

# ELDER TALES REVISITED: FORMS OF TRANSCENDENCE IN LATER LIFE

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## INTRODUCTION

Gathered and winnowed through the ages, fairy tales are treasuries of folk wisdom. Most stories feature young protagonists whose adventures symbolize the developmental tasks of youth (Bettelheim, 1976; Von Franz, 1977). A unique group of fairy tales, however, present "older" adults as protagonists. In a previous paper, I discussed these "elder tales" and argued that they symbolize important developmental tasks for later life, especially related to transpersonal themes (Chinen, 1985b). In this article, I take a closer look at the central motif in elder tales—transcendence—and its significance for psychological development in the second half of life. As we shall see, elder tales present transcendence as one of the main challenges for later life, and depict many different forms in which the process may occur.

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## RELIGIOUS TRANSCENDENCE

In the previous article, I presented the Grimms' fairy tale of "The Aged Mother" to illustrate the theme of transcendence. Let me review the story briefly, to set the context for this paper. In the tale an old mother reflects bitterly on her life. Her two sons died in childhood, leaving her alone in old age. She curses God in her suffering. She falls asleep, awakens and goes to church. There, however, she sees a horrible apparition near the altar—two young men, one hanging from the gallows, the other

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a leprous beggar. A woman approaches the old mother, and explains that those two men are what her sons would have become, a criminal and a blasphemer, had God not taken them to Heaven as innocent children. The old woman had never thought that there might be a divine meaning to her bereavement. For the first time she recognizes God's greater grace, and returns home, filled with gratitude and insight. Three days later, the story concludes, she dies in peace.

This drama provides a particularly clear illustration of the transcendence theme in elder tales. The old woman begins with an ego-centric viewpoint: like most of us, she sees the world from her own perspective. She thus experiences the deaths of her sons as terrible losses. Had they lived, she imagines, they would have kept her company and taken care of her. In a magical, numinous encounter, however, God's higher purpose is revealed to her. She glimpses the divine perspective in which her private sorrow is only one small part of an all-encompassing whole. The old mother is then able to transcend her ego-centric perspective, exchanging the smaller for the larger viewpoint. She dies shortly thereafter—a distinctly unusual outcome in fairy tales. But the story specifically says she dies in peace, no longer tormented or bitter. Given the Christian context of this story, the tale implies she went to heaven. So her death represents an ultimate form of transcendence, moving from the merely human order to a divine realm.

*death  
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ultimate  
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The process of transcendence is cast in religious terms here. Although the story comes from a Christian tradition, the tale is surprisingly non-denominational. With only slight changes in the story, having to do with external descriptions of the building or the arrangement of the altar, the tale might as well occur in a mosque, temple or synagogue: indeed, there are Jewish and Japanese tales similar to this one (Ausubel, 1948; Ozaki, 1970; Dorson, 1962). So the religious nature of transcendence does not necessarily depend upon any particular theology or culture.

Religious forms of transcendence are traditionally linked with the second half of life, and the association holds across cultures and historical epochs (Gutmann, 1970; O'Donnell, 1973). From aboriginal societies which attribute religious power to elders, to urban European society, which portrays God as an old man with a white beard (de Beauvoir, 1972), individuals in the last half of life are associated with a process of transcending the mortal realm, and participating in a divine one. Indeed, Confucius explicitly made such transcendence a task for later life. He wrote:

At 15 I set my heart upon learning.  
 At 30, I planted my feet firmly upon the ground.  
 At 40, I no longer suffered from perplexities.  
 At 50, I knew the biddings of Heaven.  
 At 60, I heard them with docile ear.  
 At 70, I could follow the dictates of my own heart: what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right (Wei-Miung, 1978; Chan 1963).

For Confucius, secular achievement is the proper aim of a 30-year-old, and the tasks of that period involve family and social responsibilities. At 40, the individual becomes confident of himself, sure of his direction and the worth of his endeavors. The perplexities of adolescence are long behind, as well as the doubts that plague young men and women just starting a career or family. At 50 years of age a change occurs: the individual turns to the "biddings of Heaven," and thus transcends private, material concerns. In subsequent years spiritual understanding deepens. By 60, the individual accepts the dictates of heaven, grasping the larger divine perspective, instead of a personal or parochial one. He or she fully transcends an egocentric view. By 70, the person becomes one with the biddings of heaven, desiring only what heaven wills, no longer split between private ambitions and heaven's mandate.

*Confucian  
 tasks  
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In India the Laws of Manu codify a similar connection between transcendence and the second half of life (Kakar, 1979; Rhadakrishnan & Moore, 1957). The theme also appears in both the Greek and Judeo-Christian roots of Western tradition. Plato, for example, held that only a mature person, after 50 or so, could understand Truth—an eternal realm of Ideas that transcends the material, mortal order. In Jewish tradition, later life was often likened to a Sabbath, a time for studying the Torah and grasping its deeper wisdom, the better to know God (Katz, 1975; Buesching, 1973). Spiritual learning was thus a task for later life, a time for approaching the mysteries of God.

*Indian  
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Ours is nevertheless a secular culture. We are inspired more by technology than theology, and tend to embrace relativism rather than religion. The teachings of the past are rich and deep, but it is often difficult to apply them to our problems today. Most readers may already know that the sacred traditions of yesteryear define the second half of life as a spiritual odyssey. The problem lies in integrating those traditions in daily life.

Yet the challenge is neither insurmountable, nor even new. Each era must reinterpret past traditions to fit changing

realities. We require the same thing—a restatement of spiritual traditions about the second half of life, cast in terms useful to modern secular society. Elder tales offer important assistance in this endeavor. As I noted, fairy tales are quite non-denominational and often present religious development in psychological terms more palatable to modern thinking. This is clearest when the process of transcendence appears in secular contexts, as we shall see in the next story, the Chinese tale of "The Mortal Lord" (Roberts, 1979).

#### SOCIAL TRANSCENDENCE

*"The  
Mortal  
Lord"*

Once upon a time, a great King went hunting with his closest companions. They paused at the top of a hill from which they could see for miles around. As the King surveyed his domain, with its rich fields and bustling cities, tears came to his eyes. He thought of his palaces and friends, the honor and wealth which belonged to him, and the love of his people. "To think that one day I must die, and leave all this behind!" the King lamented. The nobles with him started thinking, and soon they began commiserating with their King: they, too, would lose palaces, riches and honors when they died.

"Imagine if we could live forever!" the King said. "Aye," his nobles agreed, their eyes bright at the thought of immortality. One lord among them laughed. "We should never have to leave all this," the King went on, ignoring the interruption, but the noble laughed again. This happened several more times, until the King himself demanded the reason for the mirth. Then the lord bowed. "I cannot keep my joke from you, Majesty." he confessed, "although I hesitate to say it." The lord paused and went on.

"I imagined what it would be like if we all lived forever. and if there were no death," the lord explained. "Why then, the First King would still live among us, and the Great Sage! The Immortal Emperor, and the Fearless General, too! Compared to them, I and my fellow lords would be fit only to be rice-planters, and you, Majesty, would be a clerk! Imagining that. I could not help laughing!"

The other lords held their breaths, fearing the King's wrath. After a tense moment, the King laughed. He raised his drinking glass and turned to the other lords. "For encouraging my foolishness, I penalize each of you a drink of wine! And as for you." the King told the laughing lord. "whenever I bewail my death again, you are to cry out, 'A clerk! A clerk!'"

The story is rich in symbolic details, so let us take them one by one, the way we might analyze a dream. The tale begins with a King and his party who stop on a mountain top. The location is significant. First, the King is away from his palace, and the bustle of his royal court. This isolation brings up a theme that occurs in many other elder tales—that of "clearing" a place in life so that some kind of insight or transformation can occur. In essence, the King temporarily disengages from his responsibilities, and the message of elder tales is clear: as long as we are caught up in our ordinary activities, we cannot transcend them. (In the story of "The Aged Mother" for instance, the widow sat alone thinking, and this initiated the drama: her isolation cleared a place in which transcendence could occur). The story of "The Mortal Lord" also explicitly speaks of the wonderful views from the mountain summit. So the location itself brings up the theme of transcendence in a concrete way: the summit transcends the land. The peaks of mountains are traditionally regarded as sacred or magic places and even modern climbers comment on the exaltation of such locations, no doubt because from the top, one can imagine seeing all the world, the way the gods must have from Olympus or lofty Valhalla. From such an exalted viewpoint, man's affairs become only one small part of a larger picture, quite literally.

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part of  
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In the story the King begins, like most of us, immersed in his ambitions, desires, and attachments, placing himself at the center of his concerns. With such a view, the King can only regard his death as a terrible deprivation. So this story begins with an egocentric perspective and the point is accentuated by the fact we deal with a King. Monarchs are accustomed to having their way and are usually surrounded by those who agree with the royal viewpoint, willingly or not.

The exchange between the King and the laughing lord presents the crux of the drama. Immersed in his own concerns, and used to being obeyed, the King cannot conceive of any perspective other than his own. So alternatives must come from somebody else. The laughing lord introduces the King to a panoramic perspective in which they all are only small characters. The noble transcends a purely egocentric perspective, and grasps the larger context in which they all live. Centuries of civilization preceded them and centuries will no doubt follow. They are only links in an historical chain. Yet if the laughing lord asks his King to give up the dearest of human illusions—that he is the most important person ever—the lord also offers a consolation. The King may be only one link, but each link is vital. A single break can undo the delicate continuity of human culture and throw society into chaos. Through the example of

the laughing noble, the King is able to adopt a transcendent perspective and relinquish his egocentric grief.

Notice how the noble with the cosmic vision draws the King's attention by laughing. The noble jokes about death. This is important for two reasons. First, as commentators from Sigmund Freud to Henri Bergson have noted, humor requires disengagement from a situation. We laugh at our misfortunes only when we are not overwhelmed by them-if we can transcend them. So the laughing lord offers a way through which the King can transcend his egocentric perspective: humor. Second, we can accept messages in jokes-or parables for that matter-even if we would not tolerate the same advice given directly. The story of "The Mortal Lord" is a case in point-fairy tales can touch us on a deep level.

*heeding  
the  
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transcendence*

In learning from a noble of lesser rank, the King offers us another important insight. The process of transcendence does not arise from our conscious egos, as if we could decide one day to transcend ourselves and then simply do so. Transcendence is initiated by elements outside of the conscious self, and our task is to heed the messages that lead to transcendence.

The King's transcendence illustrates Erikson's notion of "generativity" (Erikson, 1950, 1983). As Erikson conceived it, generativity is a form of altruism and involves a concern for other people, especially those in the next generation. Teaching students or acting as a mentor to young colleagues provide good examples of generativity (Levinson, *et al.* 1978). The individual does not seek his own advantage, but the nurturance of another person. Raising one's own children, of course, is the most commonly cited instance of generativity, although all too often narcissism is really the motive rather than generativity: the parent sees only himself in the child, seeking to perpetuate himself through the child. True generativity involves recognizing somebody as an individual in his own right, not as an extension of oneself. Generativity, Erikson argued, is a task for middle and later life, and unless an individual attains it to some degree, further emotional development does not easily occur. The alternative to generativity, Erikson thought, is rather dismal. It is stagnation. The self-centered individual becomes trapped in his own desires, ambitions, and griefs, unable to see the larger whole. Such an ego-centered position is self-defeating, given the inevitability of personal losses in the second half of life.

Tales of youth, I might add, typically portray the *failure* of generativity in older adults. A tyrannical king keeps his daughter locked up and kills off her suitors, unwilling to let her

develop her own life. Or the wicked stepmother squanders the family wealth on herself, while her stepchildren starve. Elder tales provide a counterbalance to the fairy tales most familiar to us because elder tales portray *positive* images of generativity,

The thought of death triggers the drama in the present story, as it did in "The Aged Mother." This is understandable since death forces us to confront the smallness of our lives and the vastness of the world around us. No matter how important an individual might be in life, death levels us all. So the theme of death is not surprising—rather the opposite. the *absence* of it in most elder tales. In fact, death is rarely a problem to the protagonists of elder tales. Given the real threat of disease and death in later life, the absence of death fears is astonishing. Even more paradoxical, those themes are often quite prominent in fairy tales of younger protagonists. In two stories, for instance, one from Japan (Ozaki, 1910), and another from Italy (Calvina, 1978), the protagonist worries about his own death and, in both cases, he is explicitly identified as being about thirty years old. A French fairy tale makes the point more dramatically (Laboulaye, 1948). In the story, an old grandmother saves three fairies from a horrible fate. They bestow on her one wish, and tell her she can ask for anything she wants. She thinks of wishing for eternal life, but decides she has lived long enough. So she gives her magic gift to her grandson, letting him ask for whatever he desires. He promptly wishes his grandmother would live forever!

Do elder tales simply deny the reality of death? The answer is clearly no. Elder tales almost never depict immortality and eternal youth as an ending. Instead, they portray the death of the protagonist as a simple fact: "He lived happily and in peace until the day he died," or "She died in peace." Elder tales accept death as part of a natural *cycle*. "The Mortal Lord" helps us understand this calm acceptance. That attitude is a product of transcendence. Death is a problem only for one who clings to his own ego and values his life above all else. To those who see themselves as part of a larger process, personal death is simply a fact. So elder tales present an ideal attitude toward death, without melodrama or heroics. Indeed, elder tales practice what they preach: they mention the protagonists's death in a matter-of-fact way, as part of the whole tale, just the way the elder accepts his death in the tale as part of a larger drama.

Besides generativity, there are other social forms of transcendence that often occur in subtle, unnoticed ways. Consider one instance. Adolescents and young adults tend to proclaim their opinions in a dogmatic, challenging fashion. "This is right!" "That is wrong!" They seek absolute truths, and tend to take

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their beliefs to be examples of the same—at least when not in a skeptical mood, doubting everything. Mature adults, by contrast, are more likely to soften their claims saying, "I think that is wrong," or "In my opinion that is right." They relativize their beliefs and present them as personal opinions rather than objective truth (King *et al.*, 1983; Chinen, 1986; Sinnott, 1981). I say "mature" individuals here rather than simply "older" individuals, since most people know of persons who have become more opinionated than reflective through the years. Mature individuals transcend an egocentric viewpoint and recognize that other people may hold different beliefs. So the mature adult is usually not totally absorbed in his own viewpoint, the way a young adult is. But youth often needs to be absorbed in their own beliefs, the better to pursue their own convictions and establish themselves as independent individuals.

a  
more  
holistic  
viewpoint

Mature adults also appear to adopt a more holistic viewpoint: they transcend details to grasp the larger picture (Richards & Commons, 1984; Koplowitz, 1985; Chinen, Spielvogel & Farrell, 1985). A common way for this holistic perspective to emerge in the second half of life is through intuition. The individual does not reason step by step from one fact to another, but gains a sense of the whole situation at one time. This kind of intuition appears to ripen in the second half of life.

Another example of transcendence can be seen in the development of moral thinking during the adult years. The psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg and his colleagues investigated how individuals of different ages solve ethical problems (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984). They described a sequence of stages through which moral reasoning develops. Blindly obeying authority, for instance, is a relatively immature kind of moral thinking that children exhibit: "I did it because Mom told me to do it. I don't want to get spanked!" Thinking about moral *principles* is much more mature and usually appears only in young adulthood. "I won't steal this," a young adult might think, "because stealing is simply wrong." He or she appeals to a moral principle rather than fear of punishment. In a few cases, Kohlberg noted an even higher level of development. In this stage, the individual follows clear ethical principles to which he is committed, But when confronted with someone who differs from him, the individual transcends his personal convictions in order to engage in a genuine dialogue with the other person. Together they can then struggle toward a new moral consensus—a more inclusive, transcendent ethical viewpoint (Kohlberg & Ryneasz, 1985; Kohlberg, 1973; Kohlberg & Power, 1981).

Elder tales do not tell us what particular moral or religious principles we should follow, or how to act in specific situations. The tales only outline a basic task and it is a challenging one—relinquishing the ego in order to embrace transcendent social or religious perspectives.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSCENDENCE

The Korean story of "The Measuring Cup" introduces another form of transcendence (In-Sob, 1979).

Once upon a time, an old fisherman and his wife lived in great poverty. Each day the old man went to fish, but one day was particularly bad for him. Try as he might, he could catch nothing. He was about to give up and go home when he decided to make one last effort. To his surprise, he hooked a large, beautiful fish. "This will fetch a good price on the market!" he exulted. But when he looked at the fish, he was taken aback. The fish had such big, mournful eyes, it almost seemed to be human. The old man wondered what to do. He could not bring himself to kill the fish, because its eyes seemed to plead for its life. But he needed something to sell, so he and his wife could buy food! Finally he unhooked the fish, and let it go, thinking it might be a sacred fish. Then the old man returned home.

*"The  
Measuring  
Cup"*

The next day the old man went fishing as usual. Out of nowhere, a little boy in a green straw hat appeared, and bowed politely. "The Dragon King of the Sea," the little boy said, "sent me to convey his greetings to you. You spared the life of his son, the Prince of the Sea yesterday, although you did not know it. The Dragon King invites you to visit him in his palace so he may thank you properly." Then the little boy raised his hands, and the ocean parted, revealing a broad avenue that led down into the depths of the sea.

The old man was frightened a moment. Was this how the sea claimed *its* victims? But he finally decided to follow the little boy. So the two started out on the road into the sea. On both sides towered great walls of water, from which fishes watched them. Finally they came to a magnificent palace, gleaming in the depths of the sea. Attendants rushed forward and ushered the old man into a great hall. There the Dragon King, resplendent in gold and pearl, awaited the old man. Beside the Dragon King, was the Queen of the Sea, and the Dragon Prince.

The Dragon King thanked the old man for sparing his son's life

and then the King clapped his hands. Servants laid out a marvellous feast for the old man, and for days on end, the Dragon King feted the fisherman. But soon the old man began to long for his own home and his wife.

Finally the old man asked leave to return home and the Dragon King reluctantly consented. The Prince then sidled up to the old man and whispered in his ear. "My father will promise you anything you wish, as a reward for saving my life," the Prince explained. "You must ask for the iron measuring cup that he keeps next to his throne. He will offer you chests of gold and pearls instead, but be firm, insist on the measuring cup." Sure enough, the Dragon King promised the old man any reward he wished. The old man hesitated and then requested the iron cup. The Dragon King was loath to part with it, because it was his dearest treasure, but he had given his word, and the life of his son was worth any treasure he had. So he gave the cup to the old man.

"It is a magic cup," the Dragon King explained, "and when you shake it, and wish for something, the cup will produce it for you." The old man then left and followed the road out of the sea. He returned to the shore to discover that not even an hour had elapsed since he had left! Had it all been only a dream?

When he returned home and told his wife about his adventure, she did not believe him and the old man began to doubt his memory. But then he remembered the iron cup. And there it lay in his bag, just as he had packed it! When he took the measuring cup out and shook it, wishing for a fine new house, in an instant, their tiny hut was gone. In its place stood a magnificent mansion, as real as real could be!

This elder tale from Korea illustrates yet another form of transcendence which might be called "ego-transcendence." Jung described the phenomenon at some length (Jung, 1955; Whitmont, 1969; Edinger, 1972), so let me paraphrase his observations. In the first half of life, Jung believed, an individual develops the *ego-the* center of conscious identity and personal will. The ego opposes the unconscious and particularly tries to suppress impulses which conflict with the individual's conscious self-concept. For example, Jung felt that men repress their feminine side in order to fit their conception of masculinity, while women suppress their masculine side. The unconscious is not just a chaotic mass of unacceptable impulses, however. Jung believed that within it lay great creative potential and untapped resources. In particular, he felt the unconscious contained the inner, true Self—a center of harmony, integration and unity, towards which the individual

constantly struggles. The challenge of the second half of life, Jung felt, involves transcending the narrow dimensions of the conscious ego. The individual can then explore the unfamiliar and often frightening world of the unconscious, seeking the inner self. This true Self, with a capital S, is often symbolized as a divine being in dreams and myths, to emphasize the fact that the Self transcends the conscious ego, just as the gods transcend man.

We can see the step by step process of ego-transcendence in the story of "The Measuring Cup." The story starts by saying the old man is poor. This poverty is analogous in the previous tales to the old woman's bereavement, and the King's thought of death: the theme in all stories is that of privation, and such loss clears an area for the transcendent to emerge. After all, if the old fisherman were wealthy, in the present story, he would not have gone fishing, and he would not have kept fishing on his unlucky day. He would have therefore missed the magical encounter that triggered the process of transcendence.

The fact that the protagonist is a fisherman is highly symbolic. First of all, fishing is solitary work, so the story warns us that we will not be dealing with social issues, the way the story of "The Mortal Lord" does, but rather with individual psychology. This intrapsychic direction is confirmed by the second aspect of the fisherman's trade: he catches things from the ocean, and this provides a good symbol for retrieving things from the unconscious.

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story  
of  
individual  
psychology*

The drama begins in earnest when the old man catches a large fish with eyes so human and sad, the fisherman lacks the heart to kill the creature. So the old man lets it go, acting in an uncharacteristic fashion. All his life he has caught and killed fish, without any second thoughts about his trade. So his action reflects a new feeling of compassion and nurturance. He essentially expresses his feminine side, perhaps for the first time in a long while.

A few days later, while fishing, the old man meets a young boy, bearing an invitation from the Dragon King of the Sea. We can interpret the little boy *as* a representation of the playful, childlike side of the old man's-the child that lies dormant in adults (Von Franz, 1970). This playful, innocent aspect can rarely be expressed because of adult responsibilities and social inhibitions which force us to "act our age." In fact, the inner child often comes out only in negative ways-in petulance, or tantrums, for instance. Our story illustrates a positive expression of the inner child. Note that the little boy appears after the old man acts in an odd manner-letting the fish go. By

breaking out of his old ways of thinking and by expressing his feminine, nurturant side, the old man opens himself to his unconscious. New elements can then emerge, like the little boy.

The old man follows the boy into the ocean, and thus deep into the unconscious. In serving as the old man's guide, the little boy plays a rather distinctive role. Jung noted that a feminine figure—the anima—usually serves as the man's guide to the unconscious in myths and fairy tales. Beatrice, for instance, led Dante through the Inferno. So the appearance of a little boy in this story, rather than an anima figure, requires some explanation.

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The story comes from Korea, where a strict differentiation between masculine and feminine roles holds, with the general devaluation of the latter. So we might speculate that it would be humiliating for an old man to be led by a young woman. Another character must therefore do what an anima figure usually does—guiding the old man through the unconscious. The anima usually does this because she represents a major element of a man's unconscious. By contacting his unconscious feminine side, the man contacts the unconscious in general. But the playful childlike side may be just as unconscious for a man as his feminine aspects. Establishing a connection with that side, symbolized by the little boy, therefore allows the old man to relate to his unconscious in general.

Deep under the sea, amidst unimaginable splendor, the old fisherman meets the Dragon King, his Queen, and the Prince. Together they represent a symbol of the inner Self, hidden in the unconscious. Let me hasten to add that in East Asian mythology, the dragon is one of the most beneficent creatures, a view totally contrary to the Western view of dragons as evil monsters. In our story, therefore, the encounter with the Dragon King is not a horrifying confrontation with evil, but quite the opposite—a meeting with one of the most auspicious deities possible. As Jung noted, divinity and majesty typically accompany symbols of the Self, emphasizing how the Self transcends the ego. When the old fisherman joins the three magical beings in a grand feast, we also have a group of four persons. This motif of four frequently symbolizes completion and wholeness in mythology and folklore (Whitmont, 1969; Edinger 1972). So in portraying the old man arriving at the Dragon Palace, our elder tale emphasizes the theme of integration and totality. In essence, the old man leaves behind his familiar world, where his personal, conscious concerns predominate, and joins a larger, supernatural order, where he constitutes only one small element. He *transcends* his

conscious ego in order to participate in the totality of the inner Self, hidden in the depths of the unconscious.

Eventually the old man wishes to return home. He recognizes he cannot stay with the Dragon King, because he still has ties to the mundane order—namely his wife. The Dragon King promises him any gift that he wishes, and the Prince advises the old man to ask for the King's measuring cup. We have a rather charming reversal of what usually happens in fairy tales—the old man advising the young protagonist. Here the young Prince advises the old man! Symbolically, the old man gains wisdom from his youthful side. Ignorant himself about the realm of the unconscious, the old man is wise enough to heed the advice of the Prince: the old man can transcend his own ego consciousness.

The measuring cup, of course, is magic, and produces anything wished for. This magic symbolizes the creative richness of the unconscious Self. The cup is the vehicle for the magic and thus points to a healthy, productive relationship to the Self. On the other hand, the magic of the cup also recalls the child's omnipotent thinking, and thus refers to very early levels of psychological development, when the child cannot yet distinguish between thought and reality. The story *thus* alludes to the connection between the transcendent inner Self and archaic psychology—and thus to the difference between pre-personal and trans-personal levels of development (Wilber, 1980). Transcending the ego brings us into contact with the inner Self, and thus to seemingly primitive levels of development. The fairy tale carefully distinguishes the two, however, by noting that the cup is specifically a *measuring* cup. Since the ego measures, divides, analyzes and articulates, the measuring cup symbolizes the rationality of the ego. The story thus emphasizes, in a very subtle way, that transcending the ego does not mean abandoning it completely. The capacity to measure remains.

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Self*

The legend of Parsifal, let me add parenthetically, conveys a similar distinction between prepersonal and transpersonal development in adulthood. In that legend, the young Parsifal stumbles upon the Castle of the Holy Grail and actually beholds the Grail itself. But he does not ask certain crucial questions and so is summarily thrown out. Young and naive, Parsifal cannot assimilate the Grail experience. Only many years later—in the last half of his life, of course—does Parsifal come to the Grail Castle again. This time he knows the questions to ask. Asking *questions* symbolizes the analytic, inquiring capacity of the ego and only *after*

developing that capacity can Parsifal profit from the Grail experience.

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The process of transcendence involved in "The Measuring Cup" is the same as that in "The Aged Mother" and "The Mortal Lord." The individual breaks free from a conscious and purely personal perspective to grasp a larger one which had been hidden or unconscious before. In the greater viewpoint, the individual becomes only one small part of an all encompassing system. The endpoints differ in each story. In "The Aged Mother," the old widow glimpses something of God's sublime viewpoint. In "The Mortal Lord," the king attains a panoramic social and historical outlook. In the present elder tale, the old fisherman experiences profound psychological integration. Depending upon whether the individual's context is religious, social or psychological, the process of transcendence involves God, Society, or the Self.

Others besides Jung have discussed psychological forms of transcendence in the second half of life. The psychologist Robert Peck (1968; Peck & Berkowitz, 1964), for example, described a series of conflicts the mature adult faces, centered around transcendence. The first conflict involves "work-role preoccupation" and "ego-differentiation." In the former, we identify ourselves and others with what we do-saying for instance, "I am a teacher," or "He is a doctor." With "ego-differentiation," we transcend social roles and recognize that we-and everybody else-are persons first, who happen to hold certain jobs: "I am me, and I happen to teach," "He is a person who happens to be a doctor."

Peck (1968) noted that if the ego-differentiation conflict is resolved, another issue can be addressed-the dichotomy between "body preoccupation" and "body-transcendence." In the former, the individual focuses on his many infirmities and declining physical abilities. In the latter, he turns his attention to other issues, whether they involve social reform, grandchildren, or personal insight. Jung observed, in a similar vein, how individuals who do not grow psychologically in the second half of life frequently become hypochondriacs, obsessing about their aches and pains. Lastly, Peck described the conflict between "ego-preoccupation" and "ego-transcendence" which parallels what we have discussed of Jung's thought.

The theologian Adrian Van Kaam describes other forms of transcendence (1979). He calls one process that occurs in maturity, "de-idolization." The older individual separates himself from the ideals and ambitions of his youth. Wealth,

love or fame promised happiness back then, but in the sober light of maturity, those goals are recognized as idols-ideals which the individual put upon a pedestal and worshipped. The task of the second half of life is to transcend those idols in order to be open to more authentic truths.

Transcendence in its many forms initiates a special kind of growth which can be called "transpersonal development." The term quite literally refers to development that transcends our familiar, conscious personalities ("trans" - "person"). While the phrase may seem awkward or even pretentious at first, it serves a useful function. It highlights what sacred and secular traditions hold in common: the quest for something beyond the finite self, whether that something is God, Society, or Self. "Transpersonal development" offers a neutral idiom for our modern era. It allows us to avoid the embarrassment that religious language engenders in secular society, if we wish to do so, while reminding us of vital human experiences which a purely secular approach often ignores or devalues.

Elder tales tell us-and the message is similar from many different cultures-that transpersonal development is a major task of the second half of life. Having given ego and world their due, adapting one to the other, *the* mature adult can proceed to the next step.

In recognizing the transpersonal dimensions of development, rich resources open up to us. The boundaries of human growth burst beyond the limits that psychology or sociology impose on us. We can-s-and must-turn to philosophy, mythology, theology, literature, art, and music. The questions in the second half of life are large ones, dealing with lofty insights and profound truths. These noble issues are neither new, nor limited to mature adults, because adolescents agonize over them, too. But when the issues are raised again in later life, they are asked in a different way.

*the  
transpersonal  
dimensions  
of  
development*

Youths struggle with deep questions in order to find themselves. They seek lofty ideals which express their inner nature, the better to define personal identity. Ideals drawn from philosophy, art and literature inspire their endeavors as they take their place in the society. Later in life, mature individuals struggle with deep questions again, but now less to find, than to transcend themselves. They do not seek a place in their society, but rather the place of that society within human history, and of human history in the cosmos. Mythology, philosophy, literature and the arts serve to *expand* the individual's universe, just as it served, years before, to *define* the individual's identity.

#### WARNINGS

Elder tales are not uniformly rosy and upbeat. Some of them contain stern warnings, like the following Indian story of "The Flying Tortoise" (Turnbull, 1959; Khan, 1985). Technically, this story is a fable rather than a fairy tale, since it portrays animals instead of people. If its form differs, its spirit is that of any elder tale, so I include it here.

*"The  
Flying  
Tortoise"*

Once upon a time there lived an ancient tortoise, who spent his time sunning himself on a rock in the middle of a pond. Two geese stayed each summer at the pond. One summer was unusually hot, and the geese noticed how rapidly the pond was shrinking. If the heat kept up, the pond would vanish! They consulted the old tortoise, who scoffed at their alarm. "Dry up!" he hmpffed. "I have lived here centuries and centuries," he explained proudly, adding a few zeros to his age, "and the pond has never dried up. It never will, either!" The tortoise scolded the geese for disturbing his sleep. But the pond kept drying up, until there was hardly any water left. The geese decided they would leave and went to bid the irascible tortoise farewell.

By this time, the tortoise was quite thirsty-and frantic. "Leave?" he exclaimed. "That's fine for you, you selfish creatures! But what about me? You should have warned me earlier!" The geese were too polite to say they had warned him, so they tried to figure out a way to help the tortoise. They thought and thought and finally came up with a solution. The two geese would each hold one end of a stick in their beaks, as they flew. The tortoise could grasp the stick in the middle, with his mouth, and the two geese would be able to fly him to a bigger lake, just over the hill.

The tortoise was terrified at first, but consented. So he grasped the stick, complaining all the while. "You must keep quiet!" the two geese admonished the tortoise, "no matter what happens. If you open your mouth, you will fall to your death!" So the tortoise kept quiet, even when the geese leapt into the air, jerking him along with them. They flew higher and higher, leaving the dried up pond behind them. Then they flew over the village. A group of children saw the strange sight, and started making fun of the flying tortoise. They laughed at the tortoise and this incensed the proud creature. At last he could bear the taunts no more. "How dare you insult me?" the tortoise screamed. "I was old before your village was even built!" But with his first word, the tortoise opened his mouth, and plunged to his death!

The story begins by contrasting an irritable old tortoise, on one hand, with two young geese, on the other. The choice of the species is a happy one, dramatizing the difference between the psychology of youth and later life. The geese are strong and mobile. They are free to come and go as they please, as is the dream of youth. And they fly high under the heavens, symbolizing the lofty ideals that inspire youth. The tortoise, by contrast, is close to the earth, like the adult who has made his way into the world. He is also weighed down by a heavy shell, which serves to protect him, as does the wealth which adults accumulate through the years. Snoozing is more to the tortoise's liking, while the geese prefer travelling about, in analogy to stereotypes of age and youth.

The drama begins when the two geese notice how rapidly the water in the pond diminishes. We have the theme of loss, then, taken to an extreme. The loss is life-threatening because the pond protects and nourishes the tortoise and the two geese. It is literally-and figuratively-the water of life. The old tortoise refuses to acknowledge the problem. He does not heed the first hints of danger. He therefore fails this first test. Fortunately, the proud old tortoise has the geese to remind him of the danger until he at last recognizes the problem. By then, the situation is extreme.

The geese then propose an ingenious solution-to fly the tortoise to another lake. As they all ascend into the heavens, the pond becomes smaller and smaller, and new vistas open up to the tortoise, who had spent his life in the pond. He literally transcends his familiar world, and gains a wider perspective. So in a rather concrete fashion, our fable introduces the theme of transcendence.

The geese then fly over a group of children who begin to mock the tortoise. The tortoise has a choice at this point-either to take the taunts seriously and become enraged, or to join in the game, realize how strange and ridiculous he must look and laugh to himself with the children. To do the latter, the tortoise must transcend his vanity and dispense with social convention-particularly his rigid notions of what constitutes "dignity." Were the tortoise able to free himself from himself, he would participate in the children's festivities on a higher level-metaphorically and literally. So the tortoise's situation here recalls that of the Mortal Lord and the laughing noble. The noble laughed at his King, thinking of the King as a clerk, and the King had the choice of becoming angry at the joke, or joining in. The King joined in, recognizing the wisdom of his noble. In our present fable, the tortoise cannot even grasp the

*the  
tortoise's  
choice*

humor of the situation. He opens his mouth to shriek insults, curses at the children, and immediately plunges to his death. So he joins the children in their game, but literally on their level. He succumbs to a childish and vain impulse and falls from his transcendent position. The fable implies that he regresses to the level of the children, rather than attaining a new level of maturity. He confuses the prepersonal with the transpersonal-i-and perishes as a result.

*warnings  
and the  
incomplete  
process  
of  
transcendence*

Many other fairy tales contain similar warnings. In tales of youth, the villain is usually a wicked old witch or wizard. If we look carefully at these characters, we find that they share two things. First, they have magic powers which they have obtained by transcending the ordinary realm, and reaching into supernatural, numinous regions. But second, they use these powers for selfish ends. They try to steal the treasure of the hero or heroine, or even to kill him or her. Or the wicked old person hoards wealth and refuses to share it. So these older persons portray an incomplete process of transcendence, and a dangerously defective form: they have transcended the mundane order enough to gain supernatural powers, but they have not transcended the ego. Most transpersonal disciplines, of course, warn against this temptation. Fairy tales echo the warning and emphasize the developmental aspect: transcendence is a task of later life which cannot be done halfway. But by portraying successful cases, elder tales reassure us that transcendence is possible.

REAL LIFE

We rightly ask, however, if transcendence is merely the stuff of fairy tales-e-of whimsy, fancy, and proverbial rose-colored glasses. In one sense, it is: dramatic cases of transcendence are not very common in real life (Cook, 1985). But then fairy tales are not statistical. They do not show what commonly happens, but what *can* happen. They are not census reports, but rather measures of mankind's highest aspirations, reminding us of our noblest potential. More importantly, transcendence takes many different forms, fitted to the individual in his or her context. Some of them can be quite mundane in appearance, like the change from saying, "This is so!" to saying, "I believe this is so." If transcendence is not always numinous, it is useful to look at dramatic examples of transcendence from real life, to remind us of the reality of the process. We find such examples in the lives of unusually creative persons.

Alfred North Whitehead, a 20th-century mathematician-philosopher, provides a recent illustration (Lawrence, 1968;

Lowe, 1985; Chinen. 1985a). Like other teenagers, he was profoundly moved by religious questions in his adolescence and struggled many years with them. As a young adult at Trinity College in Cambridge, however, he gave up his religious pursuits and became a secular skeptic. The heady scientific advances of the time inspired him-and there were many. Because of his talent in mathematics, Whitehead began a career as a mathematician and wrote the *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell. Their *magnum opus* is still considered a *tour de force* of mathematical logic and rigorous rational thinking.

Whitehead subsequently spent many fruitful years as an educator, involved in numerous government commissions reorganizing the British school system. These were pragmatic years, highly productive and very much down to earth. But when Whitehead retired from his academic post in Britain, he moved to America, and began a new career. He started writing essays in-s-of all things-metaphysical philosophy. From his sixties and well into the last years of his life, he produced astonishing works on theology-of almost mystical inclination. These essays differ dramatically from his earlier mathematical research, grappling as they do with questions about God, the meaning of life and the purpose of the cosmos. Whitehead returned to broad, deep and transcendent issues, far removed from precise mathematical problems and practical administrative issues. Ironically, Whitehead's philosophical writings from late in life have had more impact on contemporary thought-and particularly theology-than his earlier mathematical work.

Alfred  
North  
Whitehead

Whitehead's life is a dramatic intellectual odyssey. After years of a secular profession, Whitehead returned to the philosophical and religious questions of his youth, but now could resolve some of them. Experience, and enormous erudition helped Whitehead to articulate a powerful, religious vision. But he undertook the effort only because he had the courage to transcend his professional identity as a scientific scholar. He broke from his established social role to take up metaphysics at a time when metaphysics was held in extremely low regard among his colleagues. Whitehead transcended self and society to *seek* answers to profound human questions.

A similar sequence unfolds in the life of Charles Peirce, the American logician and philosopher who founded both pragmatism and semiotics, the systematic study of symbols (Murphey, 1961; Apel, 1981; Esposito, 1980). Peirce began his career as a logician and made several major contributions to this abstract science. He then shifted to more practical concerns, elaborating his philosophy of pragmatism. Later in

life, however, he turned to metaphysical issues, for example, conceiving the universe to be a cosmic "organism."

The examples of Whitehead and Peirce are important because they are men who mastered rigorous rational thinking, and strongly defended empirical science in their youth. But they both transcended that scientific perspective later in life.

A similar process can be seen in the lives of prominent scientists. Jaques Monod and Jonas Salk, for example, both won Nobel Prizes for their work in medicine. Later in life, they each turned to philosophical and social concerns. From test tubes and biochemical assays, they moved to profound human questions. An analogous pattern can be seen with Albert Einstein, Karl Menninger and Hans Selye (Pruyser, 1975). To be sure, examples like theirs are rare and we might dismiss the careers of these extraordinary men as eccentricities. But elder tales counsel us to the contrary. A radical change in the second half of life is precisely the challenge of the climacteric-transcending pragmatic pursuits and ordinary routines. material concerns and ego-centric ambitions.

*the  
challenge  
of  
the  
Climacteric*

In the fairy tales most familiar to us, the young hero or heroine goes through arduous trials, and at last finds true love, wins a fabulous treasure, and lives happily ever after. The saga of youth revolves around heroism (Campbell, 1949). But life does not end with youthful triumph, nor with a "happy ever after." Elder tales show us what lies ahead. If heroism dominates tales of youth, transcendence illuminates the story of the elder. But transcendence is not a single, monolithic theme. It takes many forms, fitted to the culture, faith and personality of the individual. Nor is it a final state: it is rather a path, and one to which elder tales call us, in the idiom most suited to us—a transcendent journey toward Self, Society, or God.

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While religion doesn't have an explicit presence in "Babylon Revisited," the theme of redemption is nonetheless prominent. Indeed, the whole story can be seen as a depiction of one man's redemption. The central idea of this short story is that of transformation and change. The basic premise of the tale is that a father has returned to Paris to try and regain custody of his daughter after his 3 Educator Answers. Babylon Revisited. Religious forms of transcendence are traditionally linked with the second half of life, and the association holds across cultures and historical epochs (Gutmann, 1970; O'Donnell, 1973). From aboriginal societies which attribute religious power to elders, to urban European society, which portrays God as an old man with a white beard (de Beauvoir, 1972), individuals in the last half of life are associated with a process of transcending the mortal realm, and participating in a divine one. Indeed, Confucius explicitly made such transcendence a task for later life. He wrote: "The Mortal Lord". realities. Elder tales revisited: forms of transcendence in later life. Allan B. Chin San Francisco, California. INTRODUCTION. Religious forms of transcendence are traditionally linked with the second half of life, and the association holds across cultures and historical epochs (Gutmann, 1970; O'Donnell, 1973). From aboriginal societies which attribute religious power to elders, to urban European society, which portrays God as an old man with a white beard (de Beauvoir, 1972), individuals in the last half of life are associated with a process of transcending the mortal realm, and participating in a divine one. Indeed, Confucius explicitly made such transcendence a task for later life. He wrote: 172 The Journal of T