

5 / *To Grow in Wisdom*

I see the sick and the despised, the defeated and the bitter, the rejected and the lonely. I see them clustered together and alone, clinging to a hope for somebody's affection that does not come to pass. I hear them pray for the release that comes with death. I see them deprived and forgotten, masters yesterday, outcasts today.

What we owe the old is reverence, but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten. What they deserve is preference, yet we do not even grant them equality. One father finds it possible to sustain a dozen children, yet a dozen children find it impossible to sustain one father.

Perhaps this is the most distressing aspect of the situation. The care for the old is regarded as an act of charity rather than as a supreme privilege. In the never dying utterance of the Ten Commandments, the God of Israel did not proclaim: Honor Me, Revere Me. He proclaimed instead: Revere your father and your mother. There is no reverence for God without reverence for father and mother.

In Jewish tradition the honor for father and mother is a commandment, the perfect fulfillment of which surpasses the power of man. There is no limit to what one ought to do in carrying out this privilege of devotion (see "Children and Youth," p. 39). God is invisible, but my mother is His presence. . . .

Father and mother are always older, more advanced in years. But

is being advanced in years to be considered an advance or a retreat?

Ours is a twin problem: the attitude of society to the old and old age as well as the attitude of the old to being old.

The typical attitude to old age is characterized by fear, confusion, absurdity, self-deception, and dishonesty. It is painful and bizarre. Old age is something we are all anxious to attain. However, once attained we consider it a defeat, a form of capital punishment. In enabling us to reach old age, medical science may think that it gave us a blessing; however, we continue to act as if it were a disease.

More money and time are spent on the art of concealing the signs of old age than on the art of dealing with heart disease or cancer. You find more patients in the beauty parlors than in the hospitals. We would rather be bald than gray. A white hair is an abomination. Being old is a defeat, something to be ashamed of. Authenticity and honesty of existence are readily exchanged for false luster, for camouflage, sham, and deception.

A gray hair may destroy the chance for promotion, may cost a salesman his job, and inwardly alienate a son from his father. The fear of being considered old has become a traumatic obsession. Only very few people are endowed with the rare and supreme courage to admit their true age without embarrassment. With the rest of us, courage and honesty go underground when the question of age is discussed. The most delightful resolution the White House Conference on Aging could pass would be to eliminate from now on any mention of the date of birth from the birth certificate.

A vast amount of human misery, as well as enormous cultural and spiritual damage, is due to these twin phenomena of our civilization: the contempt for the old and the traumatic fear of getting old. Monotheism has acquired a new meaning: the one and only thing that counts is being young. Youth is our god, and being young is divine. To be sure, youth is a very marvelous thing. However, the cult of youth is idolatry. Abraham is the grand old man, but the legend of Faust is pagan.

A revision of attitudes and conceptions is necessary. Old age is not

a defeat but a victory, not a punishment but a privilege. In education we stress the importance of the adjustment of the young to society. Our task is to call for the adjustment of society to the old.

By what standards do we measure culture? It is customary to evaluate a nation by the magnitude of its scientific contributions or the quality of its artistic achievements. However, the true standard by which to gauge a culture is the extent to which reverence, compassion, justice are to be found in the daily lives of a whole people, not only in the acts of isolated individuals. Culture is *a style of living compatible with the grandeur of being human*.

The test of a people is how it behaves toward the old. It is easy to love children. Even tyrants and dictators make a point of being fond of children. But the affection and care for the old, the incurable, the helpless are the true gold mines of a culture.

We maintain that all men are created equal, including the old. What is extraordinary is that we feel called upon to plead for such equality, in contrast to other civilizations in which the superiority of the old is maintained.

In our own days, a new type of fear has evolved in the hearts of men: the fear of medical bills. In the spirit of the principle that reverence for the old takes precedence over reverence for God, we are compelled to confess that a nation should be ready to sell, if necessary, the treasures from its art collection and the sacred objects from its houses of worship in order to help one sick man.

Is there anything as holy, as urgent, as noble, as the effort of the whole nation to provide medical care for the old?

This is one of the great biblical insights: the needs of suffering humanity are a matter of personal as well as public responsibility. The representatives of the community are held responsible for the neglect of human life if they have failed to provide properly for those in need. The ancient sages realized that it was not enough to rely upon individual benevolence, and that care for the sick was a responsibility of the community.

It is in accord with this tradition that all major religious organizations have endorsed the principle of government responsibility and

the use of the Social Security mechanism as the most effective medium for dealing with the problem of medical care for the aged.

It is marvelous indeed that for the first time in history, our society is able to provide for the material needs of its senior citizens. Yet, in addition to the problem of material security, we must face the problem of psychological and spiritual security.

How to save the old from despondency, despair? How to lend beauty to being old? How to regain the authenticity of old age?

Old age is a major challenge to the inner life; it takes both wisdom and strength not to succumb to it. According to all the standards we employ socially as well as privately, the aged person is condemned as inferior. In terms of manpower he is a liability, a burden, a drain on our resources. Conditioned to operate as a machine for making and spending money, with all other relationships dependent upon its efficiency, the moment the machine is out of order and beyond repair, one begins to feel like a ghost without a sense of reality. The aged may be described as a person *who does not dream anymore*, devoid of ambition, and living in fear of losing his status. Regarding himself as a person who has outlived his usefulness, he feels as if he had to apologize for being alive.

The tragedy is that old age comes upon us as a shock for which we are unprepared. If life is defined exclusively in terms of functions and activities, is it still worth living when these functions and activities are sharply curtailed?

The tragedy, I repeat, is that most of us are unprepared for old age. We know a great deal about what to do with things, even what to do with other people; we hardly know what to do with ourselves. We know how to act in public; we do not know what to do in privacy. Old age involves the problem of what to do with privacy.

Among some primitive peoples the old were generally neglected and when helpless exposed to die. Today one can even be placed in a luxury hotel and be left to die.

While we do not officially define old age as a second childhood, some of the programs we devise are highly effective in helping the aged to become children. The popular approach is: "Keep alive a

zest for living in the elderly, by encouraging them to continue old hobbies, or to develop new ones." Now preoccupation with games and hobbies, the overemphasis on recreation, while certainly conducive to eliminating boredom temporarily, hardly contribute to inner strength. The effect is, rather, a pickled existence, preserved in brine with spices.

Is this the way and goal of existence: to study, grow, toil, mature, and to reach the age of retirement in order to live like a child? After all, *to be retired does not mean to be retarded.*

What is the role of recreation in the life of the aged? Is it merely to serve as a substitute for work one has done in earlier years? It seems to me that recreation is serving a different purpose, and that an overindulgence in recreational activities aggravates rather than ameliorates a condition it is trying to deal with, namely *the trivialization of existence.* In the past it was ritual and prayer that staved off that danger.

For thousands of years human existence was not simply confined to the satisfaction of trivial needs. Through prayer and ritual man was able to remain open to the wonder and mystery of existence, to lend a tinge of glory to daily deeds.

Modern man has discarded ritual, failed to learn the art of prayer, but found a substitute for both in occupational routine. He severed relations to God, to the cosmos, even to his people, but became engrossed in the search for success. The excitement of success took the place of inspiration. Upon his retirement from labor or business, games and hobbies, the country club or golf take the place of church, synagogue, ritual, and prayer. This, then, is the fact: hobbies have become *a substitute for ritual*, not only for work. Should we not clearly distinguish between recreation as a substitution and recreation as a solution?

Authentic human existence includes both work and worship, utilization and celebration. We have a right to consume because we have the power to celebrate. The man of our time is losing the power to celebrate; instead of participating in spiritual celebration, he seeks to be amused or entertained (see "Children and Youth," p.

40). Upon reaching the summit of his years, man discovers that entertainment is no substitute for celebration.

What are the basic spiritual ills of old age?

(1) The sense of being useless to, and rejected by, family and society; (2) the sense of inner emptiness and boredom; (3) loneliness and the fear of time. Let us analyze the root as well as the cure of these three ills.

I. THE SENSE OF BEING USELESS TO, AND REJECTED BY, FAMILY AND SOCIETY

While it is vitally important to see man in his relation to society, we must not forget that society is *not* man's only and ultimate referent. In spite of the fact that our ideologies and institutions continue to imply that the worth of a person is equivalent to his usefulness to society, every one of us entertains the keen expectation that other people will not regard him merely because of what he is worth to them, because he is capable of satisfying other people's needs, but will regard him as a being significant and valuable in himself. Just as the grandeur of the sun or an oak tree is not reducible to the functions it fulfills, so is the grandeur of a human life not reducible to the needs it is capable of satisfying. Even he who does not regard himself as an absolute end, rebels against being treated as a means to an end, as subservient to other men. The rich, the men of the world, want to be loved for their own sake, for their essence, whatever it may mean, not for their achievements or possessions. Nor do the old and sick expect help because of what they may give us in return. Who needs the handicapped, the incurably sick, the maintenance of whom is a drain on the treasury of the state? It is, moreover, obvious that a person's service to society does not claim all of his life and can therefore not be the ultimate answer to his quest of meaning for life as a whole. Man has more to give than what other men are able or willing to accept. To say that life could consist of care for others, of incessant service to the world,

would be a vulgar boast. What we are able to bestow upon others is usually less and rarely more than a tithe.

There are alleys in the soul where man walks alone, ways that do not lead to society, a world of privacy that shrinks from the public eye. Life comprises not only arable, productive land, but also mountains of dreams, an underground of sorrow, towers of yearning, which can hardly be utilized to the last for the good of society, unless man be converted into a machine in which every screw must serve a function or be removed. It is a profiteering state which, trying to exploit the individual, asks all of man for itself.

And if society as embodied in the state should prove to be corrupt and my effort to cure its evils unavailing, would my life as an individual have been totally devoid of meaning? If society should decide to reject my services and even place me in solitary confinement, so that I would surely die without being able to bequeath any influence to the world I love, would I then feel compelled to end my life?

Human existence cannot derive its ultimate meaning from society, because society itself is in need of meaning. It is as legitimate to ask: Is mankind needed? as it is to ask: Am I needed?

Humanity begins in the individual man, just as history takes its rise from a singular event. It is always one man at a time whom we keep in mind when we pledge: "With malice toward none, with charity for all," or when we try to fulfill: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." The term "mankind," which in biology denotes the human species, has an entirely different meaning in the realm of ethics and religion. Here mankind is not conceived as a species, as an abstract concept, stripped from its concrete reality, but as an abundance of specific individuals; as a community of persons rather than as a herd or a multitude of nondescripts.

While it is true that the good of all counts more than the good of one, it is the concrete individual who lends meaning to the human race. We do not think that a human being is valuable because he is a member of the race; it is rather the opposite: the human race is valuable because it is composed of human beings.

While dependent on society as well as on the air that sustains us, and while other men compose the system of relations in which the curve of our actions takes its course, it is as individuals that we are beset with desires, fears and hopes, challenged, called upon and endowed with the power of will and a spark of responsibility.

2. THE SENSE OF INNER EMPTINESS AND BOREDOM

Old age often is an age of anguish and boredom. The only answer to such anguish is *a sense of significant being*.

The sense of significant being is a thing of the spirit. Stunts, buffers, games, hobbies, slogans—all are evasions. What is necessary is an approach, a getting close to the sources of the spirit. Not the suppression of the sense of futility, but its solution; not reading material to while away one's time, but learning to exalt one's faculties is the answer; not entertainment but celebration.

To attain a sense of significant being we must learn to be involved in thoughts that are ahead of what we already comprehend, to be involved in deeds that will generate higher motivations.

There is a level of existence where one cannot think anymore in terms of self-centered needs and satisfactions, where the problem that cannot be silenced is: Who needs me? Who needs mankind? How does one relate himself to a source of ultimate meaning? The cry for such relatedness which gains intensity with old age is a cry for a referent that transcends personal existence. It is not experienced as a need from within but as a situation of being exposed to a demand from without.

Significant being is not measured by the amount of needs that agitate a person but by the intensity and depth of the response to a wisdom in relation to which *my* mind is an afterthought, by the discovery that the moment to come is an anticipation, an expectation, waiting to receive *my* existence. Significant being means

experiencing moments of time as a comprehension which embraces *me*.

What a person lives by is not only a sense of belonging but also a *sense of indebtedness*. The need to be needed corresponds to a fact: something is asked of man, of every man. Advancing in years must not be taken to mean a process of suspending the requirements and commitments under which a person lives. To be is to obey. A person must never cease to be.¹

Our work for the advanced in years is handicapped by our clinging to the dogmatic belief in the immutability of man. We conceive of his inner life as a closed system, as an automatic, unilinear, irreversible process which cannot be altered, and of old age as a stage of stagnation into which a person enters with his habits, follies, and prejudices. To be good to the old is to cater to their prejudices and eccentricities.

May I suggest that man's potential for change and growth is much greater than we are willing to admit and that old age be regarded not as the age of stagnation but as *the age of opportunities for inner growth*? The old person must not be treated as a patient, nor regard his retirement as a prolonged state of resignation.

The years of old age may enable us to attain the high values we failed to sense, the insights we have missed, the wisdom we ignored. They are indeed formative years, rich in possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through inbred self-deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness.

One ought to enter old age the way one enters the senior year at a university, in exciting anticipation of consummation. Rich in perspective, experienced in failure, the person advanced in years is capable of shedding prejudices and the fever of vested interests. He does not see anymore in every fellow man a person who stands in his way, and competitiveness may cease to be his way of thinking.

At every home for the aged there is a director of recreation in charge of physical activities; there ought to be also a {director of learning in charge of intellectual activities} We insist upon mini-

imum standards for physical well being, what about minimum standards for intellectual well being?

What the nation needs is senior universities, universities for the advanced in years where wise men should teach the potentially wise, where the purpose of learning is not a career, but where the purpose of learning is learning itself.

Education for Retirement. The goal is not to keep the old man busy, but to remind him that every moment is an opportunity for greatness. Inner purification is at least as important as hobbies and recreation. The elimination of resentments, of residues of bitterness, of jealousies and wrangling is certainly a goal for which one must strive.

Only very few people realize that it is in the days of our youth that we prepare ourselves for old age.

This is an imperative we must be conscious of even in youth. Prepare spiritually for old age and learn how to cultivate it. The ancient equation of old age and wisdom is far from being a misconception. However, age is no guarantee for wisdom. A Hebrew proverb maintains: "A wise old man the older he gets the wiser he becomes, a vulgar old man the older he gets the less wise he becomes." People are anxious to save up financial means for old age; they should also be anxious to prepare a spiritual income for old age. That ancient principle—listen to the voice of the old—becomes meaningless when the old have nothing meaningful to say. Wisdom, maturity, tranquillity do not come all of a sudden when we retire from business. We must begin teaching in public schools about the virtues that come to fruition with the advance in years, about the wisdom and peace that arrive in old age. Reverence for the old must be an essential part of elementary education at school, and particularly at home. Education for retirement is a life-long process.

3. LONELINESS AND THE FEAR OF TIME

One of the major ills of old age as well as one of the roots of the general fear of old age is *the fear of time*. It is like living on a craggy

ridge over a wide abyss. Time is the only aspect of existence which is completely beyond man's control. He may succeed in conquering space, in sending satellites around the moon, but time remains immune to his power; a moment gone by not even General Motors can bring back. Being used to dealing with things he can manage, the encounter with time is the most stunning shock that comes to man. In his younger years, he is too busy to react to it; it is in old age that time may become a nightmare. We are all infatuated with the splendor of space, with the grandeur of things of space. *Thing* is a category that lies heavy on our minds, tyrannizing all our thoughts. Our imagination tends to mold all concepts in its image. In our daily lives we attend primarily to that which the senses are spelling out for us; to what the eyes perceive, to what the fingers touch. Reality to us is thinghood, consisting of substances that occupy space; even God is conceived by most of us as a thing.

The result of our thingness is our blindness to all reality that fails to identify itself as a thing, as a matter of fact. This is obvious in our understanding of time, which being thingless and insubstantial, appears to us as if it has no reality.

Indeed, we know what to do with space but do not know what to do about time, except to make it subservient to space, or to while it away, *to kill time*. However, *time is life*, and to kill time is to murder (cf. "Religion in a Free Society," p. 19). Most of us seem to labor for the sake of things of space. As a result we suffer from a deeply rooted dread of time and stand aghast when compelled to look into its face. Time to us is sarcasm, a slick treacherous monster with a jaw like a furnace incinerating every moment of our lives. Shrinking, therefore, from facing time, we escape for shelter to things of space. The intentions we are unable to carry out we deposit in space; possessions become symbols of our repressions, jubilees of frustrations. But things of space are not fireproof; they only add fuel to the flames. Is the joy of possession an antidote to the terror of time which grows to be a dread of the inevitable death? Things, when magnified, are forgeries of happiness, they are a threat

to our very lives; we are more harassed than supported by the Frankensteins of spatial things.

Most of us do not live in time but run away from it; we do not see its face, but its make-up. The past is either forgotten or preserved as a cliché, and the present moment is either bartered for a silly trinket or beclouded by false anticipations. The present moment is a zero, and so is the next moment, and a vast stretch of life turns out to be a series of zeros, with no real number in front.

Blind to the marvel of the present moment, we live with memories of moments missed, in anxiety about an emptiness that lies ahead. We are totally unprepared when the problem strikes us in unmitigated form.

It is impossible for man to shirk the problem of time. The more we think the more we realize that we cannot conquer time through space. We can only master time in time.

Time is man's most important frontier, the advance region of significant being, a region where man's true freedom lies. Space divides us, time unites us. We wage wars over things of space; the treasures of time lie open to every man.

Time has independent ultimate significance; it is of more majesty and more evocative of awe than even a sky studded with stars. Gliding gently in the most ancient of all splendors, it tells so much more than space can say in its broken language of things, playing symphonies upon the instruments of isolated beings, unlocking the earth and making it happen. Time is the process of creation, and things of space are results of creation. When looking at space we see the products of creation; when intuiting time we hear the process of creation. Things of space exhibit a deceptive independence. They show off a veneer of limited permanence. Things created conceal the Creator. It is the dimension of time wherein man meets God, wherein man becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations. *Time is the presence of God in the world of space*, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all beings.

Time is perpetual presence, perpetual novelty. Every moment is a new arrival, a new bestowal. *Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy. The moment is the marvel;* it is in evading the marvel of the moment that boredom begins which ends in despair.

Old age has the vicious tendency of depriving a person of the present. The aged thinks of himself as belonging to the past. But it is precisely the openness to the present that he must strive for. The marvel is discovered in celebration.

He who lives with a sense for the Presence knows that to get older does not mean to lose time but rather to gain time. And, he also knows that in all his deeds, the chief task of man is to sanctify time. All it takes to sanctify time is *God, a soul, and a moment. And the three are always here.*

It is still considered proper to expect that the first responsibility in planning for the senior citizen rests with the family. Such expectation presupposes the concept of a family which is not only an economic unit but also an interplay of profoundly personal relations. It thinks of the family not only as a process of living together but also of a series of decisive acts and events in which all members are involved and by which they are inwardly affected.

What is characteristic of the modern family is that on the level of profound personal experience, parents and children live apart. The experiences shared at home are perfunctory rather than creative. In the past, it was the role of the father to lead the children through moments of exaltation. Whatever stood out as venerable and lofty was associated with the father. Now we are entering a social structure in which the father is becoming obsolete, and in which there are only three ages: childhood, adolescence, and old age. The husband of the mother is not a father, he is a regular guy, a playmate for the boys, engaged in the same foibles and subject to similar impulses. Since he neither represents the legacy of the past nor is capable of keeping pace with the boys in the pursuit of the future, his status is rather precarious.

Children today experience their highest moments of exaltation in

a children's world, in which there is no room for parents. But unless a fellowship of spiritual experience is re-established, the parent will remain an outsider to the child's soul. This is one of the beauties of the human spirit. We appreciate *what we share*, we do not appreciate *what we receive*. Friendship, affection is not acquired by giving presents. Friendship, affection comes about by two people sharing a significant moment, by having an experience in common. You do not attain the affection of your teen-age son by giving him an expensive car.

It is not necessary for man to submit to the constant corrosion of his finest sensibilities and to accept as inevitable the liquidation of the inner man. It is within the power of man to save the secret substance that holds the world of man together. The way to overcome loneliness is not by waiting to receive a donation of companionship but rather by offering and giving companionship and meaning to others.

The real bond between two generations is the insights they share, the appreciation they have in common, the moments of inner experience in which they meet. A parent is not only an economic provider, playmate, shelter, and affection. A human being is in need of security, he is also in need of inspiration, of exaltation and a transcendent meaning of existence. And to a child, the parent represents the inspiration, the exaltation, and the meaning. To my child, I am either the embodiment of the spirit or its caricature. No book, no image, no symbol can replace my role in the imagination and the recesses of my child's soul.

It is easy to speak about the things we are committed to; it is hard to communicate *the commitment itself*. It is easy to convey the resentments we harbor; it is hard to communicate the praise, the worship, the sense of the ineffable.

We have nearly lost the art of conveying to our children our power to praise, our ability to cherish the things that cannot be quantified.

This, then is a most urgent problem: How to convey the inex-

pressible legacy, the moments of insight, how to invoke unconditional commitment to justice and compassion, a sensitivity to the stillness of the holy, attachment to sacred words.

There is no human being who does not carry a treasure in his soul; a moment of insight, a memory of love, a dream of excellence, a call to worship.

In order to be a master one must learn how to be an apprentice. Reverence for the old, dialogue between generations, is as important to the dignity of the young as it is for the well-being of the old. We deprive ourselves by disparaging the old.

We must seek ways to overcome the traumatic fear of being old, the prejudice, the discrimination against those advanced in years. All men are created equal, including those advanced in years. Being old is not necessarily the same as being stale. The effort to restore the dignity of old age will depend upon our ability to revive the equation of old age and wisdom. Wisdom is the substance upon which the inner security of the old will forever depend. But the attainment of wisdom is the work of a life time.

Old men need a vision, not only recreation.

Old men need a dream, not only a memory.

It takes three things to attain a sense of significant being:

God

A Soul

And a Moment.

And the three are always here.

Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.

NOTE

1. For discussion of these ideas see Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965); cf. also "Idols in the Temples," pp. 107 f.

6 / *Religion and Race*

I

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go."

The outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Pharaoh is not ready to capitulate. The exodus began, but is far from having been completed. In fact, it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses.

Let us dodge no issues. Let us yield no inch to bigotry, let us make no compromise with callousness.

In the words of William Lloyd Garrison, "I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject [slavery] I do not wish to think, to speak, or to write with moderation. I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and I will be heard."

Religion and race. How can the two be uttered together? To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child. To act in the spirit of