

## Shedding Old Skins So We May Grow

by Ron Pevny

An important aspect of the inner work that supports us in moving through the transition from mid-life adulthood into the Elder stage of our inner and outer lives is letting go. It is necessary to consciously shed those elements of our lives that keep us bound to the past when the possibilities of the future require us to travel lightly, carrying only that which will support us in this new life chapter.

Images from the natural world around us can serve as potent reminders that we are natural beings. We live and grow in the same way as all living beings—death always precedes new life—and this process always requires the death or letting go of what we have been so that we can move to the next stage of our growth. It's no surprise that indigenous peoples who live close to the land understand this, and their rites of passage are designed to reflect this understanding. For many of us, a beautiful reminder of this dynamic is the image of a snake having to periodically shed its skin, and in many cases become blind and vulnerable for a while, before growing a new skin that is large and healthy enough to contain the snake in its next stage of growth.

In our modern world that has lost touch with understanding of the dynamics of life transition, we too often try to move into a new external life stage without doing the inner work that supports our psyches in making this journey. We too often give no thought to the reality that, if we are to realize our potentials in our lives after “retirement age”, important changes must be supported in our inner lives. We can't take all of who we have been into our next life stage and thrive. Our old skin will become too constricting, too unhealthy, too rigid to support a being who is growing. So, conscious eldering requires us to become conscious of and to release those aspects of ourselves that, if we hold on to them, will constrict our energy and won't serve us moving forward. This includes attitudes, beliefs, attachments to ways of identifying ourselves, stories about who we are,

resentments, regrets, and habits. Equally important, the path of conscious eldering calls us to become conscious of qualities, attitudes, beliefs, gifts and wisdom that are truly our strengths and that can form the foundation for the new beginnings ahead of us.

Letting go is so often difficult. Most of us have a sense—sometimes a very clear and compelling sense—that there are aspects of our lives that just don't serve us, and may even be seriously undermining our joy, effectiveness, love. But the reality is that these aspects often become part of our sense of identity. It feels safer to associate with what is familiar than to open ourselves to the unknown. And yet, conscious acts of letting go are critical to our growth.

- They are critical because of what we are releasing.
- They are critical because they free up the energy that has been bound to them, so this energy can support the development of new vision and new beginnings.
- And they are critical because of the reality that as we age, we will inevitably experience more and more losses, including our very lives at some point. These losses send many people into long-term hopelessness and bitterness. But we have another option. As we come to recognize the pain that results from holding on to a past that is no longer possible, and experience the new emotional and spiritual energy that results from letting go, we come to see opportunities for growth no matter what we lose. The more capacity we develop for letting go, and trusting that each time we let go we open the door to some new possibility for LIFE, the more resilience and peace we will have as we age.

There are some important realities to understand about letting go. First, it is a misconception that letting go is primarily the result of a strong act of will, and that letting go happens in one powerful, dramatic release. Yes, strong will is necessary but it is usually not sufficient. For most of us, letting go is a process that happens over time, just as a snake sheds its old skin gradually over hours or days. Letting go requires ongoing commitment to a process that is like peeling off layers one by

one, until finally all that is left is the core, and then that is released as we touch it with the power of our love for ourselves and our commitment.

Much of the time, letting go of something that has felt like a part of us involves some grieving at the same time we may well feel a sense of liberation. It's important to allow ourselves to feel grief if it arises as we let go.

Another reality is that we cannot force out of ourselves something that needs to be shed. There may be a lot of painful emotions attached to what we need to shed, and a sense of revulsion or anger at it, e.g., "I'm sick of you, so I'm throwing you out. Good riddance. I don't want to ever see your miserable face again." Here's the reality. This just does not work. These things we need to let go have become part of us. Our energy is attached to them and gives them their life. Trying to throw them out with revulsion or anger only empowers them as they struggle in our psyches to hold on to their roles in our life. It becomes an unending battle. It is no more productive than ignoring them in the first place.

So, what is the alternative? The alternative is approaching them with the transformative energy of love, honoring them for having in some way or other served us in the past, and releasing their energy to serve us in new ways in the future. We honor their role in our journey of growth. We express gratitude for what they have taught us and how they have shaped us into the unique individuals we are, with elder wisdom and gifts honed from experiences positive and negative. We don't try to tear off an old skin, but rather gently release it with trust that our psyches will support us in engaging in this natural process. Nothing supports this process more than bringing our love and compassion to ourselves and to what needs releasing.

There is also value in working to understand what you intend to replace it with. For example, if you need to release an old pattern of allowing fear to keep you from doing what you really want to do, you can make a practice of working to develop and nurture trust, fear's opposite. Throughout this process, know that you are supported in your growth by that spirit in you that calls you to grow and thrive, and that helps you to follow each small death with a new beginning.

You are a hero on a hero's journey of growth through endings and beginnings, sorrows and joys. It is a journey whose very nature is change. Fighting change is futile, and can only result in stagnation. Courageously facing change brings life

and renewal. The essence of our humanity is our ability to choose whether to stagnate or grow, in whatever circumstances life presents us.

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