

THE GOLDEN YEARS

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In loving memory of Janet Klein who named this time of life for me

Here I am in the middle of the last season of my life, reflecting on this invitation to write an article on how it is to be me as an elder in my family and community. How am I now? How has Focusing, and in particular, Wholebody Focusing, helped me be the way I am in this final stage of life? At this very moment I am feeling okay and yet not blind to the challenges of aging that are before me. I am getting older. I am not as good looking as I used to be (actually not true, I think I look better than I ever have, perhaps because I like myself more!) I am slowing down a little, not wanting to do as much — nor feel the need to. Yet I feel confident because I have the resources I need to meet the challenges in this final season of life. More on this later.

When did I begin to notice that I was moving into this last season of my life? When did my body begin to let me know that it is time to become more aware of its limitations? It started earlier than you might think. My 50th birthday was the moment when I realized with a shock that I wasn't 24 or even 35 anymore! A wee voice inside of me said, "You don't have to get it right anymore, Kevin, because no one cares. If you haven't got it right by now, you never will."

My awareness of the aging process began in that moment. Over time, I have received gentle reminders that I am getting older and that I might consider some new strategies that would benefit me in this emerging reality. For example, I undertook some financial planning that would enable me to continue working, but with less effort and with more free time for me. I also looked at health issues to ensure a happy life. My doctor was a great help in guiding me in this direction. I began a program to get healthier in all facets of my life. In short, I woke up and became conscious in a new way. I began to really appreciate the life I have and to look at its possibilities for my own well-being. Now that I am in my 70's I am very grateful for the awareness that came to me in that 50th birthday moment. I am grateful that I was able to listen to the advice that came from deep within me. I could have ignored it. I could have held on to my younger life. Instead, I listened inwardly. Fortunately, I had the inner resources to do so and I used them to my advantage.

INNER RESOURCES

What are these inner resources? In reality, these resources are partly intuitive and partly learned. They began to come to consciousness when I made the decision to live an inner-directed life. I seem to learn best about life from direct experience. Then, out of my own experience of a situation, I love to learn what other people have discovered. These discoveries support my own knowing. Listening to the experience of others expands and enriches my own experience of a situation.

I would like to cite one example of a skill that has become an essential resource at this time of my life. When I am in Grounded Presence, a primary skill in Wholebody Focusing, I am able to talk to, and be in relationship with, those parts of me that seem to be slowing down or not functioning the way they used to. Such a situation would normally cause me a great deal of anxiety, anger, and resentment towards these parts that seem to be failing me. Instead, I can do something quite different. I can invite these parts to come more into my conscious awareness and ask them what they need or what is possible, given the current situation. It amazes me that these parts respond to my invitation and let me know what is possible and what I can do to facilitate their future possibilities for being. In this manner, I feel empowered. I feel I am participating in my life's challenges based on concrete information that feels right and true and specific to my situation. What amazes me even more is that these parts, which appear to be so dysfunctional, have the wisdom and the energy within themselves to transform themselves, given the opportunity to do so. This moves me to say, "When a part of me feels loved, it awakens to its own healing!"

GROUNDED PRESENCE

When I am in Grounded Presence, I have a sense of myself and at the same time, I feel connected to a larger self that is supported by the environment. I feel part of something — something bigger than I know. When I am aware of my connection to something bigger than I know at this stage of my life, I have the resources to know how to be and what to do beyond what I think I know. The knowing that comes out of Grounded Presence usually feels just right to my situation. As my life changes, so must I find new ways to take care of myself. What has worked so well in the past no longer does, isn't what is needed, nor do I know what will be needed. When I am in Grounded Presence, there is a Body Wisdom that I can access for assistance, because it seems to know what is needed right now in a way that I don't!

This inner resource has helped me enormously through this period of my life. I will speak to it now directly from my bodily felt sense of the aging experience rather than trying to think about something to say. I will be with this question of the aging process as my Wholebody Focusing partner, Karen, listens to me. Karen and I have been listening to each other from Grounded Presence for some time now as we explore subjects of mutual interest.

It is a beautiful winter day in Scotsburn, Nova Scotia. I am sitting at the kitchen table next to a wood burning stove looking out at the mountains that begin at the end of the garden. Karen is sitting on a leather sofa with her dog, Jackie. I take a moment to feel grounded and invite a felt sense of what aging is for me and what I might want to say about that.

I'll talk about aging from where I am living right now in my 70's. I feel there are seasons in life, and this is the final season. There was a season when I was born. Then I grew up, and matured, and became an adult. I married and had children. They too grew up and moved away. Once more, I am on my own in this final season of my life.

I am speaking from the final season of life where I find myself on my own again. I want to describe how Wholebody Focusing has really helped in giving me tools and the empowerment I need to effectively move through this last and final season of my life.

Karen: What comes for me is that you are alone again, but in a whole new way with new possibilities.

Kevin: Yes, with new possibilities and with a much greater degree of consciousness.

Karen: It is not that you are alone and you don't know what that means, it is rather you are alone now, and you are aware of possibilities at the same time.

Kevin: That is true, I am alone now. It is a fact of this season whether I like it or not. However, I argue that each season brings its natural gifts as well its challenges and also gives me the tools I need to meet the challenges. This is where Wholebody Focusing can be so helpful as an appropriate resource for this final season.

I want to say more about my experience of what Wholebody Focusing has been for me. It is not a resource that just happened all at once, ready for this final phase of life. In fact, it has been a way for me to grow my life and to develop resources that I needed as I became more conscious of my own empowerment and limitations. The term Wholebody Focusing is really a coming together of a life of learning from many sources including the Alexander technique and Focusing. It has evolved to the point where it is a perfect fit for me in what I need in my life right now. So this resource I have has been developed over a lifetime, based on what was needed in my life. What has worked for me is now available to others who might benefit from my experience.

Karen: What you are writing is a story of something that has helped you in your life and offers this life experience as a possible resource for others in this specific season of their lives. So you are putting out an invitation. You are saying this has helped you in your life, and maybe it might help me in mine.

Kevin: Yes, this is an integration of many life experiences that have helped me. If they can help you, all the better! And why I mention these disciplines, Focusing and the Alexander technique, is because I am asking myself once again if I really do have the resources needed to face the challenges of my life now.

The reality is that I am slowing down. I am not moving as fast as I used to. I don't think as quickly on my feet as I think I used to. I certainly don't remember as well as I used to, especially names and numbers. I have to admit that there are parts of me that are not living up to my expectations in their functioning. What I am discovering is that the old ways of handling situations just aren't working for me as well as they used to — as though they are just not up to doing the job. So what to do about that? My life is changing and the tools I used when I had boundless energy are just not there anymore. I used to be able to give and give and give and not worry about receiving, but now I can't. I realize my energy is limited in a way that I never thought of it as limited before. How do I deal with the reality that I am not as young as I used to be?

Do I get angry because I'm not as full of energy as I used to be, not as young and handsome as I once looked? People don't look at me like they used to. In fact, young people don't even notice I'm there. My memory can be so bad at times that it's embarrassing! I could tell myself that life is tough, dammit, dammit, and on and on and on. This would be one way to handle the situation of being in this season my life. I could put up a fight, hate it, and pretend it is not even happening!

Karen: That's the normal way, that's the familiar, the usual, the expected!

Kevin: Yes. At this time of my life, I realize I have tools to help me deal with these challenges. In fact, I've been using these tools to help the lives of others, and now it's time for me to benefit from them, too. These very same resources are now for me!

I refer to these tools as Wholebody Focusing, a collection of my life experiences that I use to help other people in their lives. I have used them for myself over the years, but this time I want to look at these tools again and see what qualities of Wholebody Focusing would be useful for this final season of life. How can Wholebody Focusing work for me now?

Whenever I ask myself a question like this, my first response is that nothing will come and there is nothing I can do. It is a familiar belief I hold. However, as I say that, I notice I have a slight headache and my shoulder feels stiff. I feel drawn to pay attention to my body. I could ignore these signals or I can begin to notice myself, my physical body, and notice how the chair, and floor, and room, support it.

I notice that it is a beautiful day out there. I can see it from in here, yet I don't have to get out into it. I can stay in this warm cozy room and not have to go out there in the snow, knee deep in all its splendour. This reminds me of my childhood in Toronto; we used to have snow just like this. But not now, not these days. Right now I'm enjoying the scenery out there which reminds me of the times past as a child in the snow and what a delight that was. So right now I have an opportunity to let all this good feeling of the room, so warm, and you, and your sense of welcoming, and the view of the forest out there with all the snow coating the trees, all of that I can feel in me now as pleasurable. And when I do that I realize my body likes this, my body likes my awareness of life around me. In fact I find myself actively looking around more and enjoying what I'm seeing. At the same time, I realize it is very difficult to feel unhappy with my life when I am enjoying this moment.

Karen: I guess that's why I want to learn how to do that, too. Can you teach me how to do that? That's how I want to live my life, too.

Kevin: I'm just sitting here. Rather than stewing about what is wrong with my life, I am actually noticing my physical connection, my awareness of what's around me right now, like the warmth of the room, the lighting, the things I hadn't really noticed until now. Until now I have been preoccupied without even realizing it. Now I seem to have been able to pull myself away from the preoccupation and become more aware of what's going on right here, what is actually here. Being more present to what is actually here seems to change my mood.

Now I'm noticing that a man has come to shovel your walkway, and he looks half my age. I'm so glad that he is shovelling your walk and he probably cleared your driveway, too. He looks so able, and he seems to be enjoying doing the job, and he's being paid for it. I am glad I don't have to do that anymore except occasionally, but this is not my work. I do something else instead that really does suit me, and I get paid for it. Nor do I have to work like I used to. I don't have a family to support anymore, and my life is quite simple with few expenses. I can work just as much as I like, the way that I like to. My needs are not that great, so life is much easier for me in that respect. For example, I don't own a car anymore. I don't have to, as I live in the center of the city. What a relief not to have to own a car and manage its servicing and all that parking business. I used to worry about the car breaking down and not knowing what to do. Now I don't have to worry. I don't have a car, and don't need one — not anymore.

Karen: What strikes me is that you don't have as many needs as you used to in this season of your life. And it is a relief.

Kevin: Yes, but there are needs too, just different needs. And these needs are important. Like, I am glad I am healthy. My weight is fine, cholesterol and blood pressure are all fine, and I am grateful for having developed a lifestyle that keeps me healthy. That is really important to me now, far more important than it used to be. And I am glad I started developing good eating and exercise habits years ago, so they are just a part of my life now.

Yes, I realize this is normal, this is my normal life now, especially when I hear other people my age complaining about what is happening to them, what medications they are taking, and how these are not working, and all that stuff, in a helpless kind of way. It seems that they become obsessed with their health, and how they feel so let down or left out. I don't think that is very healthy, and certainly not very entertaining — if this is all we can talk about!

Maybe I can say this: I want to stay healthy, I want to be happy, and I want to have a good time! And I want to meet people like me, people who live their lives with consciousness. I am not trying to ignore problems as I get older, but I don't want to drown in them either. I want to use the resources I have to work with them. I am putting this out there, naming what I want.

Karen: That's revolutionary. In this stage of life you want to be healthy, happy, and have a good time. What intention. What a plan!

Kevin: I have learned this one important thing from the practices of Focusing, the Alexander Technique, Wholebody Focusing, etc. If I put out an intention, for example, from Grounded Presence, and then I step back for a moment and really feel the support of the ground and connection to life around me . . . when I do that . . . and put my worries about all that 'over there', I'm in a good space to ask myself this question: "What do I want?"

USING WHOLEBODY FOCUSING TO SUPPORT A PHYSICAL AILMENT

I'm reminded of working with clients on a body dysfunction. I make sure that we are both well grounded and connected to ourselves and to each other, and when it feels right I ask, "If this part of you could speak, what would it say that it needs right now?" What is so remarkable is that a response actually comes! I am fascinated by the fact that when we pay attention to something, calling to us from the body in this way, something happens.

To illustrate this point, if I put my attention to how my body is right now, I can sense a lot of things going on, and yet my attention is drawn to my right knee for some reason. There is a little bit of an irritation there, it hurts a little on the inside. I don't panic when I feel something like that in my knee, and now I notice my right toe is also feeling sore.

Karen: You don't run to the doctor whenever you feel that something doesn't feel right in your body, like the irritation in your knee or some pain in your toe.

Kevin: No I don't, because I actually enjoy noticing the twinge in my knee, particularly if I have someone there to keep me company, which seems to make it easier for me to do so. And I know the more physically present I am with myself, the easier it is for me to be with that knee — exactly how it is. Then my knee seems to begin to be more conscious of itself too!

Karen: The knee itself becomes more conscious when you pay attention to it in this way.

Kevin: Yes, I like that; it feels like a real connection between me and what is going on in the knee. The knee seems to come more alive when you might think it would become more sore. But no, it doesn't actually, it just feels different. Well, how is the knee exactly? It's a bit sore; the soreness is there, but only in one spot, and then there is also the feeling in my toe, and I realize the knee is a part of a much larger sense of something going on in me. Right now I can feel some activity in my shoulder, and it seems connected to the knee, and I don't know why. Now I'm feeling something in my shoulder and my foot, as though the whole right side wants to expand in some way. It feels like I'm going on some kind of journey when I pay attention to my knee. Now I notice there's a movement happening in my leg right now, and I'm not doing it! The leg itself wants to do this movement, and there seems to be more energy in me to do that than in me trying to stop it. It's powerful!

Karen: It seems like your whole body is responding to your awareness of the knee.

Kevin: Yes, things are happening; I am really waking up. At least the body is waking up and I'm just observing it. I'm not personally doing anything, and yet there are these funny movements happening in my body — now my hands are moving. Now I'm rubbing my head. I can say something is happening, it feels great, it is not negative, in fact, it's kind of fun. I'm enjoying this. It feels like I'm giving myself a kind of workout. It is effortless; the body is doing it! I don't know what this has to do with the knee. But there it is, and I am enjoying it. As I say that it feels complete, in fact it is complete. The whole thing has just stopped. Now this is funny, and yet it's true, that twinge in the knee isn't there anymore!

Karen: The twinge isn't there anymore and that's funny. This is the inner resource. This is how it works.

Kevin: I can't explain it, but I do know that I can do this process and I feel good about it. Certainly there will be times when I notice something, and it seems to be saying, "Go to the doctor." At least I am noticing, at least I'm listening, and that makes all the difference. To actually hear what these parts have to say, or feel some kind of response from them is remarkable. Sometimes these body ailments just need my attention. Other times, they need something else. But right now when I gave the knee my attention in a whole body way, it seemed to be able to sort itself out. That seemed to be enough. At other times I remember my body telling me, "You're tired, I'm tired, take a rest."

What I like here is the ability to dialogue with parts of myself about something going on in me that wants my attention. My experience is that the response that comes in the body is life directed, in some way. It always gives me good advice, if I can listen and not try to put up a fight. It gives me something I can do (or even better, *it* can do) to make the situation better or more compatible. That is a wonderful, wonderful skill to have in this last season of my life. I am in my 70's right now, and it isn't going to go the other way!

Karen: You said something that really struck me, you said, I don't know why it happens but I know it works, whatever part of the body that comes to my attention when I ask what it needs, it lets me know!

Kevin: It does let me know.

THE INNER RESOURCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Kevin: It is quite remarkable, and it is a skill. For example, if I were in panic about my knee, if I become really worried about it, my whole body would be in panic mode, contracted and tight. If I ask, "What do you need, what do you need?" in a state of panic that is actually crying out for help, you can imagine the kind of response I would get!

Karen: The knee would say, "Yikes! Go away! Go get some help!"

Kevin: Yes, I can hear it say, "Go away; come back when you are feeling better! I don't need your panic; I just need you to be open with me. Be friendly towards me. Can't you see I'm doing the best I can and I need your support? What I don't need is your panic."

Karen: That is a very powerful thing. This means I don't have to run out the door and ask a doctor what's wrong. I can ask my body directly; it's quite remarkable.

There is also something more subtle here. The knee just knows itself; it doesn't know the other parts until you do. All it knows is that it is in the shock of what it feels like, and when it feels your panic, all it feels is more pain. It doesn't know about the rest of the body because you don't. It doesn't know what's going on in the rest of the body because you're in panic mode.

Kevin: Yes. In fact, I'm cut off from my body in that moment. But when I pay attention to the whole of me, the pain in my knee then has the capacity to know *more* than what it knows. It can join me in being aware of the whole. And that gives it possibilities that it would not otherwise have. This is a very different outcome in the knee's experience and my experience

of the knee. This is what consciousness brings to it. Consciousness can open my own eyes to the larger experience and also open the knee's eyes to the larger experience of itself, in the context of the whole body. That opens the door to an awareness of its possibilities because it can feel the larger context of the body as its container, and now it can feel safe enough to explore these possibilities. It makes a huge difference — this is about the power of my consciousness.

Karen: It seems like the knee knows something about being a knee, and also about what it is to be in community with the whole body when it is given an opportunity to do so, and the rightness of that because it has always lived in the community of the whole body.

Kevin: Yes, the knee wants to come back into that community, but for whatever reasons it can't or has forgotten how. It has felt separated and cut off in some way. It needs the reminder that it is part of the larger community of the body.

Using this inner resource of Wholebody Focusing requires a certain kind of inner attitude. I'm talking about the power of consciousness as a skill and a resource, and how helpful that can be as I experience my aging situation. It is about paying attention and learning how to live in a healthy way. It is also about creating a healthy relationship between me and the parts of me that need my attention in a way that enables these parts to let me know what they need for themselves. This is the power of consciousness, and it is very powerful. To actually know that this kind of change can happen is remarkable, empowering, and it requires skill.

BEING OPEN TO NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR LIFE

If I think more about this season of my life, I realize once again, how much things have changed. The children are grown. I have more free time — at long last! Life is simpler than it used to be — and I have to get used to these new rhythms. I don't need as much. There is less demand on my time. There is time and space to realize that maybe there are things that I would like to do, and I am asking myself questions: What would I like to do now, in this period of my life? What are the possibilities now, for my life?

To ask these kinds of questions I first need to accept the reality that I *am* in this phase of life and not some other phase. For example, if I still think I am a teenager or a younger man of 30 or 40, asking such a question will be confusing when it comes to the bodily response of what is possible. I have to accept the life I have right now as the starting point, in order to ask questions that are grounded in realistic possibilities. I need to ask these questions with the same attitude as I would ask my knee: what it *needs* or what it *wants* . . . ? It is the same skill as in the knee pain context.

STEPPING BACK ONCE A QUESTION IS POSED: WORKING WITH LIMITING BELIEFS

I have learned to step back and not to try to make an answer happen, or try to answer it myself, or expect an immediate response. It often takes time. I have learned to trust that

it will respond when it is ready to — and, often in ways I don't expect or haven't even anticipated!

Here is something that came to me, unexpectedly, after asking myself an open question, and then stepping back with an open mind. It is the story about plans for Europe in the Fall. I notice when I begin to think about plans to visit London, Brittany, and then Dublin, I can easily feel overwhelmed by all the details. This is a familiar pattern of feeling overwhelmed, obsessing about every single detail, and then deciding it is all too much for me to take on. Right now, I am noticing this response pattern. I'm stepping back from it, and what comes is a reminder that says, "Kevin, life is much easier than you think it is." Now I have to laugh because it feels true. The overwhelmed feeling has left me. I realize that there is lots of time for the plans to literally fall into place. This habit actually is not about my aging, it is about my habit of anticipating the worst, in thinking about future events. I am simply more aware of my behaviour than I used to be. By becoming more aware of my patterns of behaviour, I am able to step back and laugh a little bit. Life is really not all that serious now! That feels so true!

Suddenly, many examples come to mind of how I tend to anticipate the worst in any situation, only to discover that in doing whatever it is, the outcome turns out to be very different than what I expected, and sometimes even very enjoyable.

To realize that life is not as hard as I think it is, is a major shift for me, and effects the way I live my life. The most immediate benefits of my change of attitude are in regard to my physical well-being. The stress on my body as I approach daily activities is much less than it used to be, and clearly benefit the healthy functioning of the whole — also a benefit of just being conscious. The role of conscious awareness in my life also happened because it needed to. I don't have the same strength, energy, or time to waste what energy I have. I used to waste so much energy just anticipating how hard it would be for me to do something. Then I would prepare myself to do the event as though I was preparing to push a car out of the deep snow!

GRATITUDE FOR THE INNER RESOURCE OF WHOLEBODY CONSCIOUSNESS

From my personal perspective, mindfulness can be a very rewarding activity, especially when it is grounded in the sense of the whole body connected to its environment. This skill requires just *noticing*. It is about becoming aware of what one is doing — while doing it in order to make healthy choices that will benefit one's life — rather than work against it.

I also notice that I cherish my life now more than I ever have. I cherish each day when I can say I am feeling pretty good today, and feel grateful that I can say that. Gratitude is another quality that seems to come with aging — at least mine — for just being alive, maybe because, at some level, I realize my time here is limited. This feeling of gratitude comes to me spontaneously, and it is heart-warming.

MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE LIVING BODY

I hadn't thought of my body being a friend, and as I think about it, I don't think I have been all that friendly to it until now. Growing up I was taught to control my body, make it follow the rules, make it behave and forcing my body to do things that it clearly didn't want to do. I blamed it for being lazy and stupid when, in fact, I was forcing it in ways that perhaps were not natural — or even right for it or me. I would manipulate my body and make it comply with something without reference to its own inner knowing. The word that comes in me now is *betrayal*. I betrayed my own body rather than befriend it. At this stage of my life I have the opportunity to reflect on what my body really needs to maintain health and well-being. When I do this in this skillful way from Grounded Presence that is connected to the whole living body, and connected to its environment, things just come to me. I seem to be informed, often when I least expect it. This information is extremely helpful in guiding my life now.

THE POWER OF RECEPTIVITY, ACTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS, AND LISTENING TO OTHERS

There is something about just being purely receptive — and — being purely receptive is the opposite of being passive. Pure receptivity is about the power of non-doing so that, as Alexander would say, “the thing does itself”. I call this ‘*active consciousness*’. It is an observation that consciousness is actively engaged with life around it naturally, and that things happen directly out of this engagement, all on their own!

Engagement is also related to connection with another. To quote Teilhard de Chardin, “A person grows as a person in connection with another person, and in no other way.” I really enjoy listening to people, and one thing I have learned in Wholebody Focusing is how to listen. Initially, strange as it may sound at this juncture in my life (and this writing), it was not easy for me to feel okay with feeling that natural bodily connection with another. A very strong part of me said I shouldn't enjoy this sense of connecting. I now understand the power and beauty of this interactive space, being in sync with someone else, and allowing body wisdom to move between two people — very much the opposite of being passive. At such times of real connection with someone, thoughts and words seem to flow directly in way that isn't of my own making, yet turns out to be just right!

ACTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS AT 70: COMPLETING A FULL LIFE

Consciousness at 70 is really very different from consciousness at 20. At 20 I was full of life and just living, and not thinking about it very much because I was too busy living it. At 70 I am still living life, but I also have the time and the space to be more aware of how I am doing so. I seem to be able to be more conscious of what it is I am doing as I am doing it. This opens up possibilities for me, this new sense of awareness, and brings in the element of having more spaciousness inside to make choices based on what I want, rather than what I must. When I was 20, I was not aware of my choices and possibilities. My life experience then was limited in ways that it no longer is.

To conclude, I am seeing certain challenges in this specific season of my life — no doubt other challenges will come later. Life is changing — that is something I cannot help — but I can *notice*. Then it becomes a question of what to do about whatever has been presented to me.

This season can show me a way of completing my life if I am open to what naturally comes in me as a way of preparing for completion. It is scary to say that, but it is also real. Whether I like it or not, this is a time to put my life in order so that I can feel complete with it. I can learn to appreciate this season, work with it, and deeply value the naturalness of the process.

Wholebody Focusing has given me a way of being with my life that feels so very empowering. I feel a sense of peace with myself, a sense of completeness, even now. Perhaps I will be able to let go of life when it is time to do so. I have been fortunate to witness some very peaceful endings. The memories of such moments have given me courage to face the possible ending of my own life. Not all endings need be painful.

My body, in its wisdom, is informing me and preparing me for these changes. So be it!