FOCUSING ADVENTURES IN AGING:
Alone — Crisis and Opportunity

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To see the force of character up close, we must become involved wholeheartedly in the events of aging. This takes both curiosity and courage.

James Hillman

PART 1

Moving into aging is rarely a chosen or graceful moment. I had been introduced to what I will call “conscious aging” in my fifties through brief insights. One of these happened when I saw a beautiful woman in my waiting room as I was summoning my next patient. Her radiance distracted me for a moment. Finished with my session, I realized I felt unusually sad and my heart was aching. What came to me (before I was Focusing) was a surprise: I would never be a young, beautiful woman again. My thought was that I had given up on that a long time before.

These thought-full moments can hold a new frame for collecting experiences that hold new perspectives on life as we age. Moments that had once been filled with tradition and hope, like the wedding of our last child, new grandbabies, graduations (and on and on . . . ) can now be more bittersweet, as they also signify our own aging process. As one mother told me, “When my son died, I deeply understood that all lives have beginnings, middles and ends.” It was then that I became most aware of my own aging event, even though I was only fifty-five.

However in my early sixties, the deaths of two close friends and my beloved older brother brought home a deeper sense of loss, taking much more time for my heart and soul to heal. But it wasn’t until my sixty-seventh year, when I was dumped into my own aging crisis after experiencing an acute viral episode that resulted in pneumonia.

While many people are able to move back easily into their lives after an illness, I couldn’t. I experienced what my daughter named as “a perfect storm”. Both of my daughters were going through medical crises at the same time, deepening the gut-wrenching felt sense of it all. (One daughter had torn the ACL of her knee and was immobilized, and the other one had started into labor two months early.) In the middle of all this, an exiled traumatic memory . . . of my father’s suicide when I was six . . . was triggered. It pushed me further into a terrible dark place of feeling totally alone.

The astonishing part of this entire scenario is that I had no idea what had hit me. I had always been healthy, active and somewhat arrogant about looking and acting younger than my age. And after all . . . I was an experienced psychotherapist!!! To be immobilized and at the same time the unable to help either daughter was unthinkable. Now I was the one
who needed help!! The pneumonia soon left my body, but the felt sense of aloneness haunted me, at first, viciously. As I slowly re-connected with family and friends, I found the courage to tiptoe closer to the combined forces of the present and early traumas that had left me so vulnerable to my terror. I began to realize that my illness had catapulted me into the soul-chilling fears of my six-year old and my sixty-seven-year old self at the same time.

Thankfully my knowledge of Focusing, a way of tapping into the deeper wisdom of my body and soul, came to my rescue. Central to Focusing is feeling how the body “holds” experience and how that helps us to go deeper into our conscious/unconscious wisdom. Gene Gendlin, the creator of Focusing, calls this bodily-felt experience, a “felt sense”, which he describes as “the holistic, implicit bodily sense of a complex situation. It includes many factors, some of which have never been separated before. Some of those factors are different emotions” (Gendlin, p.58).

Since I had been a Focuser and a Focusing-Oriented Therapist for five years, I survived this crisis by holding tenaciously to what Ann Weiser Cornell calls, “Self-in-Presence”. Self-in-Presence implies not only finding one's own “felt sense” of what is happening inwardly, but also creating some space for curiosity, respect and compassion for whatever comes up in that process.

For me, both a felt sense and an attitude of acceptance were central to unraveling the confusion around my crisis. Yoga, meditation and Focusing sessions with a wonderful therapist all came to my rescue. My therapist offered a solid and compassionate Focusing connection, holding me steady as I revisited my perfect storm, helping to steer the boat through the troughs of my fear and confusion.

**PART 2**

Here are some of the moments I was able to remember in the midst of my crises. I will share my “in-the-present” senses of being sick and alone followed by the “whole meaning” in parentheses. Next, in contrast, are the felt senses of my exiled (unconscious) traumatic experience that broke through. The two offered very different levels of sensation and meaning. The “felt senses” of my early trauma were much deeper, and more frightening, taking longer to process. I could not have processed them by myself as they carried very profound feelings of fear, rage, loss and sadness.

During my sickness, the “alone” felt senses were as follows:

1. Being distressed that friends were not visiting because they feared contagion (total abandonment)

2. Not knowing how I got so sick and immobilized so quickly, and why I was not getting better faster (alone, confused and helpless)

3. Not being able to find ways to calm myself followed by moments of self-doubt (overwhelmed and unable to comfort myself, some despair)
4. Feeling increasingly isolated and going deeper into myself, and afraid that this is what aging is really about (realization I was not only alone, but aging and alone)

5. Fearing I would not be able to tolerate my distress and would have an urge to die quickly if it continued (bleak projections about the connections between aging and death)

In the middle of this, the following felt senses of my childhood trauma crashed through (became conscious):

1. Feeling sick and wanting to die and end my misery, accompanied by a deep chill in my core (terrifyingly clear image of being totally alone in the world)

2. Having an image of looking at the center of my own death . . . a black hole in the universe (very clear image of the connection between being alone and dying, mostly void of feeling)

3. The image of my death mutating into the face of my mother, terrified herself and unable to comfort me (surprise connection, less alone, familiar sense of confusion)

4. Fear of feeling out of touch and becoming paranoid . . . losing my sanity . . . not feeling human (pushing away painful connection)

5. Experiencing a change from physical chill to hot rage that neither parent was able to protect me from my father’s death . . . I was all alone to deal with their mess!! (A very conscious insight to my dilemma as a six-year-old, followed by deep and painful sadness)

6. Relief and realization (I had felt very alone and helpless then, but now the perfect storm had shown me a way to reclaim my abandoned child . . . 61 years later. This time it featured the fear of my own death. However, I was more connected to the world with a strong support system and not in denial of my own aging.)

Even as I was grappling with all these frightening images accompanied by powerful and unsafe feelings, I began to feel some real mastery. I held each of them at a distance until I could find the compassion and grief for it all. Reconnecting to my six-year-old has been critical for me. She had been overwhelmed and had found a place to hide in a very deep forest . . . splitting off in order to keep some sense of connection and hope until it was safer to come out. Now my aging self feels very connected to her and my compassion gives me more distance from fear and confusion as I begin to create my next/last life stage . . . my “third age,” as the French say.

Many of these feelings have stayed with me, mingling, merging, receding, and requiring effort through Focusing to further tease apart the strains, and to bring them more clarity and comfort. What I understand from all this is that aging offers us so many tiers of experience and sensation that integrating them can be a full-time job.
James Hillman suggests that as we age, we lose our short-term memory in order to focus more on the memories and on the long-term meaning of our lives.

The concluding portion of life may be asking us to draw conclusions from prior actions. Could it be that the soul doesn’t want to leave this world innocent of the life it has been living for ninety-odd years and wants memoria to turn those years into character values?” (Hillman, p. 92)

There is no doubt in my mind that my perfect storm has offered me a window into aging. I have seen the power and the depth of my fear of being more alone . . . and it’s not as frightening. I have felt my confidence return and am grateful for my resilience and the knowledge that I gained from this inner journey to the dark places. No doubt I will probably return to them as I age, but feel I now have a solid foundation to greet them with compassion and understanding. Focusing has become my trusted companion along the way. I am also finding new connections as I share my perfect storm with others who are on the frontiers of aging.

Recently, I was with a group of women who had come together to reflect on aging and their concerns about getting older. As I led them in a brief visualization about what they wanted to take with them into their futures from the present and past, I suggested they might want to take something from their childhood. As they were sharing, I was surprised to hear some of them had been unable to get very far as they had been triggered by their early childhood trauma and felt blocked from going forward.

I shared my story about the Perfect Storm, and we all agreed that coming to terms with trauma was one of the most challenging parts of moving on as we get older. We wondered that as we plan and ponder about our future . . . making “Bucket Lists” of important places, communities, and parts of our character that we want (and don’t want) along on our journey, our unconscious and our deeper wisdom are making their own lists. This may be a Bucket List of unfinished business, trauma, life lessons, necessities, help from our angels . . . that is happening in a parallel process to the conscious every-day planning part of our lives.

I felt I had received help from my deepest wisdom as I went through the trauma I described in this article. In fact I remember in an earlier Focusing session, I had had a moment when I realized I was only living in 2/3rds of my body. What was given me . . . or possibly what I gave myself . . . was a Perfect Storm, helping me reconnect to my precious six year old.

Focusing is the perfect tool to help bring these different levels together in order to facilitate this complicated journey. What we need is the curiosity, the courage and trust that we will have most of what we need to help each other pioneer through this important life stage.

REFERENCES