

Gaining a Heart of Wisdom

Finding Meaning in the Autumn of Your Life

by James E. Miller

The later part of one's life can be such an interesting time. Despite all the stereotypes of older age, this can be a very fertile period, a time rich with important learnings, continuing growth, and real fulfillment. This is not true of everyone, of course, nor of all times. Some of later life's issues can be quite challenging. But there is much about this stage of life that can hold surprising promise for those who are open to life's unfoldings.

These are not empty words. The ideas that are developed in *Gaining a Heart of Wisdom* grew out of my experience in working with elder adults near the beginning of my ministry, just a few years out of seminary. Several hundred seniors in an invigorating program called The Lakeside Elder Adult Project taught me a great deal about older age in the years I was honored to work with them. Then a funny thing happened as time went by—I grew older myself. Now in my seventh decade, I'm learning firsthand the subtleties that my elders did their best to teach me when I was a young man. Their thoughtful wisdom lies at the foundation of this presentation.

THE DESIGN OF THIS DVD

Gaining a Heart of Wisdom is divided into eleven parts: an introduction followed by ten individual segments, each of which begins with a different truth about aging. The tenth truth also serves as a conclusion.

This 36-minute presentation can easily be viewed in its entirety. The pause between each section when the screen dips to black is short enough that it does not interrupt the flow at all. However, if you wish to divide this program into ten or eleven different parts, it's easy to find your way to each individual section using the opening menu on the DVD.

All the photography is from nature. That allows viewers to make their own associations with the ideas that are being expressed, while also applying these thoughts to their own experiences and learnings.

This audiovisual is also available as a four-color book, entitled *Autumn Wisdom: Finding Meaning in Life's Later Years*. The text in the book is not exactly as it is spoken in this audiovisual, but it is almost the same.

USING THIS PRESENTATION IN ONE PLAYING

Preview *Gaining a Heart of Wisdom* so that you're familiar with its ideas, visuals, and format prior to presenting it before a group. Use your own words to make a brief introduction. Explain that ten basic ideas will be presented, without naming them. You might say something about your personal response to your first viewing. Presuming there will be time to discuss the program afterward, you can alert your group to expect such discussion.

If you wish, you might prepare viewers with a question or two. For example: "As you listen to the ten main ideas that will be offered, note which ones ring the truest for you in your own life. If there are ideas that don't quite ring true for your life, remember those too so we can dialogue about them."

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Once the DVD has been played, you might divide your audience into small groups for purposes of discussion, to be followed by feedback before the whole group. Alternatively, depending on the nature and size of your group, you might facilitate a discussion with everyone present. There might be reason to encourage viewers to write or journal about their thoughts and feelings before making verbal responses within small groups or the group as a whole.

Following are some facilitating questions:

- Which of the ten principles did you most agree with? Why?
- Were there any principles with which you disagreed? Why?
- What if this presentation had, say, twelve principles instead of ten. What one or two more would you suggest be added?
- In what ways in particular do you feel that the autumn of life can be a time of ascent, as alluded to in the second segment?
- Does *Gaining a Heart of Wisdom* present a valid portrait of the possibilities of healthy aging today? Why or why not?

USING THIS PRESENTATION WITH MULTIPLE PLAYINGS

The most natural division is to play eleven segments one by one (the introduction followed by the ten principles) or as ten segments (the introduction and first principle together, followed by the remaining nine principles). If time is limited, two or three segments might be played, and discussed, as a unit.

Following are facilitating questions for the various segments:

1. There is no single path for you to follow. There are only paths.

- What are the different sorts of paths that people are following in the autumn of their life as you look around you? How would you describe those paths? Do you feel these paths leading to different places or to a similar place?
- In your experience, do people in the autumn of life grow more alike or more different as they age?
- At one place in the script, the words are “Following your chosen path requires courage.” Do you believe that’s true? If so, how? What courage has been asked of you?

2. Your time of decline is a time of ascent.

- What are the declines of the autumn years that are to be faced? In your experience, what feelings mark these declines?
- What are the ascents that can be a part of this journey? What feelings mark these ascents?
- Do you sense that one’s spiritual life evolves in older age? If so, how? How is an older age spirituality different from that of one’s younger years?
- A prayer is voiced in this section: “O Lord, may the end of my life be the best of it. And may my closing acts be my best acts.” What are examples of what these best acts might be? What makes them best?

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3. *In the fading light, you can see better than ever.*

- What are the sorts of things you can see in these later years that you perhaps didn't see so well in earlier years?
- What is it that helps you to see better?
- In your experience, does the fading light help hide anything? If so, what?

4. *Remembering your past is the way to your future.*

- Why is there such an emphasis in our culture upon leaving the past behind?
- What are the sorts of things in life that are worth remembering?
- What are the best ways to carry one's past into the future?
- Should parts of the past be left behind? If so, what are those kinds of things?

5. *As you learn to let go, you will gain.*

- What sorts of letting go do the autumn years require?
- What are the gains that the later years might allow?
- What role does God play in all this?
- The script includes this 300-year-old advice: "No matter what you may lose, be patient. For nothing belongs. It is only lent." What is the relevance of this advice for one's later years? Are these words really true?

6. *To find the sacred place, stop right where you are.*

- Do you feel you searched for and found sacred places in your younger years any differently than you have in your later years? If so, what are the differences?
- What helps you find sacredness right where you are?
- Have your ideas about sacredness and about God changed in any ways as you have grown older?

7. *Your time of endings is best marked by its new beginnings.*

- What sorts of new beginnings are possible in the autumn years?
- Emily Dickinson's words are "We turn not older with years, but newer every day." In what ways is that true?
- Do you find that most people believe in the possibility of these new beginnings at this stage of life?

8. *There is only one time to live in, and that time is now.*

- Is it easier or more difficult to live in the present moment in the autumn years?
- Do the present moments seem any different in one's later years? Do you have any feelings associated with such moments that you didn't have in earlier years?
- Do you sense that God is especially present in the individual moments? How is that presence known?

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9. *In your smallness you will find your greatness.*

- How has your estimation of how large or small you are changed through the years?
- What does it mean, in your estimation, to experience greatness as a human being? As an older human being? As a child of God?
- Wordsworth wrote, “Trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home.” What is the personal significance of those words in the autumn of life?

10. *There is no way but this way: the way of love.*

- How has your understanding of love evolved as you have grown older?
- Does love manifest itself any differently as you grow older? If so, how?
- The words from the 90th Psalm are, “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” What do the psalmist’s words have to say to those in the autumn of their life?
- What is now clear to you about your life and about all of life that has not been as clear before now?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Miller, James E. *Autumn Wisdom: Finding Meaning in Life’s Later Years*. Fort Wayne, Willowgreen Publishing, 2005. Available through Willowgreen Inc, 10351 Dawson’s Creek Blvd., Suite B, Fort Wayne IN 46825, 260/490-2222. www.willowgreen.com

Arrien, Angeles. *The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom*. Boulder, CO, Sounds True Inc, 2005.

Hillman, James. *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life*. New York, Random House, 1999.

Skinner, B.F. and Margaret Vaughan. *Enjoy Old Age: A Practical Guide*. New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1997.

Weiss, Robert and Scott Bass. *Challenges of the Third Age: Meaning and Purpose in Later Life*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2001.