

THE FOUR-STAGE LIFE CYCLE

I was 75 when I read Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's *The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk and Adventure in the Years 50-75*, chagrined that her book failed to lay down any guidelines for the chapter I seemed to be just entering! Wryly, I told myself, "Well, I will just have to write my own "Fourth Chapter."

My search for meaning in my life's fourth chapter continued as the years flew by. Then one day recently, I received a gift—a book called *Aging With Wisdom*. It came, appropriately, during the season we call Epiphany, for it became that for me. This is how it unfolded:

The author, Olivia Ames Hoblitzelle, described the Indian Vedic philosophy of four stages of life—all of them based on a spiritual perspective as being the purpose of life. The four stages move from identifying with a limited self or ego, to our true self, the divinity within—leading to liberation and spiritual enlightenment—the ultimate purpose of life. The concept of *four* life stages felt true to me. I had always resisted stopping at the three stages posited by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot.

It was also the word "Vedic" that arrested me momentarily . . . a word that had inexplicably appeared in a dream of mine a month ago. Was there something in this Hindu notion of stages that was meant to enlighten me in some new way?

The first stage is easy to mark: *Brachmacharya* is the "student stage" where education is dominant. The second stage—*Grihasta*—25-50 is also familiar: the "householder stage" where we marry, raise a family, and work in the marketplace.

It is the third stage, *Vanaprastha*, 50-75 where so many of us have focused our attention naturally. Olivia calls it the "forest monk" stage marked by the "empty nest" and appearance of gray hairs, the urge to simplify, and finding we are stepping into mentoring roles. It is from this sensibility that she herself writes and does so in an interesting and important way.

The fourth stage, *Sannyasa*, age 75—end of life, means *renunciation* and is ascribed in Hindu writings to ordained persons/priests set apart from the community to perform spiritual practices in silence and solitude. I ponder the way Olivia combines this fourth stage motif of "renunciation" with her own experience as a forest monk. She speaks so clearly of "those afflictive emotions, compulsive behaviors, negative states of mind, and yes—the self-cherishing tendencies that block compassion for others. Is there something about silence and letting go to others' taking on responsibility that I am meant to learn in this stage of my life?

Olivia says it this way:

For those of us more drawn to the contemplative life, cultivating the practice of renunciation is possible at any time, in any circumstance, as long as one understands its deeper meaning.

In its deepest sense, renunciation refers to the longing for freedom. One's spiritual practice becomes the organizing principle of one's life. It is about cultivating the attitude of letting go or surrender toward how we are living at all levels—material, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

At the material level—it might involve looking at a lifetime of accumulated things to see what we can give away, how we can downsize and simplify.

She continues with these words that suddenly open up for me my own internal processes at work:

The deepest meaning of renunciation invites us to live with greater awareness of our subtler forms of attachment.

It is in describing these subtler forms that I am arrested with the familiarity of this aspect of my own inner journey over recent years, and which is intensifying now.

First is the attachment to afflictive emotions like anger, pride, or impatience. With me, the word impatience instantly strikes a chord!

Then it is attachment to compulsive behaviors around food, shopping, or media. In a way everything I do in these areas is fraught with my own peculiar form of pre-planning and attempts to control by making lists or allowing mindless engagement.

Third, she described as the trickiest of all, negative mind states like worrying, self-doubt, or judgment. How to renounce these, I immediately ask myself? Oh to be free!

Up until now, renunciation has appeared to be all getting rid of negative things I would be glad to be rid of. But she poses something even more important to me right now:

At still another level, we can soften and let go around self-cherishing tendencies and recognize the happiness that comes when preoccupation with self gives way to deeper caring for others.

Suddenly hope arises! At the core, there is this aspect of cherishing one's gifts that feels like a lifelong healthy attempt to recognize the blessings of who I am as God made me, and to devote my energies to helping others similarly place value on who they are. Even my ability to self-examine, and sometimes to put those insights into writing, is part of the gift of who I am as God made me. But am I, at this stage of my life, being drawn more clearly into *deeper caring for others*? If so, I need to ask when my gifts of introspection are a preoccupation with self I no longer need in the same way? This feels like a defined shift in emphasis—not a denial of self-cherishing, but an expansion of its power. It is a subtle difference, one I cannot yet clearly explicate. But it may have importance for the next stage of my life, which is in transition on many levels—including where I live and how I am supported. How may I continue to care for others as this fourth stage of life unfolds with all its uncertainty?

I cannot move too quickly here; instead of trying to devise a plan—my usual *modus operandi*, I need to consider what will *deeply caring for others* mean in a new way that is as yet mercifully unclear. If I am too quick to frame it, I will miss the message the Spirit is only beginning to whisper.

I return now to that seminal dream that was given me recently:

*I want to record as best I can a dream in the night, and perhaps more than a dream. It had to do with trying to fathom the meaning of a spiritual companion's suffering and experience. The word Vedic appeared without explanation. It had to do with carrying of this person's experience in a "Vedic" way: **someone else was to be dealing with her**. I described this development to others, sharing it in writing. One person understood; another questioned it, and I agreed that it was not something lightly shared and foisted on a situation or person, but I also instantly began talking about the astonishing variety of ways I experienced my own relation to God: I used a series of metaphors—child of God, lover and marriage partner—various levels of relationship yielding an infinite variety of meanings.*

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Can it "be nice to be old" (as Olivia's Alzheimer's husband said at one moment of awareness) and to come to flower in compassion? In my own life and work with others, and perhaps beyond the immediate context to the larger one in our divided world? Why am I feeling drawn to books dealing with racial injustice, to the recent film detailing America's tumultuous history I had lived through in the twentieth century? To what extent is it in silence, or also in human presence and contact?

I pause here and put my thumbs up in an awkward gesture of despair—recognizing my common human frailty.