because you can trust that the right and left hemispheres of your brain are in communication, and that your rational mind has free and complete access to what your intuitive processes have been surfacing.

Assignment:

At the top of the page, write: "Blueprint for My Best Possible Experience of Conscious Aging." Sign it and date it.

On the left side of a sheet of paper, write down the following applicable categories you care about, leaving ample space between each item.

Living Arrangements

Where I live

Type of housing

Geographical/terrain of location

With whom, if anybody do I live

Relationships

Love interest/Spouse

Friends

Adult children

Grandchildren

Other

Finances/Budgeting: Experience of having enough

How I spend my time

Work (paid or unpaid/if any)

Play

Artistic/creative

Spiritual/religious/personal growth

Physical exercise/wellness involvements

Hobbies

Responsibilities/logistics

Socializing/Group activity

Health

My Legacy: Making a Difference

How I get around: My Car or other mode(s) of transport

Appearance/Style

Pet(s)

Caregiving and end of life experiences of those for whom I care

My own end of life experience including making peace with death and dying

Overall emotional profile: dealing with the challenges and opportunities of aging

Now, I want you to go through each of the items and write as short or as long as you need to capture what to the best of your knowledge and ability at the present moment you believe to be your ideal but potentially achievable goal. It's not that you won't potentially have obstacles or challenges to overcome, or that you can guarantee you'll get precisely what you want, but short of worst case scenarios over which you have no control, you also know that you have a high probability of having access to both internal and external resources to do so. (In other words, your best possible outcome, is one that is rooted in the realm of real possibilities rather than in ungrounded fantasy. At this juncture, don't worry about possible but improbable worst case scenarios beyond the aspects and limitations that you've already considered and factored in. Being realistic does not mean you don't get to set potentially achievable aspirations for yourself—to tell the truth about what it is you really want. Think of seasoned hope as a magnet pulling you in the direction towards which you are being called. An old saying goes like this: "Don't be afraid to leap to the moon. You may not get there but at least you'll get off the ground."

Don't overthink this. Write as quickly and honestly as possible. Make sure you catch the flavor, if not the specifics, of what you're hoping for. Make sure the vision you're capturing is compelling and authentic—something that is both inspiring and meaningful to you. Again, don't worry about possible but improbable worst case scenarios. This is your turn to ask for what you really want: a vision of conscious aging that has its own intrinsic meaning, value and purpose and is as compelling as the decades that have come before.

This next phase of your life will be different in ways from what you've experienced in the past, but with compensations and enhancements that bear the potential to not only meet but exceed your hopes for achieving unprecedented levels of the freedom, wholeness and fulfillment you seek. Conscious aging holds the promise of the culmination of your life's journey *regardless* of the circumstances with which you will be faced.

Respond to each prompt as honestly and fully as possible.

Keep what you've written close at hand because we will be revisiting this list tomorrow.

FIERCE w/ Age

Lesson 9

Today's Topic:

How do Hope and Reality Impact Each Other? How can I make my blueprint real for me?

In our previous lesson, we discussed the difference between giving voice to a compelling vision of yourself living the best experience of what conscious aging means to you possible--and fantasizing. You will recall that fantasizing is born out of denial. Lacking both roots and wings, fantasies can flip from hope to fear at the slightest breeze.

But understanding the limitations of fantasy should not scare us away from making plans that are grounded in a serious assessment of what it is we truly want for ourselves. Envisioning, hoping, giving voice to aspirations: for those of us who have broken denial, and understand the illusion of mastery, making any kind of plan that is both meaningful and grounded in reality entails a risk. We who have experienced and seen so much, who have passed beyond the naïve innocence of youth to understand the downside of elevated expectations, may find this daunting, indeed. But taking liberty with the words of Bruno Bettelheim: "If we do not want to

change and develop, *to take risks and entertain hope*, then we might as well remain in a deathlike sleep.”

So how do we walk the fine line of both holding the vision of what we really want—and accommodating objective reality? This is indeed challenging—but possible. In the following series of lessons and assignments, you will be guided to draw upon both internal and external resources to continue to refine the blueprint you outlined yesterday. The experience of freedom, wholeness and fulfillment you seek grows as you continue building a plan for how you are going to live into your own unique experience of conscious aging that is unshakable because the meaning and purpose of your life will not be contingent upon factors that are beyond your control. Clearly, that we are even having this discussion here, demonstrates how far you’ve come in trading old conceptions of mastery for illuminating alternatives that will both motivate and inspire.

Today’s Assignment

Yesterday, you began building your blueprint by writing out your ideal but potentially achievable goals across a broad spectrum of categories. You took the risk of thinking about what it is that you really want for yourself and you captured it in writing.

Today, you are going to take an even bigger risk. You are going to go for something you want even more than any one item on your list of aspirations: the guarantee of meaning, purpose

and fulfillment that is unshakable because it is not based on factors that are beyond your control. Are you ready to dive deep?

It's time to revisit yesterday's blueprint. If you typed it on computer, print it out and grab a pen. This assignment has three parts.

1. First, go through your response to each category and ask yourself this question. "As I think about my present circumstances as well as about the future, is there anything that I know of now that is or could probably be an obstacle to my actually achieving/having this in my life?" If the answer is "No, there are no probable undermining attitudes/obstacles/challenges", put a big checkmark next to the item. (Another way of thinking about this: if you have good reason to believe that the risk in this particular category for falling short of your hopes and expectations is low, and your level of skills and resources is adequate, put a checkmark next to it.)
2. Now go through the remaining categories and ask yourself this question. "As I think about my present situation as well as about the future, is there an undermining attitude/obstacle or challenge in the way that could likely prevent me from achieving/having this in my life?" The nature of this obstacle may either be something that you believe you may have some degree of control over but don't yet know how to address, or it may be the result of circumstances that will or are likely to arise beyond your control. In either case, circle the item.

3. In this last step (for now) number every circled item on this list on the basis of potentially easiest to address (number one) through the most complex or worrisome.

Between now and the end of the retreat, you will continue to go through exercises that guide you to face and address the obstacles that you have identified. Obstacles will no longer serve as stumbling blocks that put an end to hope but rather will come to represent decisions to be made on the way to fulfilling the promise of this next phase of your life.

FIERCE w/ Age

Lesson 10

Today's Topic:

The importance of discernment: which voices/opinions and judgments, both internal and external, are worthy of your trust?

You have surfaced a lot of information over the past week and one half, and chances are you've been more attuned than usual to the voices, opinions and judgments that are chattering away at you, both internally and externally. In fact, while you are undoubtedly gaining more clarity in regards to some areas of this next phase of your life, there are others that may be persistently shrouded in fear and confusion.

One of the main factors contributing to confusion and unclarity is when the voices, opinions and judgments that are coming your way conflict or contradict one another. The solution to this is what the spiritual traditions refer to as "discernment." Amongst all the voices competing for your attention, there is one in particular that you can count on to help you sort through all the options to make the best decision possible, regardless of the circumstances with which you are faced. Some traditions call this the "higher self" or "inner wisdom", others call this voice "God" or "Spirit." However, you think of this discerning voice, you instinctively know when you

have tapped a source worth listening to above all others. Some people report recognizing this deeper voice, offering reliable guidance, when they get goose bumps on their arms, or a chill down their back. Others report that they “just know.” Suddenly, where there was confusion and indecision, there is clarity and action steps.

So what are these other voices that distract and confuse us? Some are voices in the real, external world: the critical relative who thinks you make bad decisions. Or the manipulative financial adviser, who is playing upon your fears to encourage you to make a decision that is good for him, bad for you. But many of the voices vying for your intention are internal, ghosts from the past. Some may be well-meaning, over-protecting you from making the same bad mistakes long after you’ve learned your lesson. I’m sure if you take the time, you will recognize some of these. There’s the inner critic, perhaps an echo of a judgmental parent or teacher. There’s the fearful inner child, who is scared he/she doesn’t have what it takes to survive. There may be many other voices you can pick out in the mix: a temptress? A whiner?

Today’s Assignment: Your Board of Directors

Take a look at yesterday’s assignment, and visit the list of obstacles you wrote down under step number 5. Select one which you are particularly unsure about, whether the obstacle is something you actually want to overcome, or if you do, whether it is actually insurmountable, and/or if it is, why? You’ll know when you’ve found the right obstacle to work with when you

re-read it and feel confused, anxious and/or conflicted. Perhaps you wonder if you made a mistake putting it on the list in the first place. That's the one.

You are now going to bring this obstacle before what I am going to refer to as your board of directors. These are the voices that represent both the inner and outer voices that are clamoring for your attention. Imagine each voice as a character or spirit sitting around a conference table in your imagination. You are listening in as board secretary, taking notes as the meeting is convened.

The first one to speak is the chairman of the board. This is the persona that represents your highest and wisest voice. The chairman is going to look around the table and tell all the other voices that you've called them together to reach a consensus about the nature of the obstacle you're facing, and what is the best course of action for you to take.

After the chairman of the board has addressed the group, let Critic be the kick-off speaker. Critic will tell you all the position he/she has taken in relation to the obstacle you face and whether he/she has an opinion about what you should do about it—and why. If critic has something useful to say, listen. But if Critic becomes disrespectful or abusive or unhelpful in anyway, you can count on the chairman to bring down the gavel on him/her and turn to the next voice.

What does inner child have to say about this?

What does whiner have to say?

Is there anybody else who would like to offer his/her opinion at this time, or respond to any of the previous speakers? Let everybody have their say. If there is cross-talk, listen carefully and take notes.

When everybody has had their say, the chairman offers his/her opinion. You will recognize this as the voice of wisdom. Don't be surprised if the chairman asks for time to consider what he/she has heard, refraining from rendering judgment on the spot. Recognizing when one has to be patient, and not to give into forced or premature resolution: this can be wisdom, too.

Regardless of the result, thank the board members for their time and trouble on this matter.

Meeting adjourned.

Know that this advisory board stands ready to serve you whenever you are confused or conflicted.

In a few days, we are going to return to the practical challenge at hand: helping you build a blueprint for this next phase of your life that is unshakable. This blueprint is one that both addresses the obstacles and respects your vision for aging, as it continues to unfold over time.

Meanwhile, in the next series of lessons, you will be once again guided to not only trade old conceptions of mastery for illuminating alternatives that will both motivate and inspire, but to supplement, transcend and sometimes bypass your traditional ways of making decisions and thinking about what it means to be your age. To do this, we need to go deeper still—into the very bedrock of your beliefs about aging, mortality and the meaning of life.

FIERCE w/ Age

Lesson 11

Today's Topic:

How will your personal philosophical, spiritual and religious history translate into the experience of conscious aging you seek?

Throughout this retreat, we have been looking both at the fear-inducing beliefs and stereotypes that spur many to romanticize or revile aging, and how to ground your authentic aspirations in a blueprint that can't be shaken by any of the circumstances that may arise that are beyond your control.

Of course, nobody wants to experience the shadow side of aging. But lest we face head-on the questions of decline, marginalization, loss and mortality with which we are being confronted daily—both the obvious threats to our health and vulnerability, but also those lurking just beneath the surface of many of the issues we do not normally consciously associate with issues of ultimate concern--we cannot make peace with the aging process.

For millennia, it was the role of religion to provide us with the answers to our ultimate concerns. But in modern times, many of us are largely on our own to develop or embrace notions of meaning that help us face aging and the future with hope.

In spiritually and psychologically healthy individuals, notions of our place in the universe and our relationship to forces beyond our understanding and control have changed and will continue to grow and deepen over time. As a number of scholars point out, including James Fowler and Richard Moody, we go through multiple stages of spiritual development. In today's assignment, we will consider how your philosophical, spiritual and/or religious conceptions have served you in the past, and whether—viewed through the lens of your own concerns about the future—they will go the distance.

This is a deep dive for most, so before I continue, I'd like to offer some assurances. This retreat welcomes participants from all spiritual and religious traditions, faiths, beliefs, philosophies and communities. Through my doctoral studies in religion at Vanderbilt and my subsequent training as a spiritual counselor at the New Seminary for Interfaith Studies in Manhattan, I recognize and respect both the similarities and differences between us. As I was raised within a belief system that was God-centered, I think in terms of a power greater than myself, relishing both the personal relationship and the mystery of this conception of the divine, having made peace with the paradox some time ago. That said, I affirm that there are many conceptions of that which is the source of meaning in one's life. The purpose of this assignment—and, in fact, the objective of this retreat overall—is not to persuade or convert you to any one way of thinking,

but rather to raise questions that spur you to deepen your relationship to aging in light of coming to terms with issues of ultimate concern within your philosophical, spiritual and/or religious system of beliefs.

To make a long story short, the notion of God with which I was raised is very different from my notion of God today. For many years, I believed in a loving but judgmental God, quick to anger and punish. When I became disillusioned with this conception, I became attracted to philosophies that hold the promise that we have it within our power to call the shots in our lives. When I didn't get what I wanted, I found myself getting mad at God. In retrospect, I realize how compassionate and loving that God would tolerate my hubris with such patience.

While I still sometimes fall into this way of thinking, my conception to my place in the universe and my relationship to forces beyond my understanding and control deepened dramatically 23 years ago, when at 49 (1997), I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I grew into a more mature understanding of God, coming to understand that a relationship with God is not a means to an end, but the end itself. As I age, I am increasingly aware of living large portions of my life over the edge of mystery. But I now know that it is possible, too, to be in this free-fall within the heart of the divine.

The key learning here is not for you to come to the same conception of ultimate meaning to which I have arrived. Rather, I ask you to take the time to think about your own personal

philosophical, religious and/or spiritual history and its relationship to your ultimate concerns about the future.

Today's Assignment

Think about your progression through life as chapters in your philosophical/religious and/or spiritual autobiography. You don't need to write out each chapter. For the purposes of this exercise, giving each chapter a title and making a few notes for yourself is enough. Chapter One describes the worldview into which you were born. If you were to give this chapter a title, what would it be? Now think about what happened next: did you go through a state of rebellion? Or was there a time, rather or in addition to, when you more fully embraced the beliefs into which you were born? Perhaps you found an alternate community that helped you make peace with questions of ultimate concern—or perhaps you are still searching. Your book may be three chapters, ten chapters, or as many as you need to fully tell your story. Whether or not you believe your story is still unfinished, take a stab at writing your last chapter as if you have found what is you've been looking for. Write this last chapter out as fully as possible and keep it someplace nearby where you can refer back to it later.

FIERCE w/ Age

Lesson 12

Today's Topic:

Coming to Terms with Your Biggest Fears

Starting tomorrow through the end of the retreat, we are going to pick up where we left off last week to complete the blueprint for your vision for aging consciously. I have promised you that this plan will be unshakable regardless of the circumstances that you may be facing. But to achieve this, you must be willing to face head-on the shadow side of aging. Unless we make peace with the questions of decline, marginalization, loss and mortality that lie just beneath the surface of most of our fears and issues, we cannot make peace with the aging process.

Today's lesson and assignments are the shortest, but possibly the most powerful. The reason for this is simple. The next step you need to take to become older, wiser and fiercer is not something anybody can teach you. It is, rather, an act of faith that by its very definition stretches you beyond your comfort zone and over the edge into the mystery.

On the very first day of this retreat, which by now, may feel like a long time ago, I asked you to think of someone who is aging poorly and make a list of adjectives, qualities and characteristics that best describe this individual. The time has come to find this list and read it through once again.

When you wrote this list, you undoubtedly had a great deal of judgment about this individual, his or her shortcomings as well as misfortunes. You selected this individual and listed these particular attributes because they represent the very things you least want to be part of your own journey as you transit through this next phase of your life. In fact, they are what you fear most.

And now I'm going to ask you to make peace with each and every item on your list. Hopefully, none of these things will ever be a part of what you will bring to your own aging process nor will any of the unfortunate things on the list happen to you. As the 12 step program teaches, you can and should resolve to do everything in your power to change the things you can.

However, the 12 step program also teaches that we ask to be granted the courage, discernment and strength to accept the things we can't—and the clarity and wisdom to know the difference.

Today's Assignment:

1. Refresh yourself by re-reading the last chapter of your spiritual autobiography.

2. When you are through, read through the list of attributes of the individual you selected as representative of someone who is not aging well, and ask yourself the following questions:
 - Is it possible that this person made choices that I would not have made for myself but that make sense, or are at least understandable, within the overall arch of his/her life? Can I find empathy for this individual—or at least suspend judgment?

 - Is it possible that I have been viewing aspects of this person's aging process through the lens of stereotypes or preferences based at least partially in fear?

 - Is it possible that this person's life was nevertheless meaningful, perhaps in mysterious ways beyond our limited perspective and ordinary understandings?

 - Am I sure that God deserted this person or is it possible that even in the midst of suffering and despair, this person was being held firmly in God's loving embrace?

3. Find a paper and pen. I am now going to ask you to write a letter to the individual you chose as representative of someone who is not aging well. What would you most like to say to this person now? Put everything that is in your heart into the letter—your sadness, your forgiveness, your regret, your love. You don't have to actually deliver this letter, even if you could. It is enough to put your thoughts down in writing and trust that by healing your unfinished business, you are freeing yourself from fears about the future to not only grow older, but to grow whole.

FIERCE w/ Age

Lesson 13

Today's Topic:

Celebrate Your Freedom

Remember back in the first week of the retreat when you took the Spiritual Maturity Inventory? I'm sure that you were at the peak of spiritual development in a number of categories. And chances are that after taking this retreat, you are well on your way to progressing towards the top of many more.

One of the many of the great gifts of age is that we finally realize that we have the power to stop wasting valuable energy either seeking approval or proving how much better we are than others. In this new stage of psychological and spiritual maturity, we are finally free to reclaim our innate capacity to experience, express and act on authentic feelings. Drawing upon a new level of emotional maturity, we know when it's worth speaking our minds, and when it is more prudent or gracious to keep it to ourselves. These are just a few examples of the ways we become more fully ourselves as we age, no longer in kneejerk reactivity to the past, nor to fears about the future. This is the essence of true freedom.

We are less manipulatable; more forgiving; slower to judge and more compassionate with our own foibles and shortcomings. And this is just the start. In the assignment below, I promise that you will have a great time discovering the many and often surprising ways in which you are expressing your freedom as you age.

There are a lot of us, waking up to this new level of freedom, simultaneously. Members of the Conscious Aging Book Club often report steadily increasing levels of self-acceptance and self-esteem. More and more often, we can face both our internal and external critics with a notable decrease of defensiveness:

No embarrassment, no long explanations, no guilt and, best of all, no unwarranted apologies.

Of course, there are times when it is not only appropriate but impingent upon us to admit we're wrong and say we're sorry. There are those times, for instance, when we either consciously or inadvertently do harm to someone. We make mistakes we need to rectify. We wish we had done things differently. But at last there comes the time when we've learned the lessons, rectified the deficiencies, and have learned the meaning of "good enough." Then we remain willing to make whatever amends necessary as we go along, knowing that we will never get it perfectly right—and that's okay. We can forgive ourselves and others, and just do the best we can whenever we can. And this is something really, truly worth acknowledging.

Today's Assignment

As the great Katherine Hepburn once said: "If you obey all the rules, you miss all the fun." Now it's your turn to celebrate. Make a long, fun, rich, wonderful list of everything you are done apologizing for!

FIERCE w/ Age

Lesson 14

Today's Topic:

Completing my Blueprint

You have done deep, diligent, inspired work through the course of this retreat. And now it is all about to come together for you.

You will recall that one week ago, you concluded the first draft of your blueprint by going through each of the categories and asking yourself this question. "As I think about my present situation as well as about the future, is there an obstacle or challenge in the way that could likely prevent me from achieving/having this aspect of conscious aging in my life?" The nature of this obstacle included both those things that you believe you may have some degree of control over but don't yet know how to address, as well as those things that would be the result of circumstances that will or are likely to arise beyond your control. You circled these items and then numbered them on the basis of potentially easiest to address (number one) through the most complex or worrisome.

The next day, you selected at least one of these obstacles before your board of directors. Chances are that as a result, you have already resolved at least one or more of the obstacles in your way. Take a moment now to revisit your original blueprint, and see if you can already change any of your circles into checkmarks indicating what is now a positive response to this question: “Do I now have good reason to believe that the risk in this particular category for falling short of my hopes and expectations is low, and my level of skills and resources is adequate?”

In this assignment, we’re going to deal with the categories that remain with circles around them, and once again, we are going to start with the lowest number and then work our way up, as time allows, towards the higher numbered/more complex issues.

This assignment is the culmination of all the groundwork you’ve been laying over the past three weeks. As a result of all the hard work you’ve been doing, you now have access to both your right and left brain capabilities. As a result, the obstacles you have identified will no longer serve as stumbling blocks that put an end to your aspirations but rather will come to represent decisions to be made on the way to fulfilling the exciting promise of this next phase of your life.

Today’s Assignment

Begin by selecting the lowest numbered circled category from your blueprint that has not already been resolved. This is the first issue you will be working with. After you have

submitted this category to the process I am about to describe, you return to submit every item that has been circled on your blueprint to this process one-by-one until you are done.

You are shortly going to be presented with 11 questions. Take as long as you want or need on each.

Unlike some of your past assignments which asked you only to follow your thoughts, this time you are invited to engage with your left-brain rational thought processes as fully and completely as you wish. Don't worry, in fact, about whether the voice is responding is left or right brain, instead think only about bringing the very best you are capable of, trusting that the most appropriate balances and most evolved voices—honed by three weeks of diligent groundwork during the course of this retreat—will be working with you toward the resolution you seek.

Resist the urge to read ahead, taking each question as it comes. In fact, if you can print this page out, consider folding it so that only one question appears at a time.

Question One: Which category am I submitting to this process and what is the obstacle or challenge related to the category that I would most like to resolve right now?

Question Two: What outcome would I most like to achieve?

Question Three: How have I tried to resolve this situation so far? Or, if it hasn't yet occurred, how have I thought about resolving it?

Question Four: What was it about this approach that does not work?

Question Five: What can I change about this situation?

Question Six: What must I accept about this situation?

Question Seven: What is my greatest fear about this situation?

Question Eight: What is the truth about this situation?

Question Nine: What one thing am I being called to do to get the resolution I seek?

If you would like additional input or affirmation at this point, choose from among these tools to assist you in this response. The tools are:

1. Go to a favorite book, perhaps a spiritual or sacred text, and with this question in mind, open at random and begin to read.
2. Take your question for a walk in nature. As you stroll, receptive to personally meaningful signs in the environment.

Question Ten: What does the Chairman of my Board have to say about my decision?

Question Eleven: What is my vision for this category now?

Next Step:

If you now know what you need to do: If you now have an idea of what it will take to overcome the challenge or obstacle in order to realize what you originally entered as your vision for this category, revisit your blueprint and turn the circle into a checkmark. You may, however, also have discovered that you have decided to adjust your original response. For instance, on your original blueprint, you may have said you wanted to continue living alone in your own home but through the course of this retreat, have realized that this may not be possible, or that this is not what you really want to do. If, for instance, you have decided to look for roommates, or to move in with a friend, go back to the original blueprint and revise your vision.

When you have completed this step, return to the 11 questions and submit each of the categories in your blueprint that remain circled to this process. You will notice that even though you started with the simplest and are working up towards the most complex, the process is cumulative. You may well find yourself suddenly knowing how to overcome

obstacles farther down on the list without even going through this process. Prepare to be surprised.

If you still don't know what you need to do, or reject the revision you feel you are being called to make:

Remember, that sometimes the thing you are being called to do right now is to have patience and trust that the resolution you seek will soon be yours. Put this category aside for awhile and return to retrieve another circled item from your blueprint to submit to the 11 question process. Regardless of the results you did or did not achieve with your first category, trust that the process is cumulative. Remain open to receiving clarity and resolution on the next category you submit to the 11 question process. You may well find yourself suddenly knowing how to bring about the resolution that eluded you regarding the category and obstacle you worked with today without even resubmitting it to this process. Again, prepare to be surprised.

How will you know when your blueprint is complete?

Continue submitting circled categories to the 11 step process until one of the three outcomes occurs:

1. **Every category on your blueprint has a checkmark next to it.** You have now done everything within your power to create a vision for aging consciously that is deeply grounded in both reality and hope. Know that you have what it takes to adjust to

changing circumstances and unexpected turns of fate. Most importantly, you have traded old conceptions of mastery for a way of relating authentically to the aging process that can bring you the experience of freedom and fulfillment you seek, regardless of the circumstances you face.

2. Some of the categories on your blueprint are still circled but you are okay with this.

You trust that continuing to engage with the questions that remain are not problems to be solved, but the very heart of the journey to the freedom, wholeness and fulfillment you seek.

3. Some or many of the categories on your blueprint are still circled, or you reject what you think you are being called to do.

Like most of us, you are in transition. That is, in fact, the essence of the spiritual path, which is more about progressing than arriving. The key is to refrain from judging yourself for the situation you find yourself in now, and what you think are your prospects for the future. Know that there is always the best possible solution to whatever it is you are facing and that the experience of fulfillment you seek is not contingent on your circumstances.

You have already come a long way during the course of this retreat, examining old beliefs, behaviors and situations that no longer serve, acquiring new depths of

understanding about who you are and to what you are being called. The most challenging part of this is breaking denial, facing head-on both the shadow and the light, remembering that waking up—even if uncomfortable-- is not an obstacle on the way to the achievement of your goals: it is, rather, the essence of the spiritual path, itself.

Sometimes, especially if the frustration or pain is acute, it is helpful or important to seek outside counsel. And, in fact, even individuals who have a clear vision of what it means to be aging consciously or know they're on their way to resolution of their issues benefit from having a wise companion on the journey with whom to converse. Spiritual counselors, life coaches and psychologists stand ready to support us as we continue exploring this new life stage, helping us address both practical consideration and ultimate concerns. Your next step is this: trust that the very impulse that moved you to embark upon the Older, Wiser, Fiercer retreat will guide you to the support, clarity and fulfillment you seek in ways that may be beyond your current expectations and understanding.

FIERCE w/ Age

Lesson 15

Today's Topic:

Making a Difference: The True Nature of Meaning and Purpose

“Don't ask what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive. Then go do it.
Because what the world needs is more people who have come alive.”

Howard Thurman

We have arrived at the final lesson of the Older, Wiser, Fiercer Retreat. While we've been addressing the issues of legacy and making a difference from the beginning, the matter is a subject so near and dear to all of our hearts, I will now invite meaning and purpose to have the last word.

It is natural as we initiate and transit this next stage of our lives that we pause not just once but often to wonder “What is this journey through life all about?” Some may feel themselves driven by the conscious— or unconscious concern—that if you haven't achieved something tangible and significant by now—or at least by the end of your life--you will have fallen short of your life

purpose. A healthier way of thinking about life purpose is this: your true legacy is the summation of your whole life experience, successes as well as shortcomings, culminating with what truly matters most: what and how well you've learned to give and to receive love. Sometimes our love expresses itself as yearning, sometimes as passion, and sometimes love settles heavily upon our hearts like a spiritual homesickness that aches for resolution. But know this: you can only feel such exquisite yearning for meaning because you already know what home means, and what it is to be loved. Just as homesickness points to your experience of a real home, real love, so does yearning for meaning contain the memory of what has already been yours—and will be yours again. It is as the mystics teach: You would not search if you had not already been found.

Writer Dorothy Lessing writes that almost all people: “have strange imaginings. The strangest of these is a belief that they can progress only by improvement.” We think it is solely up to us, to our own efforts towards mastery that make a genuine contribution. But Dorothy continues: “Those who understand will realize that we are much more in need of stripping off than adding on.”

I have had several experiences that capture the essence of Dorothy's words, and I'm guessing you have, too. There are times when it is as if heaven touches down to kiss the earth, and all is well, whole and complete. One of these moments arrived when I would have least expected it—between the first and second rounds of chemotherapy for breast cancer decades ago. For reasons beyond logic, it had suddenly become important for me to get Dan and the kids to help me paint the kitchen. Given the circumstances, they would most probably have done anything

for me. But what I wanted most was a painted kitchen. So there we were, the four of us, wearing old baseball caps, splattered with paint, working to the beat of the Beatles.

Toward the end of the weekend, we were standing back admiring our work when I burst into tears. Not knowing what was wrong, my family huddled around me until I could finally choke out what was going on.

You see, at that moment, I was swept with the realization of my love not only for them, but for everything that was of life. My love was so strong, I felt like I was burning up inside. I was like the Seraphim in the Jewish mystical tradition: angels in attendance to God whose only purpose it is to recite “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The thing is, as the story goes, the passion of their love is so great, the angels can only get partway through the first holy before burning up with emotion.

That is my vision for how I would like it to be for me at the end of my life: not worried about my purpose, but secretly on fire from the inside out with love.

As we conclude the retreat, I leave you with my fondest hope for you: that you venture forth knowing that aging is not the obstacle—the impediment that blocks you from fulfilling your ultimate purpose in life. Conscious aging is, rather, the essence of the spiritual path, itself.

Having come this far, I am certain that you have everything it takes to make your life a culmination of your journey with a meaning and purpose of its own. I salute you as a fellow traveler on the road to wholeness and fulfillment.

Today's Assignment

Over the past three weeks, you have been exposed to multiple tools and resources that you can continue to call upon as you continue your journey through aging consciously. In addition to these offerings, what other processes, rituals and/or practices have been helpful to you over the years?

Your last assignment is to decide on what has been most valuable to you, and to commit to building these invaluable resources into your life on an on-going basis. Many people benefit from some kind of morning ritual, either taking quiet time for prayer, meditation, journaling or contemplative reading every day. Others find that going to a retreat center or spending time in nature on a regular basis keeps the spiritual journey fresh and alive.

I hope that you will make on-going involvement in the Older, Wiser, Fiercer community an integral part of your plan. We are doing important, groundbreaking work together, replacing the stereotypes of aging with a compelling vision for this next phase of life, not only for ourselves as individuals, but for the world. Here's to growing older, wiser and fiercer together!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Orsborn, Ph.D.

Dr. Carol Orsborn is the best-selling author of over 30 books including her new book [Older, Wiser, Fiercer: The Wisdom Collection](#), hailed as a classic in the conscious aging genre. She was 2015 Gold Nautilus Book Award winner in the category of *Consciously Aging: The Spirituality of Age: a Seeker's Guide to Growing Older* (with Robert L. Weber, Ph.D.)

She received her Doctorate in History and Critical Theory of Religion from Vanderbilt University, specializing in adult development and ritual studies, including intergenerational values formation and transmission. She has served on the adjunct faculties of Pepperdine, Loyola Marymount and Georgetown Universities. She is currently curator of *Fierce with Age: The Archives of Boomer Wisdom, Inspiration, and Spirituality*.

For the past forty years, Dr. Orsborn has been a leading voice of her generation, appearing on *Oprah*, *NBC Nightly News* and on *The Today Show* among many others. Her blogs have appeared regularly in *Huffington Post*, *Beliefnet* and NPR's *Next Avenue*, among others. She has been a frequent speaker at conferences and events such as the American Society of Aging, Sage-ing International Conference, Boomerstock, the Positive Aging Conference, Omega Institute and the American Academy of Religion and has been a featured presenter multiple times with the Shift Network.

Dr. Orsborn established her reputation as a generational expert as co-founder of Fleishman-Hillard's FM Boom, the first global initiative by a top ten PR company dedicated to helping brands such as Ford, AARP, Prudential and Humana communicate with Boomers.

Dr. Orsborn lives in Nashville, Tennessee close to her two grandsons and with her husband of nearly 50 years and three beloved dogs.

Stay Connected

For an excerpt and on-going discussion of Carol Orsborn's culminating work [*Older, Wiser, Fiercer: The Wisdom Collection*](#), (Available as Kindle eBook and paperback) visit CarolOrsborn.com

To read and discuss more books about conscious aging, the Conscious Aging Book Club, led by Carol Orsborn, meets monthly at [Parnassus Books](#), Nashville's top independent book store. The hour-long discussions take place the first Thursday of every month at 10:30 a.m. Selections include primarily non-fiction works by experts, mystics, psychologists and authors such as Florida Scott-Maxwell, Ram Dass, Joan Chittister, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Connie Goldman, James Hollis and others. Currently we are also meeting virtually via conference call. To receive notifications from the Conscious Aging Book Club, email Carol at Corsborn@aol.com with subject line: Add me to CABC.

The CarolOrsborn.com archives also feature recommended reading and highlighted Conscious Aging Book Club selections along with Carol's commentary, discussion prompts and participant's comments. You are invited to read along and post your thoughts. For a list of these books with links, visit the Book Club tab at CarolOrsborn.com.

In addition, readers can access Carol Orsborn's *Fierce with Age: The Archives of Boomer Wisdom, Inspiration and Spirituality* also available at CarolOrsborn.com featuring the best of the nearly 1000 digest entries, summaries, comments and links to curated content about conscious aging Carol assembled and shared over the course of close to 10 years of monthly digests.

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WHAT THE REVIEWERS ARE SAYING ABOUT ORSBORN'S *OLDER, WISER, FIERCER*:

"Like all the great voyagers, Carol Orsborn has brought back to us, not a story of her travels, but a gift which can belong to us if only we summon the courage to follow in her footsteps. Carol Orsborn has written a remarkable classic. It is an unbelievable privilege to engage with what she's given here to the world." -- Harry R. Moody, Ph.D., author of *The Five Stages of the Soul*.

"Dr. Carol Orsborn has been a thought leader and inspired author for over forty years. *Older, Wiser, Fiercer: The Wisdom Collection* is the culmination of years of scholarship, conscious living, advocacy, and practical understanding of the demands and opportunities associated with becoming an elder. This readable revelation of a book helped me learn how we can grow more courageously into a new season of life. I will return to it often for sage advice and spiritual support... and to *get my fierce on*." -- Brent Green, Ph.D., author of *Are You Still Listening*

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