

# GRACE NOTES XI

**DR SALMA SIDDIQUE** considers the process of growing old, and wonders about the place of psychotherapy in the autumn of our lives.

## Autumn

Wanting to go,  
All the leaves want to go  
Though they have achieved  
Their kingly robes

Weary of colours,  
they think of black earth,  
they think of  
white snow

Stealthily, delicately  
As a safebreaker  
They unlock themselves  
From branches.

And from their royal towers  
They sift silently down  
To become part of  
The proletariat of mud.

Norman MacCaig, Sept 1982

**A**UTUMNAL COLOURS AND seasonal lives bring thoughts of ageing and wisdom and loneliness. We equate growing older with aspects of loss or losing parts of our body and mind functions and, of course, dealing with the loss of our loved ones and facing the loss of ourselves through death. However, our emotional functions are often extended and enlivened. Erikson's final developmental stage was of wisdom and suggested that this can bring 'ego-integrity' or 'despair' which suggests a polarity of positions. I feel most older people would prefer to see themselves moving between both poles or somewhere along the spectrum. These positions within the developmental stage can be influenced by poverty, class, ethnicity and opportunities found or given in life. Dianne Athill's (2009) classic book *Somewhere towards the end* writes openly and

insightfully about being older. Penelope Lively in a piece in *the Guardian* (2013) about being 80 shares her thoughts on the time and opportunity to enjoy solitary pleasures of reading, contemplating, enjoying nature etc. Both these texts written by older women reminded me of the range of emotions around ageing and preparing for death. It mirrored my view of autumn with its both fading and bright colours and the falling of leaves to make rich soil and compost for the next stage of life.

As we know the balance of the UK's population is becoming older – politically considered a drain on resources and benefits. As Lively (2013) says 'the poor have always been with us and now the old are too.' By 2030 there will be four million people over eighty. Julian Barnes' (2009) book *Nothing to be frightened of*, gives us some guidance and reflections on preparing for our deaths. However, despite its inevitability, or even proximity, my guess is that many of us don't even think about the onset of old age or preparing for death.

Where can counselling and psychotherapy sit amongst all this? We might ponder from a Transactional Analysis perspective on how the ego states fit or whether the therapy on offer is the same for all clients irrespective of age (or other variables). And if not, how different? Are we being ageist by perceiving older people as different or ageist in pretending that we are all the same with the same needs. How do Berne's life scripts pan out in old age? Berne's rather deterministic view, ie the person's genes and external circumstances affect the life script chosen by and for the child is belied by individual accounts of unique lives experiencing internal 'radical changes or 'drastic upheaval' (Berne, 1972).

Psychotherapy might provide this 'drastic upheaval' as well as offering a witness to a person's life script or story.

At last year's National Children and Adults Services (NCAS) conference it was stated by the Health Secretary that the journey into later life 'should not involve waving goodbye to one's dignity,' and that many face loneliness: 'A forgotten million who live amongst us – ignored to our national shame.' In my own clinical practice I have seen a number of clients in their later life who have accessed the talking therapies not merely to counter low mood, or to open up about abuse or trauma in earlier life, but with

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the desire to breathe life into their stories – *À la Recherche du Temps Perdue* (Proust, 2002). For Proust the story is and only can be 'Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated – the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived – is literature.' How can we use literature to enhance our work? As our mobility falters, illness colours judgment or the world contracts and darkens through the changing seasons it can bring with it loss and silence by the way of retirement, bereavement and reduced social networks. The art of story telling can offer emotional, spiritual and physical support to the person telling the story as well as the listener. The story is the social contract of listening. When did we stop listening to the individual's story and start pathologising loneliness? We might remind ourselves that psychotherapy is only offering a microcosm of society offering companionship and support through relationship.

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