

LIVING MYTH PODCAST

Episode 380 – Elders and Youth on Paths of Healing

As happens to me often, I woke up in the middle of the night, and found that I was inside a story. In many ways a story can be a territory to wander around in. And for me each visit to a story reveals something new. In this case, I was inside an old Japanese tale that first appealed to me because of its unusual title, which is translated as the 60 Canyon Abandonment. As it turns out, the number 60 in the title has nothing to do with the amount of canyons, but rather names the age at which a person was required to abandon their life and wander out into distinct canyons in order to die alone.

This may seem an outlandish and far-fetched idea, yet, people abandon themselves all the time. People at all stages of life can be seen to abandon their true longings and the genuine dream of their own soul. And modern people abandon themselves to mass media, to personal digital devices, and increasingly now to artificial intelligence. In times of trouble and duress, entire populations can be seen to abandon the very things that once made them feel free and hopeful, feel wise and humane, as they forget about what is important about life, and even what is important about the Earth itself.

Here on Earth, it turns out that everyone has abandonment issues that tend to intensify whenever dramatic changes or real growth is required. The old story, which is part folktale and part fairy tale, begins in a country controlled by a strong man who sought to take power over all areas of life. Like other autocratic rulers, he was known for violating all the common rules to satisfy his immediate needs or to indulge in personal vendettas, while at the same time creating rules and laws that limited and harmed other people.

Because he was obsessed with material productivity, the ruler decided that by the age of 60, people were less able to contribute to the collective materialistic effort. And so soon enough, a law was passed that required everyone who reached 60 years of age to vacate their lives, to give up all they had and to leave behind everyone they knew. Simply because of aging, older people had to trek out into the mountains and abandon themselves in distant canyons. Despite the harsh and punishing nature of such a practice, once the idea of abandonment became the law of the land, people followed the rule and willingly gave up their lives when the time came. Someone looking in from the outside might quickly see the absurdity of this rule and the brutality of the ruler. However, when someone claims ultimate power, and lays down the law, most people will eventually fall in line out of fear, or else because they seek to benefit themselves in the short term.

One day it happened that a certain man had reached his 60th year. In order to be a law-abiding person, he would have to abandon his life on the anniversary of his birth. It was the day his life began, and it was also the beginning of the end of life for him. It turned out that the old fellow had two grown children, a daughter and a son who truly cared for him. And when they saw their father preparing for the lonely walk into the distant canyons, they both became sad and troubled. When he expressed his resignation, stating that the law is the law, they insisted that they accompany him on his last journey.

Soon they all set out together on the path of abandonment. And when they had reached a place where they had to climb a winding forest path, the children noticed something odd. Their father kept clipping off the tips of evergreen branches and tossing the tips over his shoulder onto the path behind them. The sister and brother stopped the old man to say that they could see what he was trying to do. They pointed out that it made no sense for him to try to mark the path so that he might find his way back to the village, he would only be breaking the law and he was sure to be publicly punished, and then sent away again. The father answered calmly saying that he understood that he was now old and near the end of his own trail. However, they were young and had their whole lives ahead of them. He said it would be a disaster if they became disoriented and could not find their way back to life. He was marking the path, not so that he could go back, but so that they would not lose their way and wind up becoming abandoned themselves.

All of a sudden, the children could feel the hearts breaking a little, as they all stood together on the deserted trail. Sensing the compassion in their father's heart, they realized that they could not abandon him in this way. And in that moment, they all realized that they were in this trouble together, they were beginning to see how abandoning life at any stage could begin to drain life from all its stages. And despite what the law required, soon enough, the son and the daughter were insisting that their father return to the village with them. At that point, they completely turned around and returned to the village. And upon arriving at this simple hut, they all realized that the father would have to go into hiding. Seeing no other option, they loosened some floorboards and made a place to hide in the earth below the hut in which they lived. After that, each day, the children would pass food to the father and comfort him. And for his part, the old man was now living not just under the house, but also outside the law.

There's more to the old tale, but sometimes it's wise to stop just as the father and the children did, in order to consider the situation. A moment of mutual awakening occurs when the young and the old managed to stop in time and consider what is happening to them. At one level, the father seems ready to abandon life and simply let nature take its course. On another level, when facing his own death, a depth of compassion awakens in him and a realization dawns upon him. He cannot simply abandon his children or neglect the future which the younger ones represent. He may be willing to accept his own abandonment, but he cannot accept that his children might become disoriented and lose their way in life. This realization about the future beyond his own life, is a clue to how things can turn around.

The next clue comes when the young ones have their own moment of compassion and greater understanding. In the midst of the path of abandonment, a deepening of understanding and an awakening of compassion develops amongst the young and the old alike. In awakening to a deeper truth, they begin to reverse the common attitudes that have come to be the law of the land. At that point, the blind march of time becomes reversed, and even renewed, as a seeming dead end becomes a new beginning. This moment of realization turns the father from simply being an older person to being like an elder. The transformation comes not from a social event or religious ceremony. Rather, it comes from an inner awakening of the heart and soul.

Even if there were ceremonies for converting older people to elders, the actual change must come from inside the awakening soul. As in the story, when a person truly turns their life around, it also affects those who are around them. If there is no change at the level of the individual soul, that can be no

change at the collective level of culture. Like characters in a faithful story, we find ourselves at this time, both in danger of abandoning ourselves and increasingly in doubt about the future of life on Earth.

Meanwhile, back in the story, the young people now have knowledge that they must keep to themselves, and the old man must view the world from a deeper place. At the same time, the ruler became more extreme in his demands on people. He started making new rules and proclaiming odd ultimatums without consulting anyone. And the people suffered increasing levels of anxiety and hardship and fear. Of course, would be autocrats and all who lust for power must rule by spreading chaos and fear, by dividing people against each other, and by making certain people the objects of hate and scorn. When it seemed that things could not get any worse, the ruler declared that anyone who could not fulfill certain tasks would have to pay even harsher penalties.

Without any explanation, the ruler demanded that each person must bring before him a rope made of ashes. Of course, no one had any idea how to make a rope of ashes, and the son and the daughter anguished over the impossible task, and the penalties that were now facing everyone. From under the house, the old man could hear what was causing all the concern, and he told them to find a length of tightly woven rope, and showed them how to slowly burn it, so that it retained its shape while being turned to ash. When they brought the ash rope before the ruler, he was surprised. He did not expect that anyone would be able to solve the puzzle. His intent was simply to create a sense of chaos, and thereby dominate the people while becoming richer at the expense of everyone else.

Ignoring the effort of the daughter and son, the ruler immediately set another task upon all the people. The new executive order required that each person had to bring a conch shell through which a silken thread had been thoroughly passed. And again, they would be harsh penalties to pay for whoever could not do it. This time, the daughter and the son brought the dilemma directly to their father under the house. He told them to tie a grain of rice to a silken thread and place it inside a conch shell. And then to place an ant inside the shell and aim the opposite end toward the sun. The children were amazed at how quickly the ant appeared at the other end of the nautilus carrying the grain while also pulling the thread through all the twists inside the shell.

Of course, the ruler lost no time in assigning a third task. And at this point, everyone was required to bring a drum that played itself or else be fined for failing the test. Of course, the son and daughter quickly brought the seemingly impossible task to the attention of the old man. And he asked them to catch a bumble bee and bring him a clay pot as well. After emptying the pot, the old man placed the bee inside it and closed the top of it by stretching a piece of dry leather over it. When the children handed the pot to the ruler, the bee began to buzz around and bump himself against the top. And the effect was that the pot seemed to be a drum somehow playing itself.

At that point, the ruler insisted on knowing how the children could solve the puzzling tasks that no one else could manage to do. Under pressure and not knowing what else to do, the children explained that it was their old father who had the knowledge of how to accomplish the seemingly impossible tasks. Then the ruler asked why the father did not present the solutions himself. And the son and daughter had to admit that the old man was past the age of abandonment, and that they all had broken the law together. When the ruler pressed the question as to why they did not follow the abandonment rule, the

daughter and the son explained how they could not abandon someone who was caring and compassionate and wise like their father. The ruler immediately concluded that since they had broken the law, the solutions to all the tasks were invalid, and everyone would be punished in a more severe way.

In the anguished silence that followed, the ruler became unusually quiet. He seemed to turn inward and ponder the situation. After a time, he said that he was impressed with the honesty and the compassion of the children and surprised at the wisdom of their father. He acknowledged that the rule that required that people had to abandon themselves was harsh, and might even be foolish if it meant that those who could provide wisdom were rejected from society. And then to everyone's surprise, the ruler rewarded the sister and brother, he exonerated their father and asked that the old man come to court as an advisor. And from that moment on, the 60 Canyon Abandonment law was itself abandoned and soon abolished.

In its place, people began to consider ways to develop greater respect for those who are older, but also ways to involve younger people with their elders. Those who became older now aspired to become elders, they began to look at what was called the Second Risk of Life, that is to say, being willing to risk what was left of their lives for the benefit of those who were younger, and for a better future for everyone. This second risk was deemed to involve sustaining the life of both nature and culture, while finding ways to keep everyone connected to the community of living souls. Part of what turned the whole dire desperate situation around was that the old man turned against the mainstream and decided to follow a higher law than the law of the land.

There is a revelation that suggests that genuine elders are not simply the keepers of law and order. Rather, the role of elders involves turning to higher laws and deeper truths in order to better see where the common customs have abandoned those who the laws were intended to protect. The idea of a genuine elder appears as the opposite of, and as the antidote to, those who have power but use it unjustly. The ruler had positional authority, whereas the genuine elder has inner authority as well as wisdom. One draws power from the established order and uses it for personal gain and against other people. The other draws upon a deeper sense of authenticity and uses that power for the benefit of others. One serves the demands of the ever-needy ego self, while the other serves the aims of the awakened soul that sees the value of individual life in all people and at any age or stage of life.

The ruler in the story acts the role of the autocrat and the would-be strong man who desires worldly power but has no idea what power is intended to serve. He requires everyone to submit to him and plays the role of the negative elder. He has the trappings of leadership without the vision or the wisdom necessary for it to become meaningful. He has the means of power without the understanding and the compassion necessary to make the means serve a genuine meaningful end. And in the end, power that does not enhance life must eventually serve to destroy it.

In traditional cultures, elders do not simply exercise power and authority, but rather, they are expected to remember the essential values and the enduring truths that people keep forgetting. Genuine elders learn to see beyond the usual restrictions, in order to uphold higher standards than those that happen to rule the day because of history or politics, or even uninspired religion.

The ancient tale of the canyons of abandonment is not simply about respecting older people, but also about the necessity of making genuine elders. When a culture forgets its elders, the elder people begin to forget themselves. Instead of acting like elders, people simply become olders, who forget what is important in life. Those who grow older without growing wiser, become more fearful and more narrow minded as they age. Instead of taking the healing road, they act out their unresolved resentments and animosities on other people. Meanwhile, genuine elders are examples of those who die before they die. They face death consciously and develop a greater appreciation for life. It is not simply that they desire to live longer, but that they also have a longing to serve and enhance life in the modern lifestyle.

Instead of people growing older and wiser, people can simply grow older and older. Instead of developing wise and seasoned elders who can help others find meaningful ways to live and to heal, modern societies tend to produce unenlightened olders who blindly seek ways to hold on to power at any cost. Sadly, when older folks fail to commit to the greater ideals that sustain the deepest values of humanity, they tend to become more fearful and anxious, while also becoming more cynical, and more deeply self-involved.

Growing older happens to everyone, but growing wiser happens to those who awaken to a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their own life. Elders can carry a greater vision because they have developed insight into their own lives, they have faced up to whatever fate has handed them and found ways not simply to survive, but also to understand the struggles and the suffering that are part of each human life. In many traditions, the elders are not simply those in positions of authority, but rather those who creatively tap into the sage in the heart, tap into the inner wise old woman, or wise old man of the soul. In doing so, they learn to resonate with and speak for the animals in the forests. As those who become truly old enough to know better, they also become living depositories of wisdom for the next generation to draw upon. And in that sense, they develop inner authority and authority that knows what needs to be preserved and be remembered, in order for human life to be noble and meaningful and properly in tune with nature.

Genuine elders lead by remembering further back than others as well as by seeing more clearly ahead. Therefore, they are less likely to try to be political leaders, and more likely to become cultural and spiritual guides. The elders serve as seers who can see behind and beyond the politics of the day, and perceive ways to bring people together and plant seeds for a meaningful future. Elders hold to the universal laws in the highest ideals of humanity. And in that sense, genuine elders are also instinctive humanitarians. In traditional cultures, elders were considered to be a valuable resource without whose guidance whole societies could lose their way. As depicted in the story, when faced with an impossible task, a wise person allows the force of universal imagination to operate through them.

Genuine imagination is the deepest power of the human soul that must come into play. And that opens us to the possibilities of help coming from unlikely places. In the abandonment story, tiny beings like ants and bees had to be sought as helpers, as if to indicate that a different order of understanding must be applied when dealing with dangers that threaten nature as well as culture. The great problems in life involve conflicts and opposition's that cannot be solved at the surface of life. At the same time, there is a hidden unity that underlies all of life, an inner unity also found in the depths of the individual soul.

Those who become as elders, and those who find the inner elder in their own heart, become able to tolerate the tension of opposites long enough to find creative solutions that bring a sense of wholeness to otherwise broken situations.

Traditional tales from many cultures show how youth and elders are opposite sides of a psychic pairing that can help reveal an important secret of our human identity. They are parts of a paradox in which each is necessary to understand the other, in which each holds a key to a deeper appreciation of the course of human life. Despite cultural gaps between youth and elders, they are secretly connected, and each holds an essential piece of the human inheritance. The eternal youth, which exists inside everyone, carries the original dream of our life, and the intrinsic vitality needed for living in a meaningful way.

The elder, or inner sage, is like the wise old man or wise old woman in fairy tales that carries both the deep instincts for survival, as well as a capacity to discover new ways to find healing and meaning and purpose. At a point in the abandonment story, when the old man and the young sister and brother refused to abandon each other, they also take a big risk. Together, they enter a secret alliance that shifts the psychological ground and makes it more possible to find paths of meaning and ways of healing. When older folks risk living with genuine courage and vision, younger people feel encouraged to find and follow the core imagination in their hearts as well as the prompting and guidance of the deeper self within them.

In many ancient traditions, elders and youth were considered to have a foot in each world, in a way that gives them a unique kind of authenticity and edge of life relevance, for both the elder and the youth inhabit a betwixt and between state that can make them radically open to the spirit of change. And as a result, they can be more in touch with the other world while also staying in touch with the struggles in this world. Together, they shape the inner imagination needed to face the impossible tasks that arise whenever the world itself needs to change.

When the oldest and the youngest in the soul come together, we can tap into wisdom and creativity at the same time, and can learn to hold together the ending of one era with the beginning of the next. The age-old arc of imagination that secretly generates and sustains human culture stretches between the eternal youth and the wise old sage that both inhabit the heart within our own heart. And the dream of life on Earth depends upon a conscious connection between these ancient and endlessly creative qualities of the human soul. It is not that childhood doesn't matter, or that the period of adulthood is somehow dismissible, but rather it is that the child is unwittingly carrying an inner dream that will try to awaken during the struggles of youth, and the adult feeling the burdens of responsibility is always close to the possibility of awakening to the sage dwelling within their own heart.

Youth and elders do not simply represent the extremes of life. When they function as awakened outsiders, they become the channels through which new ideas, as well as long forgotten forms of wisdom try to enter the common world. When the world becomes increasingly divided, the challenge involves redeeming positive views of both the elder and the youth, and thereby rediscovering how each can help redeem the vision of the other. At the level of the soul, we are called by the spirit of the age in

which we live to find ways to live fully and to heal ourselves, and also to find ways to bring healing to a world that continually becomes divided against itself.

If we can stop amidst the rush of life, and pause on the paths that typically lead to self-abandonment, we can find that two things are trying to catch up to us at the same time. One is the knowing inner sage, and the other is the ever-young, dream-making youth of the soul. Each offers an essential part of the great adventure of life which is intended to be lived fully and creatively and passionately all the way to the end.

When enough people can become the vessels through which the eternal youth and the wise old sage can enter the world, then there can be an awakening of the collective soul that can turn things around, even in the midst of a period of great loss and collective abandonment. Human culture is intended to be continuously remade through the genius of youth and the wisdom of elders acting in concert with the capacity of nature and the earth to repeatedly renew life at all levels.