

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Inner Life of Aging: An Interview with Dr. Connie Zweig

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Mark: Welcome Connie Zweig. It's great to finally meet you.

Connie Zweig: Hi Mark, so good to see you.

Mark: Thanks. Now, we're going to talk today about your wonderful new book about aging, about the inner work of aging. I want to start by quoting something that you say. You say the age is our curriculum. Can you say more about that please?

Connie: I'm so glad you picked up on that sentence. I thought it really summed up my perspective. You remember when Rhonda has talked about grist for the mill. He was a spiritual teacher who was important to many baby boomers. For me, aging is the grist for the mill. It's the curriculum through which we can continue our development. What I mean by that is as our bodies age, as our minds age, as we start to experience losses or our own diminishments or memory loss or whatever, the physical, emotional, and spiritual changes are for each of us, they're unique to each of us, there is an opportunity there as well. The opportunity, as curriculum implies, is to learn from them, but it's more than that. It's to use them for our inner work.

My background is in depth psychology and Advaita Vedānta, and those are my two lineages. When I have an experience that I know I'm going to learn from, I draw on depth, psychology and shadow work and contemplative practice. The book is offering ways to do that around our experiences of aging. That's what I mean by a curriculum. What are the spiritual practices that we need now that fit our physical condition, our mental and emotional condition, and our spiritual needs? Not what we needed when we were 20, but what we need now and the same with our creativity.

Writing is different for me now. With 72 years of life experience, then it was at 25 when I started writing or 30 or 40. The curriculum is our own life experience and the hits that just keep on coming as we live our lives and how do we use them well. That's the question.

Mark: Yes. We're going to get to creativity and spiritual practice a little bit later, but I want to talk about the importance of accepting life as it is, which is something that you repeat throughout the book. Why is acceptance the first step toward integration and transformation?

Connie: Also a really good question. I have an 89-year-old friend who said to me, "I don't want to be with those old people, I'm not like them." Breaking through denial is the first step in my framework, the first step in shadow work, but in a larger framework, the first step in recognizing reality, not even accepting it, but recognizing this is how it is. I feel fantastic. I have a lot of vitality. I have no health issues, but the body is 72 years old. What does that mean? If I believe I'm going to live forever as I did as a youth, then I'm in denial. If I believe I can do anything now that I could do before then I'm in denial. I interviewed hundreds of people during the workshops that led to the creation of the book. What I found was the denial is epidemic because our culture is youth oriented.

It's anti-aging products. Every time you turn on the TV there are people in their sixties and seventies in the commercials, you know, playing tennis and living in a resort. There's no acknowledgement culturally of the limitations that might come and of the shortened time horizon. I think one of the big shifts from the pandemic is that many people gained what I call mortality awareness. There was a denial of mortality in our culture until a few books broke through. Then the pandemic kind of woke people up. Some people, not even everybody. From the point of view of shadow work, I call this character in us, the inner

ageist. It's the part of us that denies, that defends against, that doesn't want to know the truth, the whole truth of aging.

Mark: There's a book called *Travels with Epicurus*. I'm not sure if you know it, but it's by a guy named Daniel Martin Klein. He goes to Greece to compare how they age to how we age. It's a really fun memoir, but he talks about the forever youngsters. The people who are just running, running, running, trying to stay relevant, trying to stay thin, trying to stay desirable and how toxic that is for our mental and physical as well as spiritual health.

Connie: If we are taught all of our lives, living in the west, because this is not everywhere, but living in our culture, if we are taught that it's only good, it's only positive to be young, to be strong, to be independent, to be doing, then all of the opposites of those qualities go into the shadow, into the unconscious. Then it becomes bad to be old, to be weak, to be dependent and to need other people, to have limitations, and to stop doing. To stop rushing about in busy-ness. All of those things then may erupt in later life as they become necessary to us and create incredible disturbance for us and unhappiness rather than acceptance, and even using them as our curriculum.

I'll give you an example. My father, he died in 2012 at 87, but he was a very strong, independent, smart guy who ended up getting dementia and being in a wheelchair and becoming very dependent. He never complained. He didn't feel like a victim. He slowly, slowly allowed my sister and me to take care of him. It was such a radical shift. It made me realize that he was modeling something, that he was really modeling-- There are other things that he didn't model. He was no saint, but in terms of this shift of those positive qualities of youth and those "negative" qualities of age, he was really quite accepting. That was a gift to me. That's really what I'm referring to.

Mark: You talk in the book about people struggling with invisibility, feelings of being unimportant. How do folks work specifically with that-- With that feeling of invisible? Just not mattering anymore?

Connie: There's no simple answer to this. Because look at Encore network, millions of baby boomers are signing up to remain relevant either to start new businesses, millions are starting new entrepreneurial ventures or to volunteer, or to contribute in some way, to mentor. All of that is fine. I'm not making that bad, but what I'm saying, my perspective is, late life in other cultures around the world is a call for self-reflection and a call for spiritual practice. If we keep ourselves as busy because we're afraid of becoming invisible and irrelevant, that's the fear underneath and the shadow. If we keep ourselves doing, doing, doing, as we were in mid-life, then we miss out on the spiritual, even on emotional opportunities at this stage of life. Yes, maybe some people run, run, run, and then meditate for 20 minutes, but that's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about a shift in our pace, in our priorities and really slowing downward, inward, downward so that we can reorient to different values and different priorities. We can't do that if we stay just as busy because out of fear of becoming invisible and irrelevant. It's not that we don't contribute. That's not what I'm saying, but we need to learn how to do it as an elder, not as a mid-life hero.

Mark: Mid-life hero. I like that. When I spoke to James Hillman years ago, he talked about the adventure of slowness that as you get older, just getting in and out of the bathtub can be like climbing a mountain and without being corny about it, it's actually really true. As we

become slower and we become more limited, we have to accept that we are not going to be engaged or relevant in the same way anymore to the youth-oriented world that keeps moving on.

Connie: That's right. Hillman wrote extensively about the eternal youth, the *Puer aeternus*. In Latin it's Puer aeternus that you referred to earlier. If we remain identified with the eternal youth, then we can't become an elder. We can't make that internal shift psychologically and spiritually if we, as Dylan calls it, stay forever young.

Mark: Yes and yet, as Dylan's great example, we have all of these bad models. Rage against the dying of the light. All of these really counterproductive messages that we get from a death denying culture. You talk in the book about emotional repair, Connie, and as part of the inner work of aging. What do you mean by that?

Connie: There are developmental tasks to shift from hero to elder or what I call role to soul. Being identified with being heroic and doing, and identified with our work roles, to really becoming an elder and identifying with soul. These developmental tasks are the body of the book. One of them is emotional repair because most of the people I interviewed either felt identified with a wound. "I was abused by my father," or, "My husband left me," or, "My wife cheated," "My brother lied to me." "My minister molested me."

They are identified with an emotional story, which isn't going to allow them life completion in a peaceful way. Many of the people I talked to want forgiveness, or to be, to give forgiveness or to be forgiven. They want one or the other. That requires inner work and also interpersonal work. There's a chapter in the book about this. It seems to me that a lot of people in our generation have been in therapy and have done a lot of this work, but they haven't done it in the context of impending death. They haven't done it in this context at this age and that changes things. If you let it in, if you allow that to penetrate you, it changes the emotional repair work. That's what I'm talking about.

Mark: You mentioned outgrowing the story that we've lived with or repairing healing the story. I think that's such an important point. Folks don't realize that they are living in narrative, a self-perpetuating, largely fictional narrative.

Connie: Exactly.

Mark: How does waking up from that story mind change the process of aging? You said a little bit, but I'd love to hear more.

Connie: Well, there's so much in the culture now that reinforces the narrative self and the values of stories and storytelling. There's a level where that's true. There's a level of where people live by their stories and value their stories and tell stories to their children, family stories, and read stories but there's a level of spiritual development where the narrative self becomes noise in the mind.

It actually blocks our experience of what I call pure awareness, which you could call anything. If you're Buddhist you could call it emptiness or if you're-- you can give that the name that you want, the higher self, or God, if you wish, but I call it pure awareness. It's the experience of inner silence, vast inner silence.

When the story arises again in meditation, whether it's, "I forgot to turn off the oven," or "My husband hurt my feelings," or, "I'm furious at my mother," whatever it is, when you're doing spiritual work, you begin to have a different relationship to those stories, to the noise in the mind; it becomes the noise rather than the signal. As an elder, you have this opportunity to shift your identity, to move your unconscious identification from the story level to a more essential spiritual identity, which I call soul but again, you can call it whatever you want and you can't really do that if you're unconsciously identified with the narrative.

Mark: Right. Can you talk specifically about the role of shadow in aging and in the evolution of our attitude toward aging?

Connie: Yes, originally I wanted to call the book *Meeting the Shadows of Age*, because what I discovered was that when my book *Meeting The Shadow* came out in the second book, *Romancing the Shadow* came out, I discovered that it really struck a chord. People needed to learn how to orient to the unconscious and then when I got into the literature on aging, I discovered that nobody was teaching that.

There's one book that's a collection from a conference called *Young and Aging* but other than that, there's nothing out there for the popular audience about how to age with an orientation to the shadow or the personal unconscious. The reason that that's important, the reason that I decided to do the book, even though I thought I was done writing, I realized that there was a contribution to be made because no one had really done this.

The shadow was like a dark room in which all of our unconscious fears and fantasies and images lie dormant and shadow work is the process of development of those images, bringing them into the light. If you have an unconscious image that is about the senile person watching television all-day long, in the shadow, it turns out from research out of Yale University that that's actually bad for your health. It has physical, emotional, and cognitive consequences on your health as you age, if you have negative associations and feelings and images in the shadow. That was just startling to me. Over many decades, someone has researched this and found over and over again, that that's the case. If you have unconscious negative images of retirement in the shadow, you have a shorter lifespan. The material that we keep repressed in the shadow is not only outside of our awareness, it's affecting us. It's affecting our body, mind, spirit.

What I really tried to do was uncover those patterns, those images, and feelings, and thoughts that are prevalent in our culture about aging. That's what I really tried to do, like the useless retiree or the driver, which keeps us going and going and going or the inner ages which I mentioned before. When you actually can form a shadow character, Jane Human called it personification. When you personify an image that was previously unconscious, then you can have a conscious relationship with it, then you can choose not to let it control you.

Mark: All right, but those shadow images, those shadow characters don't go away. Isn't that correct? My understanding is that they're always there, all the buttons are there, but we don't respond to them as--

Connie: That's right.

Mark: We don't respond to them as thoughtlessly.

Connie: They lose their charge. They get less and less control over us as we become more and more aware of them and work with them. For example, I discovered my own inner ageist at the beginning of writing this book. It's in a very different place in my psyche now. It doesn't feel like it has much mastery over me anymore.

Mark: But it was strong in ways that you weren't aware of?

Connie: Because I'm so attuned to my own self-talk from doing shadow work and meditation for five decades, I noticed, when I was sitting next to a very old, poor, dirty woman, I started to notice my self-talk and I saw that I was ageist. I was horrified at my own prejudice. As I worked with that and formed the shadow character and began to understand where it came from in my family and in the culture, now, I can notice. I can observe if it pops up. Like when I see an older homeless woman on the street, I have a different feeling now than I did five years ago.

Mark: You talk about reinvention and that feels like a particular challenge for folks aging now. This is the first generation to bridge the electronic age. We're the last people in history who will have known what it was like before the internet. You talk about reinventing reinvention and thinking about it differently around aging. Could you say more about that?

Connie: Sure. Most books and experts mean doing more because we have so much longevity now that we've never ever had before. That's also a first in our generation. The length of time between retirement and frail-old age can be, for some people, as long as the time from childhood to adulthood. What do we do with all that time? The reinvention folks are about doing more, continuing the empire building. They're not--

Mark: The empire of the self.

Connie: No.

Mark: [chuckles]

Connie: They're about the empire of business, and organization, and volunteering, and all that. Yes, I'm more about the empire of the self. My use of the word means reinventing our identity in the way that I was mentioning before from the hero to the elder. Reinventing ourselves not to stop doing but to do more consciously, to do whatever we're doing with the awareness of 60 years of life, or 70, or 80 years of life and all the fruits of our labors that comes with that, and so being able to let go of the ego's agenda.

I don't know about you, but I recognize that I was never in control of anything. I really thought I was when I was young. I thought my ego knew what was best. My husband used to call me Master of the Universe. Now, if I'm doing with the sense of letting go of the outcomes, with a sense of flow, with a sense of interconnectedness, with a sense of purpose that's larger than myself, then I'm reinvented.

I'm not doing as I was in mid-life. It's an aspirational task, Mark. It's not easy, and it's not quick, and it's not superficial. It's not something we could say, "Oh, I'm like that, it's done." It's a work, it's a curriculum, and it's a spiritual work. It's worth it because, from my point of view, this is the deeper purpose of our lives. This is really the deeper purpose, not only more money, not maintaining our renown or running out of fear of being invisible.

This is really our purpose. This is preparation for death. We all want to die without regret, so why not explore who we were, really are, beyond our outworn roles and personas? If we reinvent more doing, the risk is we step into another role, right?

Mark: Yes, but few people think of this as an opportunity to get off the wheel.

Connie: That's right.

Mark: They get to drop or we get to drop so many things that we valued or really had to pay more attention to in younger life. What a relief this could be?

Connie: That's exactly right. It's such a relief. We're selling our house, and I'm in the process of giving away everything I have. It's such a relief. I don't need all that stuff, and I don't want to identify with it anymore even though a lot of it's really beautiful. It's freeing myself. My practice is shifting from role to soul. It's a practice. It's ongoing, and it takes attention. That's the beauty of it as far as I'm concerned.

Mark: Is this connected to aging and creativity, which you write about in the book as well, this way of we're able to reframe and do things differently? Is that the source of a new kind of creativity in older age?

Connie: I think it's possible that as we let go of the ego's agenda and begin to make this shift of identity, that we will be creative in a different way. For example, this book came to me very differently than my earlier book. This is the sixth book. It basically came through. I've had spiritual experiences that have shifted my relationship to my mind, and I'm not so identified with my thinking anymore.

This book was not an analytical thinking task. It really came through. I wanted to get it published, but I didn't push the way that I did in the past. I kind of allowed myself to trust life. That the winds of publishing would carry this book out into the world. It didn't happen the way I thought it would. All of that is the different relationship to the creative process.

I wrote about creativity as spiritual practice because part of what my life has been about since my first writing mentor, who was Marilyn Ferguson, who wrote *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, she really taught me how to write. What I found was, in the '80s, that if I meditated, if I practice meditation, and then went to the computer, writing came more easily. If I got burned out or stuck in the writing, blocked, I went and meditated and let go of my thoughts, and came back to the computer.

That rhythm has been my practice for 50 years. Often when I'm writing, it feels very contemplative. I can imagine that people could have that experience with painting, or drawing or sculpting, or playing music. Sometimes my husband meditates before he plays bass or guitar. There's a rhythm to the creative practice that is less effortful, and less egoic so that's how I see older creativity.

Mark: Does that allow the aging person to try new things as well because there's not so much riding on them? What the hell, if you're not the best painter, well, you're enjoying it.

Connie: Good point. That's right.

Mark: What about other forms of creativity as you get older that aren't necessarily art-related? What would you recommend for people in terms of a creative outlook on life, and how that shifts the way you live?

Connie: It's so individual. We're moving, because we're in a fire danger zone, and it's so hot, we can't spend much time outdoors, even though it's a beautiful place. We're moving to a cool area so that we can live outdoors in our 70s. For some people, the connection to the natural world is really important in late life, and we all know what's happening to the climate. Elder's Action Network has a lot of different communities for people who are interested in networking, and service, and activism. They have climate communities, democracy communities, creativity communities, all kinds of things.

I think that is a way to feel less alone in our creative networking and there are other kinds of service as well. I'm going to probably look for some mentoring opportunities. That feels to me like a way to pass on my creative gifts. There are all kinds of opportunities to serve because there's so many communities in need. I think service can be very creative. If we find something that fits who we are, and what we have to give, we can leave an amazing legacy through serving, and it can be local, or it can be online, and it can be national, or global. There are all kinds of ways now to connect with communities of service, and activism, political activism, as well.

I have a friend who lives near here, who's in her 80s and she's always been an activist. She went to Standing Rock, to the big protests in her 80s just to back up the kids there. That's incredibly creative and brave. People are doing all kinds of things in these years we've been given that can reframe their effectiveness, their contribution, their capacity to serve, and we can do those things alongside our inner work so that we're not doing them unconsciously. With superiority and self-righteousness and other ways, we were activists in our youth, at least I was. I mean, I was in Berkeley in the late '60s, and I was very self-righteous. I can't be that way anymore in my politics. I hope that answers your question.

Mark: Yes, it answered it very well. It's not about sacrificing passion, it's about redefining passion.

Connie: Good point. Connecting with it in a way that fits who we are now, not who we were then.

Mark: The last question I want to ask you is about spiritual practice. I did a book with Ram Dass years ago and he said that wisdom is the only thing that doesn't diminish as we get older. Everything else runs out but wisdom is the only thing that can grow. What kinds of spiritual practices would you recommend specifically for people who want to enrich the aging experience and also understand themselves better in the time that we have?

Connie: Well, let me acknowledge Ram Dass, who coined that phrase "Role to soul" so I loved it, and I borrowed that from him. Part of the answer to this is determined by whether one feels in alignment with a lineage. Whether one feels resonance with Judaism, or Buddhism, or Hinduism, or Sufism, or whatever, Christianity. In every single one of those traditions, there are mystical practices and some of them are hidden but they're there. You can find because of the democratization of the spiritual world now, you can find books and teachers who will offer contemplative practices in any of those traditions.

Rather than simply going to church and following what the clergy says, you can experience what some of the early mystical Christians experienced, or mystical Judaism or mystical Sufism or whatever. Buddhism is, obviously, everywhere and there are many different schools of it. I recommend for beginners to try out different schools of Buddhism in their practices, and see what resonates with you. Mindfulness is the epidemic now, but it's not right for everybody. It takes some research and some connecting with teachers.

What's really important from my point of view here is shadow awareness. I wrote a whole book called *Meeting the Shadow of Spirituality* because so much difficult stuff can come up when we're doing spiritual practice, especially with a teacher. We're no longer youth who are naïve and simple-minded about this, "That guy's enlightened, he's perfect." We have to go in with much more complex psychological and shadow awareness now.

Some people are practicing Hatha Yoga to maintain flexibility. Some people are practicing Kundalini. I know a lot of people who are doing Kundalini work. Some people are practicing mindfulness just to get to learn about how their minds work. Why does it wander so much? What does that mean and what do I do about it? That's a beginner's basic practice. You mentioned earlier that I interviewed Father Thomas Keating, so some people are doing contemplative prayer, which is a really easy practice from the Christian mystical traditions. Krishna Dass, I interviewed Krishna Dass, for people who feel very devotional, it's your nature to love God, Krishna Dass teaches chanting. It's very beautiful. It's in the Hindu tradition but all different kinds of people show up for that and he does free satsangs online. I interviewed Rabbi Rami Shapiro. He's a mystical Jewish rabbi and he teaches that. Some people feel unaffiliated, they don't have a lineage. They're just general spiritual seekers and there's a lot available now to those folks. I would recommend finding the fit for you. Finding the fit. Seeing what-- Reexamine what you experienced in the past. If you were in the spiritual community or did a practice, what happened there? What kind of disillusionment did you experience or are you still involved? Do you still want what you wanted back then? I know I don't have the same desires that I did in my 20s when I started. So, what are you looking for now?

Reevaluate that and then see what shows up. Ask your friends, read books, look online. Look for an arousal of curiosity. You know, na na na. Oh, that looks interesting and check it out and you can take your time. You can try different practices, and then if you find one, stay with it for a while because you don't get results in the short term, so if you find one that fits, give it some real-time. That's what I would recommend.

Mark: What about the aspect of spirituality that's about the preparation for death that really helps us to look at impermanence? How can folks who don't have a religious inclination reflect on their impermanence? What practices would you recommend for doing that?

[silence]

Connie: In my lineage, the practice is, I am not this body, I am not this mind, and I've added I am not this story. My Connie-ness will pass. That's a mindful practice of my individual impermanence. There's also a beautiful book from Thich Nhat Hanh called *The Blooming of a Lotus* where he has all these mindfulness practices about impermanence that you can sit with and allow them to penetrate so that you're no longer in denial about death.

There are traditions that teach that we go into the cemetery and we sit and meditate, or we sit with a skull, or we celebrate the day of the dead, or we celebrate memento mori. That's the

Benedictian's practice. There are all these practices, and into Buddhism, there's Phowa, which is learning how to raise the kundalini so it goes up the top of the head at death. There are many practices to this. If that's too complicated, then what I would suggest is what I call mortality awareness. We recognize that there is a short time horizon now. What would allow us to die in peace? Simple as that. What would allow us to die without regret and in peace? And then, we can see if there's something we can do to actually allow that to happen.

Mark: Beautiful. That's so beautiful. Thank you so much, Connie. The book is wonderful and I wish you luck with it and thank you for visiting The Seekers Forum and I'll see you again.

Connie: Lots of love to you, Mark. Much gratitude.

Mark: Thank you, Connie.

Connie: Thank you. Thank you.

Mark: Thank you.