

Voices from Other Rooms

As mature women and men who are in trouble, we often become even more attractive to other people. They either want to help or seduce us. We catch the perverted attention of younger folk or those of our own age: “What a great conquest! Bringing a distinguished, worldly gentleman who has accomplished much in his life down to his knees. Make him fall desperately in love with me.” The vision of *The Blue Angel* comes to mind. Alternatively: “What a great opportunity to be of real help to this hopeless human being – I get to nourish her back to health and be something of a hero-in-action.”:

Our inner child is wise enough to know that we are in trouble. He recognizes the daughters for what they are: false voices of the feminine. They are daughters of darkness. They want only to conquer us, so that they might get even or add another powerful male to their list. Our inner child asks for help from his father. This isn’t always a wise choice. After all, father is often the one who is infatuated. We might instead ask for help from other people in our life. We might turn to our friends or to a counsellor, coach or spiritual director. They can help us get out of trouble or even help us take full advantage of the opportunity to learn from a true feminine or masculine guide in our life. At the very least we might need their help in discriminating between our true guide and the false guides and seducers who are playing with our passions while expanding their own egos. It requires a view from the outside, for we might be caught up in complimentary needs-fulfilment—believing (often falsely) that these needs seem to be fair, noble and even divine.

When we are “betrayed” by those who seek to assist us and bring us gifts and services for the wrong reasons, then . . . we [often] feel hopeless, confused and yearning for peace. Often times, this leads to a partial death. The hopelessness resides in our sense of the betrayal. Who can be trusted? This is especially poignant if we are not feeling confident about our own resources. We look outward for help and find ourselves vulnerable and subject to manipulation. The confusion resides in our inability to figure out what has actually occurred: it seemed like a good idea in turning to this other person for assistance and there did seem to be this reciprocal attraction (perhaps a bit of the limbic attunement we described in the previous chapter).

We are left with not just the failure to be cured, but also the failure to pick the right person for assistance. Ah yes, the yearning for peace. This is perhaps the most troubling outcome of our failure(s): even if we can’t be healed, we hope to be at least a little less confused. Instead, we are left with the opposite: an intra-psychic war that pits our sense of self-confidence and psychic strength against our sense of personal ineptitude and vulnerability. There is no peace and the search for peace seems to be in vain. We wear the vestments of despair and death rather than those of purple. Autumn is truly a bleak season leading to winter and stagnation. . . . Maybe listening to ones’ own voices (that speak to one’s own needs) requires more courage than listening to voices from outside.

Tim had been hearing voices for almost twenty years and they often caused him frustration and poor sleep. One particularly haunting voice was elicited by his prescription sleeping medication. This voice was threatening to kill him if he continued to take the medication. Tim went with a knife to his medical consultation. He felt a need to protect himself from the voice. “Is this voice saying something you wish

to tell yourself? Tim was asked. “Well, I don’t wish to take these medications. They make my mind unclear.” This voice, on behalf of his own welfare, was only able to gain Tim’s attention when threatening harm. Were Tim’s auditory hallucinations a projection of his own voice, meant for himself. It was perhaps really tough for him to hear his own self. So, the voice had to appear as a threatening source coming from outside his own psyche—a voice from another psychic space that was there to help (not harm) Tim.

Tim’s voice might be not only teaching him, but also teaching all of us about those sources inside ourselves that are helpful and healing—and that we often ignore. When we consider these voices, an important question arises from our three narratives. Are we healed and do we escape from despair and stagnation by looking outside our self for assistance? In searching for someone with no anger and hatred, should we look no further than our own home – our own self? Are there elements of our self that can provide at least some of the cure? In our soulful journey, do we always need someone other than our self? . . . Throughout this book, we are seeking to find both the external sources of help and hope and the internal sources. In this chapter, we look specifically at parts of our self (our psychic “rooms”) that have long been partitioned off from other psychic rooms. The voices that emanate from these room inside our self might provide the “arms and eyes to cure [us].”

Old Voices in New Settings

. . . The way out of hopelessness and confusion and the path to peace might reside within each of us. We have the capacity for distracting and destructive temptations—and the capacity for self-nurturance and self-healing.

A metaphor that Truman Capote offered many years ago seems quite appropriate in helping us understand more about these internal forces (both good and bad). In one of his early novellas, Capote (1994) wrote about “voices from other rooms.” These voices often seem to come from outside our self. As was the case with Tim, there are voices inside our psyche that ask questions, suggest priorities, offer dreams and aspirations, and (as with Tim) provide cautious advice. Most importantly, these voices from other rooms were often created and first articulated long before our Autumnal years.

It seems that in our young adulthood many of us made choices about what was important to us, about what was practical and about what was suitable for a woman or man to do in life. In making these choices, we set aside certain prized activities and dreams. For instance, one of us has recently worked with Samuel, a man who knew as a young man that it would never be very practical for him to continue playing drums in a rock and roll band. Samuel decided to become an accountant. A woman we have coached is now a prominent physician. Dr. Jane, as her devoted patients now call her, loved to play basketball as a kid, but gave it up during medical school.

One of our clients, Maria, wanted to be in a helping profession, yet her family decided it was best for her to be an engineer as she was too empathetic and kind to face any pain or suffering. And she was good at math. A colleague, Ricardo, is now in his late Sixties. As a single man, Ricardo loved shopping each Saturday morning at the open market. He looked forward to cooking up a feast for his friends on Saturday night. Then Ricardo got married and knew in the mid-1970s that this was not what traditional men were intended to do. We must remember that he was married before liberation from traditional sex roles had

taken hold in many societies. When Ricardo was a young husband, men were not supposed to like these domestic chores, especially in the Hispanic culture from which he came.

These activities and dreams never went away as we, Autumnals, were living through our Thirties and Forties. However, we stuck them in a room located at the back of our psychic home. They were only faintly heard. We filled the main psychic rooms in which we lived with many people, including our life partner, children, colleagues, friends, and business associates. Our living room, in particular, was rather noisy. We had little time to hear, let alone listen to, these faint voices emanating from other rooms. If we heard them at all, these voices often appeared to be “young and foolish.” They seemed to come from another time and another place in our life.

These voices, however, never went away and now in late midlife our living room is not as crowded or as noisy. We have more time to hear these voices from other rooms and are less often distracted than we were during our Twenties, Thirties or Forties. Furthermore, many events are now occurring in our lives that repeatedly remind us of these faint voices from our past. Strange and unpredictable events seem to resonate with these past activities and dreams.

One of Samuel’s accounting clients is hosting a 60s rock, roll and remembrance party. His client asked him recently if he ever played in a rock and roll band. Samuel’s client is particularly in need of someone who has played drums. Dr Jane’s practice as a physician is successful, but her own family doctor has forcefully told her to get more exercise. Jane just moved to a community with an active adult recreation program. It features an “old girl’s” basketball league.

Maria now having travelled the world, experienced the voice of her ‘true calling’, ended up in a remote village where she founded a school and started enrolling students. The wife of Ricardo, our would-be shopper and chef, just received a promotion and will have to travel in her new job. She is in her mid-Sixties, but got started late in her career, so has no intentions of retiring in the near future—she wants to make up for “lost time.” She hesitantly asks Ricardo, who is now retired, if he wouldn’t mind doing more of the cooking for himself and perhaps even for both of them during the weekends. She asks him to do more cooking only two months after a new gourmet supermarket opened down at the local mall. It features a Saturday morning farmer’s market.

It all seems to be a remarkable coincidence. There is a controversial term that is sometimes used to label this coincidence: “synchronicity.” It seems appropriate in describing this type of coincidence. A group of scientists, called chaos theorists, have an alternative (and more “scientific”) name and explanation for this phenomenon. They use the term “strange attractor.” Those doing research on chaotic systems note that there are many events in nature that seem to pull in energy from outside and establish powerful, compelling and repetitive patterns.

Chaos theorists suggest that most events occur in a random manner. One particular event, however, happens to have a slightly greater impact at a particular place and time than do other random events. Other random events then tend to orient around this slightly more prevalent event. They become aligned with the orienting event and a system is established. One spot in a roadway, for instance, is slightly more indented than any other spot. Water and gravel tend to collect in this spot. The water and gravel, in turn, are ground into the spot by passing cars and the spot becomes a small hole. This hole grows bigger, attracting more water and gravel. Soon we have a pothole. The pothole gets filled in, but the newly applied

asphalt differs in composition or weight from the old asphalt. Furthermore, there is a tiny crack between the old and new asphalt. These conditions lead to the creation of a new spot and the re-emergence of the pothole.

This same process occurs in our own lives. Seemingly random events occur that hold no pattern. Then one event somehow touches upon old, faint voices in our back rooms that are now slightly louder or less often drowned out by the noise. As a result, we pay a little more attention to this event than we did in the past. Samuel, the “rock and roll” accountant, often had offers in the past to perform at parties and many of these offers were no doubt connected to something in which he was interested. Yet somehow this latest offer is particularly poignant since it triggers Samuel’s memories and rediscovered interest in rock and roll. Dr. Jane, the basketball playing physician, has always lived near a recreation centre; there have always been basketball leagues for older adults (though usually only for older men); and she has always known, as a physician, that she should periodically leave her office to seek out more exercise and recreation. Yet somehow the time is now ripe for Jane to take action—imagine a basketball league for older women!

Though professionally trained as an engineer, Maria had vivid memories of her school and the joyful environment her teachers created for them. She had visited many villages in the past and contributed to community efforts in education. Yet the encounter with this remote village was so special that she dropped everything without a doubt to setup a school on her own – it was as if her spiritual teacher was speaking to her. The wife of Ricardo, our would-be shopper and chef, has undoubtedly asked him to help in many other ways in the past when her own work began to shift. Yet, somehow, Ricardo’s offer to do more shopping and cooking connected with Ricardo’s recent retirement and his dormant love of shopping and cooking. It also aroused Ricardo’s vague recollection of one particular advertisement and article about a nearby Saturday market.

Choosing Between Stagnation and Generativity

Random events become strange attractors. They call to us and require our attention. We recall that such events have happened in the past, and we have not noticed the pattern until now. They form an alliance with our inner voices. Suddenly other events begin to organize around this attractor and form a constellation or psychic “pothole” of activities, interests and dreams. Samuel, the accountant, plays at the Rock, Roll and Remembrance party and has a great time. He talks with the four other “aging rockers” in this make-shift group. They decide to play together every Wednesday night “just for fun.” Dr. Jane joins the “old girls” basketball league, enjoys herself, and soon finds that she also enjoys playing “old girls” soccer and hanging out after a game with her new-found and “liberated” lady friends. She then begins to teach his granddaughter how to play soccer and soon becomes a coach for her granddaughter’s soccer team.

Chef Ricardo begins cooking more often, loves it and becomes a voracious reader of cookbooks. He decides to attend a cooking class offered at the mall. Leveraging her engineering expertise, Maria is now on the village committee, exploring sustainable means of constructing school buildings. It goes beyond this for Maria. She discovers a new passion for writing, having published her first book of poems specifically for children who live in remote locations. Her book is about how it is “wonderful” to be living this close to community and nature...

All of these Autumnals feel alive and vital. Erik Erikson would suggest that they have become “generative” and have forged new identities in their lives. . . . This generativity might have curative power—in part because the voices from other rooms tend to reduce our own self-resentment (our anger and hatred) about sacrifices we made earlier in our life. We find peace in our reconciliation of old dreams and new initiatives. We make healing choices when we listen once again to these voices from other rooms—for we were not naïve or too idealistic when we were young. Wisdom and self-understanding were embedded in these early adulthood dreams. This wisdom and self-understanding of Spring is still available to us during our Autumnal years.

Alternatively, we can set aside or close the doors to the rooms from which these voices emanate—choosing instead a psyche filled with temptation, war, disappointment and, ultimately, self-defeat. . . . Our four Autumnals could choose to ignore or discount these voices from other rooms. The accountant could have politely turned down the offer to play at the Rock and Roll party. Samuel could even have neglected to tell his colleague that he played drums as a teenager. Jane could continue to work hard as a medical professional. She would find little time for exercise or her granddaughter’s soccer team.

Maria could have waited for her next international posting, so that she could enjoy leading the global business—a powerful temptation. Our would-be chef, Ricardo, could curse the bad fortune that pushed him into the role of homemaker for his excessively ambitious wife. He could have been envious of his wife and could have decided to get even with his wife by cooking a horrible meal or inadvertently forgetting to pick up food at the local supermarket. Each of these women and men of Autumn could have chosen a life of stagnation rather than generativity. This is the choice that we all must make during the Autumnal decades of life. This is the choice that enables us to heal and proceed successfully on our soulful journey.

The Demonic Voices of Denial and the Childlike Voices of Care

If mature women and men chose stagnation by not attending to these voices, then these voices can become quite destructive—even demonic. They can lead to [a] hopeless, confused and warring state These demonic voices are part of us. They don’t easily go away if we fail to attend to them. We know from many years of psychological investigation that when we consistently give little or no attention to specific aspects of our psyche, these aspects of self tend to express themselves indirectly. They express themselves through physical and mental illness; profound depression; or self-destructive activities such as substance abuse, self-defeating behaviour on the job, or suicide.

Geraldine initially sought treatment for her drinking (which was daily) but Geraldine did not have withdrawal when she did not drink. She looked for a drink to feel better. She dedicated her life to be a devoted wife and Mother, giving up her professional music career but her husband grew colder as the years go by and her children were getting older, with their own accomplishments and lives. She was encouraged by her therapist to go for couple therapy with her husband, but her husband dropped out of couple therapy and she too eventually dropped out of treatment. She continued to drink. A few years later, she went back to her therapist, when she caught her husband having an affair.

Geraldine may have been drowning the inner voice, she thought she could put aside her needs to be loved and cared for, to maintain a perfect family on the surface. When she attended to the inner voice of care, she recognised her authentic self, it helped her to stand up to her husband, reconnected with her friends

and relooked at her life. Her drinking became manageable. She travelled out of her country alone for the first time and restarted teaching professional music, which she found herself revelling in both. She was initially unsure if she could travel on her own, dreading feeling lonely and sad looking at families.

Psychologists use the term “denial” in describing this defensive process of inattention. The extensive use of this primitive defence leads directly to many of the psychological maladies of our time, particularly among mature women and men. The denied voices will eventually gain our attention or be heard by the world around us. We must determine, during our Autumnal years, if these voices will be addressed in a constructive and generative manner or in a very destructive way.

A particularly persuasive description of the crippling effects of massive denial and repression on fifty year old men is offered by George Vaillant in *Adaptation to Life* [1998]—his first report based on his longitudinal study of Harvard graduates. They were in their Fifties at this point in the study (and were in their seventies when Vaillant reported on them in *Triumph of Experience*). This description is further reinforced and expanded in Vaillant’s second report, *Aging Well* (2003). Vaillant. In these later reports (2003 and 2012) we find that some of the Harvard men were able to move beyond the denial and make some major changes in their later life. Others were not able to do so and usually had passed away by the time Vaillant was conducting his last set of interviews for *Triumph of Experience*.

. . . Our rational arguments often are senseless and the senses we do command are irrational when we are in massive denial. We say to ourselves that one illicit sexual affair really won’t upset the apple cart; that we can fool around at the edge of sexual intercourse without engaging in the “real thing”; or that we can have intercourse with someone other than our life partner without really getting “involved.” Perhaps it is something other than sex. We wait for the next opportunity to explore our hobbies because we are busy now, we postpone our desire to start a business because the economy is recovering. We resist resigning from our job, because we want to apply what we have recently learned about the management of conflict. We are tempted by the prospects of finally doing our job better. We deceive ourselves. . . . Each of us can similarly find justification in our own traditions and selective advice offered by lifestyle “experts” (with whom we agree). “Bliss” comes in many forms – only some of which are actually authentic and generative.

Our inner child knows better. Our child is not deceived. . . . We need to pay attention to the child in us at this point. This child isn’t the underdeveloped, infantile part of our psyche that cries out in fear when we hover around the decision to have an illicit affair. Rather this is the wise, childlike part of us that is safeguarding our integrity and our sanity. This is not a repressive superego or the outmoded voices of a more “up-tight” era. Rather this is the sensible voice of our inner child who sees past our denial. Our inner child knows what is really going on and recognizes our fragility. Our inner child does care for our growth and recognises our deeper desire to realise our higher potential, Our inner child is without anger or hatred regarding our own personal welfare and offers . . . arms and eyes of compassion. Yet we sometimes, lose the power of discrimination and misinterprets the real as merely a shadow.

The boy needs attention. . . . Some of the great tragedies in contemporary literature concern the failure to recognize that someone we care about is in trouble or that someone we love dies before we mobilize assistance. John Cheever (2000) offers us the painful tale of a man who stands on a hill overlooking the valley where his home is located. The main character in Cheever’s short story, *The Swimmer*, realizes that

he can swim home via the swimming pools located on adjacent properties. As he traverses the various lots leading to his own home, the swimmer encounters people he has ignored or abused over the years. He slowly realizes that he has failed repeatedly in life to attend to the people about whom he truly cares. He arrives at his home ready to change his life and be a better husband and father—only to discover that his family had moved away and that he is left alone. . . .

The Time in Life to Listen to the Voices

This choice between stagnation and generativity is not as easy as it may appear on the surface. We often chose stagnation and risk the wrath of an unacknowledged voice. If we take actions based on the voices from other rooms, then we are likely to be condemned by our family and friends—and even condemned by our own psyche. . . .

A very insightful developmental psychologist, Bernice Neugarten (1969), suggests that we often experience a developmental crisis in life when the actions we take and decisions we make are bold and generative. These actions and decisions are often out of sync with expectations of the society in which we live. Crises in development occur when we do something at a time in our life that does not square with societal rules. . . .

Sarah is an Autumnal woman whom one of us has coached. She co-owns and has served as president for nine years of a training institute that primarily serves mature men and women preparing for a second career. Sarah's timing was off in acquiring this institute for one half million dollars. She wasn't really at an appropriate age for taking on this high-risk, entrepreneurial venture. Sarah would have been better suited for this risky venture when she was 35 or 40. Sarah was 48 years old when she bought this institute and assumed a major five-year debt.

A younger person should have bought this institute. A younger man or woman would be expected by society to be sufficiently energetic and visionary to make a venture like this successful. A woman who is about to enter her Autumnal years is much too old for such a venture (especially as a woman!). What was our client thinking about, or was she thinking at all, when she assumed this large financial burden at this point in her life? The rest of the world was telling Sarah that she should be planning for her retirement and financial security. Was the rest of the world right?

Sarah often confronted herself with many disturbing questions and statements during our coaching sessions:

“What in the world was I doing taking on the task of leading a training institute? My work at the institute is always exciting but also terrifying. Is something wrong with me? Was I foolish in taking this on? Was I too old? Was I kidding myself regarding my interest in and ability to take on this venture?”

The mature men and women that Sarah serves in her institute have no doubt often asked themselves the same kind of questions. Like the president of their training institute, these middle-aged men and women are inevitably in crisis, because they have chosen to return for a certificate or degree at a much later point in life than is usually the case. These are not your typical young women and men, fresh out of high school or college. They are experienced adults, who want to enrich and renew their understanding of the world,

while also getting a certificate or credential. This interest is quite understandable and very commendable. Yet, families, friends and colleagues often do not understand why they went for further training: “Hasn’t she already had enough education?” “Why doesn’t he just settle down and take things a bit easier?” “What is she doing starting a second career this late in life?”

There are certain times in our lives that our society deems appropriate for us to explore alternative careers and personal identities. Erik Erikson (1980) describes these periods of time as “psycho-social moratoria.” Most of us are given a moratorium during our late teens and early twenties. Young men, in particular, are given the opportunity to explore new realities through the military if they are from the lower or lower-middle class or college if they are from the upper-middle or upper class.

Among young women, in most societies, only those from the middle and upper classes have been granted a moratorium. They become college students. Women from less secure financial backgrounds have typically never experienced a moratorium. They usually move directly from their family of origin to marriage. They immediately establish their own families and assume major homemaking responsibilities, as well as often work at least part time to help with the family’s precarious finances.

Other people in many societies are also denied a moratorium. They may have been assigned their identity early in their life. Perhaps their father and grandfather were doctors, so this young man or woman will also be a doctor. Alternatively, the young person has spent their entire life fighting for survival as the child of an unemployed or even homeless parent. This person will never experience a moratorium, but instead probably spend most of her life as an unemployed adult living in one of the world’s slums. The exploration of alternative identities has been foreclosed for both the predestined physician and child of poverty.

In certain societies, there is a powerful (and painful) norm practised in many families. Who is more qualified to make a decision regarding the career of a 17-year-old son? Of course, the successful 45-year-old mature father who has ‘seen it all’. When the job market is so promising, with possibilities in finance, why would you not prepare your son to be an accountant? When the family had a tradition of over 400 years of sending the older son to the military, how could this father break it? “Who do you think I built this business for—and from scratch? Of course, for you, my son!” “The daughter’s ‘duty’ is looking after members of the in-law’s family, so the earlier we marry her off, the better. Our society is not safe enough for a woman to work anyway.”

There is often a dramatic intrusion of alternative identities later in life among those middle class and upper middle-class women and men whose identity was foreclosed early in life and among those who never experienced a moratorium during their adolescent years. These women and men often rebel as mature adults—if their society allows rebellion. Their inner voices assert themselves in strong and compelling ways. We see this played out in Jack Nicholson’s film portrayal of an identity-foreclosed man in *Five Easy Pieces*. Nicholson’s character rebels, having grown up in a musical family, without viable career options. He marries a woman without “culture” and takes a temporary job on an oil rig. Nicholson plays a man who faces a midlife crisis because he knows of no identity other than that of classical musician. His only option is to assume what Erikson calls the “negative identity.” The Nicholson character will randomly assume any identity as long as it is unrelated to serious music, He can be a day labourer, a

logger or even a piano player in a local dive. It only matters that he reacts against the identity assigned to him by his family and society.

In less dramatic form, we hear many stories of physicians or ministers who grew up with a parent who was also a doctor or minister. During her Autumnal years, the foreclosed physician or minister takes up a hobby or avocation that speaks to a suppressed identity. She joins a physician's symphony or spends every free moment sailing a boat. By contrast, a man who has grown up in poverty will rebel by leaving his job (if he has one). "Take this job and shove it" is a recurring anthem for the foreclosed man from the lower middle class. Or he will leave his family, drink heavily and "take up" with a younger woman. If nothing else, he will allow himself to go a little mad as a sports fan and live vicariously off the alternative identities and successes of athletes on his favorite teams.

Retirement: A Second Moratorium?

The issue doesn't stop here. Many societies have given men (but not women) a second moratorium. As men living in most prosperous countries, we are allowed to explore alternative identities at the point we retire, provided we are not living in poverty or are not in ill health. Traditionally, the women living in most societies did not have it so good. They were expected to remain occupied as homemakers even after their husbands retire. Their work might even increase, given that they must now "look after" their husband who is suddenly "underfoot." Their retired husband is often quite fortunate if he comes from the middle or upper-middle class. He can move in many new directions: taking up hobbies, spending time at home reading or playing games, engaging in sports and recreational activities such as golf, tennis or bowling.

The world of retirement in many societies has grown a bit more complicated in recent years. Men do not necessarily retire at 65. Women often have also been working all their life and do not necessarily want to assume all the homemaking responsibilities. Even more salient to the present discussion is a question concerning what we do about the second moratorium when we are still in our Fifties and Sixties. The problem is complex. We are not yet ready for retirement. Even though our inner voices are suggesting that we shift our priorities and attend to other matters we still have to work, perhaps even into our Seventies. We don't have enough money saved for retirement, and our society expects us to still be active "breadwinners." This is quite a dilemma.

If we are fortunate enough to be living in a prospering society, then as Autumnals we have at least five options. Some of us choose the most obvious of these options. We defer our response to the inner voices by focusing on retirement and planning carefully for what we will do after age 70. Some of us choose a second option. We negotiate a compromise. Some of the voices receive our immediate attention. Others are deferred until after retirement, when society says it is appropriate for us to try something new. A third option is also available to those of us who have been financially successful in life or are particularly courageous. These fortunate or brave men and women decide during their Autumnal decades to alter their lifestyle so that they are doing what they want to do even before formal retirement.

The traditional distinction drawn between work and retirement begins to break down for these Autumnals who choose the third option. Their work becomes their avocation. Their hobby becomes that for which they are paid. At a conference on work and play one of us hosted almost thirty years ago, we invented the word "plork" to describe the full integration of work and play. Several of the people we

coach have taken this path. They have left behind their administrative duties and settled into a life of “plork.” Typically, they are occupied with writing, consulting, teaching, mentoring or coaching.

Unfortunately, for some who have chosen this third option, there are societal pressures to move back to a “real job.” Some Autumnals are not able to earn as much as they did in the past, thus, they are subjected to self-doubt and the question posed around ‘maximising one’s potential’. For many others, the family is disappointed with them, as they seem to have abandoned the ‘title’ too soon. Many of our “third-option” colleagues indicate during coaching sessions that they often feel guilty about not going to work each day or about staying home and working on their book or some other creative project. They report that they shop for groceries during the day to avoid the crowds; yet they look around and find only “old” folks. One of our colleagues, Creighton, has been wrestling with several fundamental doubts during his coaching sessions. He recently commented:

“I always seem to be the only man around [in the grocery store] who is still able to work. Why am I hanging around the supermarket instead of being a responsible breadwinner? I know that this is irrational. I still make a good income. I still work very hard. And I really enjoy my work. . . . for the first time in many years. I have more control over my time. I can work at home. However, something is wrong. I seem to be out of sync with the people around me. It’s the wrong time or the wrong place or I am of the wrong gender?”

Creighton’s life decisions don’t match societal expectations, and this is very disconcerting for him. So, what should we as women and men of Autumn do about these voices? Which option should we choose? If we respond right away, then we must confront a mismatch with societal expectations. If we defer our response until, we retire, then these voices might become impatient. We might end up being destructive to ourselves and the people we love. If we compromise and respond to only some of our voices, we may pick the wrong ones and incur the disapproval of society and the vengeance of other unacknowledged voices. What should we do? It is no wonder that we often hope these silly or threatening voices will go away. It is no wonder some developmental psychologists assign a term to this life stage: the “mid-life crisis”.

We have a fourth option as Autumnal women and men. We can fill our living rooms with activity again and hope that this activity will drown out the voices. Sadly, these activities never seem to be quite as enjoyable as they were when we were much younger. Most of us choose yet another option, at least on a temporary basis. We choose the fifth option: denial. ... We discount the meaning inherent in these seemingly random events.

It would be a bit odd to say that the offer Samuel received to play in a rock and roll band or Dr. Jane’s opportunity to play in a basketball league come from sources of inner guidance and wisdom. Was the request by Ricardo’s wife that he do more cooking somehow “meant to be”? The spiritual master who spoke to Maria through her intuition~ is this real? All this speculation sounds a bit spooky for most of us who are not true believers. To suggest that an event has inherent meaning and is somehow intended as a message to tell us something or guide us back to our earlier interests and dreams seems to be too much like the mumbo-jumbo of “new age” spirituality.

That is why we offer the scientific concept of “strange attractor.” This concept comes from chaos scientists. They are neither pop psychologists nor new age spirituality buffs. Rather they are serious researchers who try to make sense of our physical world. In doing so they have discovered that there are “strange attractors” everywhere. There is good reason to believe that this same process operates in the lives of Autumnal women and men. Events have meaning in our life not so much because of some greater power in life, though this could also be the case. Rather, events have meaning and power because certain small events tend at a place and time to link with and trigger other events. They trigger memories, interests, dreams and eventually actions.

These “strange attractor” events form a constellation or pattern that is compelling and that can serve as a guide for our own continuing generativity and the re-invention of our life. A rabbi we know talks about the “assemblage” of small, meaningful events and decisions in our lives. Taken together these events and decisions comprise a person’s “spiritual life.” He suggests that spirituality is not some big, powerful, isolated event. Rather it is constituted from a whole cluster of small events.

What happens when we ignore these “strange attractor” and assume that they are only a rising mist, a wind that rustles dying leaves, or an aged willow that looks so grey? What happens when we choose massive denial and make the wrong decision? We face stagnation—a loss of spirit and an absence of soul. We grieve the loss of spirit, yet we fail to restore spirit or move into soul work. We withdraw from the world, but don’t turn inward toward soul. We become “mean spirited,” turning our spirit into a negative force.

The stagnant male is animus-dominated. He resents others of his own age when they remain engaged in the world. He resorts to sarcasm and resistance, having abandoned hope and ambition. He even resents the young men and women who are newly engaged in the world. Like Scrooge, the stagnant Autumnal male focuses on one thing at the expense of all other aspects of life. For Scrooge that one thing was money. The stagnant obsession for Scrooge-like men in real life may concern power, position, traditional family values, reputation or an old political cause. They strive toward goals such as the acquisition of wealth or power—but these incentives no longer have meaning for us when we are stagnant.

Meanwhile, the stagnant female is anima-dominated. She resents being cast into the role of servant to her demanding spouse and children. They are going out into the world to find their fame and fortune, while she is still at home or working in an under-paid and under-appreciated job in some barren organization. Typically, she is working for a male boss who lacks emotional intelligence, relying on her to do the “dirty work” (equivalent to cleaning up the baby’s back side). Why does she still do most of the cooking at home – and all of the cleaning? Like the stagnant male, this woman acts out of habit. She has reached a point in her life when activities should take on their own meaning and impetus—activities that were previously means to other ends (such as the approval of her life partner, the admiration of other women, the achievement of security).

For both the Autumnal woman and man, the original purpose is lost. We must either move in new directions in our life or invest new purpose in the activities we are already doing. Psychologists identify this second option as “secondary autonomy.” (Hartmann, 1958) It can serve as the foundation for either psychic renewal or psychic stagnation. Our stagnant woman can find new purpose in her cooking (perhaps taking classes at the local culinary institute or community college). She can redecorate her home

and add bright new colours to the walls in her living room. Or she can volunteer in a local service club and serve on the executive committee with other women and “evolved” men who take her seriously and appreciate her skill and hard work.

Our Scrooge-like man of Autumn can repurpose his existing work and move away from an orientation toward success. He can instead move to an orientation toward significance—finding ways for his work to be of tangible benefit to his society. He can find satisfaction in mentoring the young women and men with whom he works; he can teach in the business school at the local university. He can let go of his controls and serve the family, helping them explore and establish their own identities. Stagnation can turn to generativity even without a radical change in one’s career. Accumulated life experiences can be of great value. We don’t have to start all over again; but we do need to do what we are already doing in a more caring and life-giving manner.

There is another, very disturbing aspect of psychic stagnation. We chose stagnation when we desperately try to blunt our pain—when we feel hopeless and confused. . . . We yearn for atonement and peace. We act out of an obsessive need to somehow heal the wound and eliminate the anxiety associated with midlife depression. David Morris (1991) has suggested that we live in a society that no longer can find any meaning in the experience of pain. This is largely because there is now the possibility of avoiding or eliminating pain through medical advancement and, in particular, “pain-killers.” We try to escape from that which is painful rather than finding meaning in this pain. We race away from our inner voices from other rooms and from the feminine and masculine voices because we hope to avoid pain and somehow find peace without suffering.

Unfortunately, we live in societies that not only approve of this avoidance, but also offer many antidotes to pain, both legal and illegal. We live in societies that are filled with middle-aged men and women who would rather escape pain than find any meaning or purpose in the pain or, for that matter, find meaning in any other aspects of life. In certain societies, people stop learning, growing and transforming the day they find their first job. Government jobs that are symbolically called ‘iron rice bowls’ are in demand, for they help one avoid the pain of unlearning and relearning. Life after retirement becomes even easier, as there is no need to think or work, while sitting on the pedestal of past achievements and glory. Pain and generativity are companions, so are stagnation and the avoidance of pain. Pain and generativity are the curative arms and eyes that attend to us without anger or hatred.

Discerning the True Voices

In attending to voices from other rooms, we must make some important decisions regarding what we do with the messages we receive. In attending to these voices, we do not necessarily have to do what the voices suggest. We must listen, but don’t have to take the advice. During the Middle Ages in Europe and in many Asian spiritual traditions, mystics attend carefully to the voices they receive through meditation and contemplation. They remain open to various mystical experiences. However, these mystics realized that some of these messages might come from somewhere other than a divine source. The voices may come from their own personal ego, from other people, or even from some evil source. As a result, these mystics devised methods not only for contemplation and transcendent experience, but also for determining which messages come from God and which come from elsewhere. They called this process “discernment.”

As women and men in late midlife, we must discern the good voices from the bad voices. We must sort out the truth about our psyche from all the false claims that swirl around us. We have three options when it comes to discerning these voices. We can choose to ignore the voices. This is our first choice and seemingly the safest one. Our second choice is to listen to the wrong voices. Our third choice is to listen to the right voices. To be successful in making this third choice, we must determine which of the voices seem to be responsive to our changing Autumnal needs, values and life purposes. We must determine which voices seem to keep us stagnant and stuck where we are right now, which distract us from new-found pathways, and which turn us toward pathways that are destructive to ourselves and the people we love.

These distinctions are not easily drawn. As women and men of Autumn, we usually know little about the process of discernment. We are accustomed to living in the external world, making decisions based on data that exists out there in reality. We are great at repeating the safe old patterns of thought and action. “How much money do we need to pay our bills this month?” “Which of these technical training programs is likely to prepare our daughter best for her future life?” “Where do we want to plant that new tree?” The process of discernment requires that we attend to internal data and make decisions based not on rational argument and analysis but on deep searching for inner truths related to our hopes and fears. This is not an easy task, when we live in a fast, noisy and demanding world.

We must ask difficult questions about our inner life, with courage. “Which emotions are elicited when I think about enacting this long-deferred dream?” “Of what am I most afraid when considering a positive response to this invitation from my inner voices?” “What is old, safe and stagnant in my current life?” “What is new, risky and generative in my emerging life?” “Who might be impacted in positive or negative ways, when I make this choice?” “Who can I speak to, for some advice?” “What rules might I be breaking, if I continue this way?” While several practical suggestions about discernment are offered later in this book, each of us must find our own way to discern what is right and wrong for us during our Autumnal years.

The first and most important step is to listen to the voices. Without this first step there is no need to discern anything, for we have chosen to remain deaf and blind to our inner world. We have chosen stagnation over generativity. Our child will die in our arms. We will wear garments of anger and hatred, living with hopelessness and confusion. . . . in this instance, our own childlike self, dreams we have abandoned, and voices we have ignored in the rooms of our early adulthood.