THE DECEMBER YEARS OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT: In my book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* I described the work of the October and November years of life. While I mentioned December, I could not go into detail because I had not yet experienced what that is about. What you will read is based on a talk I gave to a group of people helpers about December work. The changes in body, emotions, and mind are noted and detailed. In Spiritual Eldering an emphasis has always been placed on coming to terms with mortality which, in the December years, takes on a much more imminent power.

Oh God, do not abandon me. Please hurry to my side.

I think these words express a lot of what happens to people when they get to the December years. That is what I want to talk about with you. In the past when I spoke to you about the work in spiritual eldering, we talked about the fact that there are not any decent models around for the time when you are considered redundant population. I can imagine that some of the number crunchers would be saying something about how Medicare spent so much money on older folks keeping them alive. A much more life sustaining model would say that you use whatever you can of contemplative awareness to do your life review; to go back over the past in order to see whatever still needs to be fixed. You do this in your relationships with people by the time you have entered into elder mind.

So what do you do in your November years? Well, that is when you are doing what Jimmy and Roslyn Carter, for instance, are doing: paying back, mentoring people, teaching people, giving over the wisdom that they had learned during their lifetime. About these things I have talked a lot before, but I have not talked about the December years.

When I wrote the book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller 1995), it was quite a while ago. I began when I was sixty, so that was twenty four years ago. I did not really have a sense of what the December time was, except that I would say that if you want to do your Eldering you have to come to terms with your mortality. It is so nice and abstract to say, “come to terms with your mortality,” but when I was on a gurney being taken into the operating room, I was coming to terms with dying. It is a whole other different story. It was not so much that I was talking about the cortex, at that time; rather it was about what was going on in the limbic and the reptilian brain. Still
it was not the same situation, because the outcome of the operation was a good prognosis so that was not so heavy.

Now when I am in my December years, I find that it pays a great deal to watch what your body is telling you. It was at the time when I was beginning this work that I asked, why was I depressed when I was so successful in whatever I was doing. I realized that it was because I was overriding the body’s signals at that time. I figured that I could kick ass as if I were 40 or younger and I saw that this was no longer possible. The message was coming, but I did not pay attention to it until I began to ask the questions about Eldering. So what is happening in the December years? I want to say that thank God I have been granted a long December because my December should be over by the figures that I have of every seven years representing a month of life here.

I first was introduced to the issues of Eldering by Gerald Heard in his remarkable book *The Five Ages Of Man* in which he talks about the those December years although he does not call them by that name. That is the time for involutional melancholia. It is like a creeping up kind of sadness, a poignancy of every day. Driving up here and seeing the aspen glow, I get the sense of how many more times will I get to see this beautiful thing. There is the element that is not nostalgia for the past but nostalgia for the future. It is like saying, how much of that beauty will I still have?

If I watch the changes in my body, first of all it is much slower in repairing even the little injuries. I pulled a muscle carrying something heavy and it took me more than a week to get to the place where it did not hurt anymore. So it is a lot slower. I have a sense that the cells of the body give a message, “We are tired.” Life feels like a weight at this point. It is not unhappy, it is good, but it takes a weight. So I have to get up, so I have to do this. I will do it, I like to do it, I want to do it. It has a sense of extra weight on the shoulders.

There is a level in which the cohort of my buddies in life is diminishing. There is a great deal of pleasure in the phone calls that I have with old buddies and being on Skype with them and hanging out. What do we want to talk about? At one time we would always talk about how we would fix the world, what we would do. Now it goes a lot more, was not it fun when we did thus-and such? There is a kind of reminiscing. There is also sense in which when we do the organ recital to each other—what is working, what is not working so well—we find that young people would not understand at all what we are talking about. But, our buddies do.

Now on the other hand, we have talked about the idea that extended lifespan calls for extended awareness. I have that sense of the larger issues being more on the foreground of my mind now: What will happen to the world and in what shape will I leave it? Will it get better? Is there any way in that system to which we give allegiance and want to be citizens in, which is old and obsolete and broken—is there any way that system can be fixed?

Somehow the people do not look at the dollar bill anymore to see the eye of God on top of the pyramid looking at what they are doing on Wall Street.
Instead of *E Pluribus Unum*, we have a great deal of polarization among us. So these are the kinds of things that make me reflect at this time and the question is what do I want to dream about? I want to dream about the young people whom I meet from time to time who seem to be so full of good dreams, who want to help the world.

I want to say something about gravestones. If I had my "druthers" (and we are not in an agreement about it) but if I had my preferences, I would like to have the gravestone made, not of stone, but of wood, and engraved. When it rots away it is time that it should rot away. Or it might be made of adobe and adobe only lasts as long as you keep it going, and if there is no one there to keep the adobe going, it will be time to be finished with that too. There is a sense of how we want to be somehow enshrined in permanence with our presentation of self. Look at the Pharaohs and look at Roman emperors and look at all the guys who want to make sure that the idol they created of themselves would last for the rest of the time. Someone once said he was a self-made man and he worshiped his maker. You get the sense of what it is when we are concerned about the presentation of self.

Previously, if someone said something nasty about me, I would want to write a letter to the editor, fix my entry in the Wikipedia, but now I do not care anymore. From time to time I have a conversation with the Zalman I used to be, and I am sure that I would not today approve completely of all the things that he did. But you know what he said to me when I talked to him last, "Don't you dare, don't you dare betray me. At the time I did what I had to do. I was not in the same place where you are now. You are not in the same place where I am now. Keep honoring that." This is what I feel really strongly about in the life review, namely that this is good. All the phases of life with all their flaws are what they are and that is okay.

There is something that is called an "event horizon." That is a word that they use in cosmology, but I believe it is also about human beings. My event horizon was a large one. Years ago I felt I was about 30 years ahead of the pack. That is to say, when people were thinking one thing, I was thinking what would be the growing edge with things that would be ahead of the rest of the time. Today when people ask me, what do you expect about the future, my event horizon is smaller. I still have a little mileage left, but it is not to be able to see around the corner of time as I, at one time, was able to see with much greater clarity.

I will tell you a story about event horizons. There was a man who came to his rabbi to ask him for business advice. The rabbi said, "Go ahead, you will succeed." On the way home he stopped at the house of the rabbi’s disciple and he asked him about his business, and the rabbi’s disciple said, "You will lose your shirt." So now he said, "To whom should I listen? Should I listen to a great rabbi or should I listen to his disciple?" He listened to the rabbi and in the end he lost his shirt. So he comes back to the disciple and says, "Could you explain this to me?" The disciple said, "Yes. My master only could see till the end of his life and by the end of his life you had done very well, but he could not see beyond. I could see beyond and I knew you would lose your shirt."
think that is the issue of the event horizon. I cannot say that people in the December years have a large event horizon, to be able to see farther.

Another issue I have talked about before, especially for people doing social work and doing work with elders, is how much elders are touch deprived. The sexuality that people are talking about when they are young is not the same as when they are getting older. From time to time you hear stories of a home for the aged where Mrs. Klein and Mr. Rosenberg were cuddling up and the children did not like it. They had their loneliness and all that they wanted was their cuddles with each other. I think the same thing applies also to hospice. There was a friend of ours who passed away while she and her partner were lying in bed together. So the issue of recognizing that whatever we can do, whether it is holding a hand or a hug, is important.

My wife, Eve, tells the sequel.

“Her partner said afterward, when we all came in, ‘I went with her as far as they would let me and then I had to come back. And all I can tell you is, she is completely free and full of joy.’ Then he looked around and said, ‘This was what I was struggling ten years for—that I should not go there. Was I nuts?’”

So you get the sense that by the time the December stuff comes, that the sting of death that we experience when we think of emergency room and saving lives at all costs – the sting of death is less. Those of us who have done the kind of medical will, how many of us have said no resuscitation, do not do me any favors. I do not want any extraordinary ways to keep me alive. There is an equanimity that comes. If it were to happen today, okay. I still have a few things that I want to see done for my children and some uncompleted things.

When Freud was saying that we are driven by the two instincts, libido and thanatos, I had the sense that thanatos is not so much a death instinct as the instinct to completion. If you remember, the Zeigarnik effect in psychology means that you want to create closure. I think that that is very important. People call me up and ask me, do I want to do this, do I want to do that, and I say no thanks, no, no, no. Those are the very same things that I would have said yes to with alacrity in other years. Libido wants to open up more possibilities for life. Where I am right now, I want to close them off. I want to say, “No, I do not want to carry that on my shoulders. I do not even want to look ahead for that. I have other nice things that I want to look ahead for, but they are not now, not what you propose to me.” I hate the fact and I want to spell this out, that people trot me out when they need to have a Somebody out there. I have taught a lot of students and they are good students and the next echelon is more important than I. When they want to interview me I feel “do not do me a favor, interview my students. Get the ones who are next in line, who are going to do the real job. They are the ones who should get the attention.”

Terry Gross not too long ago, had an interview with an Anglican Bishop. When she asked him the question, “What is your prayer life like these days,” he said, “It is not verbal. I do not have much to do with words anymore. In fact
the best prayer that I have is to sit back and let God love me.” I started to tear up and I wrote him a letter to thank him for what he said, because this is the feeling that I have. We say God so loves the world, God loves us, God loves you, but we never sit down and let God love us. I think that is a very important part of the December work.

Also in December the body wants to be more sedentary than before. There still is a contemplative hunger, a hungry to spread the mind wider, to go to origins and to try to figure out the divine purposes. The best joy that I have at this point is to have these kinds of conversations with Eve, sometimes with my children, sometimes with some friends about what the nature of reality is all about. That contemplative hunger is there still.

I am going to read you a couple of things. This is from the end of the Book of Ecclesiastes; my translation is not King James.

Then come the creaky days.
Years creep up
in which one feels like saying,
“I have no taste for them.”
For the sunlight darkens in the eyes,
Dimmed is the light of the moon and the stars,
and the vision is patchy
like a cloudy sky after a rain.
The hands and arms, the guards of the house,
begin to tremble,
and the legs, like battle-tired soldiers,
are unsure in their step.

The grinding mills, the teeth, are fewer,
in the windows of the mind fog up.
The lips–doors that open to the marketplace
want to stay closed,
and the sounds heard get duller.
One’s sleep is shallow and easily disturbed
by the twitter of a bird,
and the gates of song get clogged.

The back is bent,
And the urge to mate is weakened
as a person shuffles towards his eternal home.

When I was asked to participate in a CD, distributed with accompanying book, (Graceful Passages, 2003) in which the music and words were to be played to the dying, I did this piece. Here are the words without the music at this point.

God, You made me.
From before I was born,
You took me through my life.
You supported me.  
You were there with me when I wasn’t there with You.  
There were times I was sick and You healed me.  
There were times I was in despair  
and You gave me hope.  
There were times when I felt betrayed  
that I could still turn to You.

It was a wonderful life. I loved and I was loved.  
I sang, I heard music, I saw flowers,  
I saw sunrises and sunsets.  
Even in places when I was alone,  
You, in my heart, helped me turn loneliness  
into precious solitude.  
I look back over the panorama of my life;  
what a wonderful privilege this was!

I still have some concerns for people in the family,  
For the world, for the planet.  
I put them in Your Blessed Hands.  
I trust that whatever in the Web of Life  
that needed me to be there  
Is now completed.  
I thank You for taking the burden from me,  
And I thank You for keeping me in the Light.  
As I let go, and let go, and let go… and let go.

Why did I agree to talk to you about this? Because I wanted you to understand  
what it is like when you are in the December years so that when you work with  
people, you do not give them the kind of false hope when you tell them to buck  
up, to be strong and so on. I can tell you how I would say, “Get the hell out of  
here.” What do you know of how I feel? Why do you tell me this? What I now  
need is for you to understand who I am, what I am and to recognize that you,  
too, will someday be in this same situation if God helps you to extend your  
life span. Your body will still be in pretty good shape, but it will start giving you  
the messages that you get in the December years.

There is still another life phase that I cannot talk about as of yet. Perhaps, if  
some day, when I am in hospice, you will want to come around and hear a final  
report from me. In the meantime I am glad to have spent this time with you.

REFERENCES

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The Author

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was born in Zholtkiew, Poland in 1924. His family fled the Nazi oppression in 1938 and arrived in New York City in 1941. He was ordained as a rabbi by HaBaD-Lubavitch in 1947, earned his MA in psychology from Boston University in 1956, and a Doctor of Hebrew Letters (DHL) from Hebrew Union College in 1968. His DHL dissertation was subsequently published as *Spiritual Intimacy: Counseling in the Hassidic tradition*. Professor emeritus at both Temple University (Professor of Jewish Mysticism and Psychology of Religion) and Naropa University (World Wisdom Chair), he is primarily known as the father of both Jewish Renewal and the spiritual eldering movements. A participant in ecumenical dialogues throughout the world, including the widely influential dialogue with the Dalai Lama, documented in the book, *The Jew in the Lotus*, his many published works include *Jewish with Feeling: Guide to a Meaningful Jewish Practice* with co-author Joel Segel and *A Heart Afire: Stories and Teachings of the Early Hasidic Masters* with co-author Netanel Miles-Yepez. He continues to be active in mentoring his many students the world over, incorporating wide-ranging knowledge of the spiritual technology developed by peoples all over the planet. He is committed to a post-triumphalist, ecumenical, and Gaian approach.