



## Old Age is a Crown Instead of a Curse in Helen Luke's Beautiful Hands

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by Van Waddy

**R**ilke's image of a man turned 'round, in Duino Elegies, "taking leave" on a hillside overlooking a valley that shows him his home for the last time, congers up for us the perfect mood for stepping into a little book called *Old Age* by the Jungian analyst Helen Luke. Written in her eighties, it is a jewel and, indeed, a backward glance from the heart stance.

Using Homer's *Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, and a few lines from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Luke writes five essays that place before us a feast in words and images. She explores old age as a sacred transition in the dimension of time, as an encounter with the Self that invites us, in Eliot's language, to "move in measure like a dancer" in the midst of the "refining fire."

The storm-tossed, conquering *Odysseus*—still identified with the hero image of himself (his ego), still the driving architect of his masculine achievements—is confronted by a prophecy from the blind seer *Teiresias* half way through Homer's *Odyssey*. He is told he will take a new journey, inland, that he must carry a well-cut oar and travel to a country where people have never seen an oar. There he will meet a stranger who will tell him what to do—to plant his oar firmly in the earth—a final letting go of that which had held for him the meaning of his life.

The beauty of Helen Luke breaks through in language and

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**Van Waddy** is a psychotherapist in Atlanta. See [www.vanwaddy.com](http://www.vanwaddy.com)

dialogue in this story of *Odysseus*' final journey, for Homer never finished this part of the tale, leaving it to our imagination to trace these final moments. Luke writes poignantly of these final hours in our hero's life and his struggle to make sense of and to release all that had meant something to him during his full life.

The oar he is told to plant in a land where no one would recognize an oar (They'd never seen the sea) would flower into a tree of hope that others might see it and be moved to ask questions about the journey they themselves had not yet taken. He had no more use of it, he was told, as his task of seeking "knowledge no other man had found," achieving results and exerting power in the outer world was over. He had to let all that go.

Don't give your oar to your son, he was told, or you will be preoccupied with how your son uses it, not able to focus on your task of letting go. This is the work of old age: to let go of everything, even the meaning. Everyone else has to find their own meaning.

Lear's "let's away to prison" speech to his daughter *Cordeilia* in *King Lear*, occurs towards the end of his life, while he is in his eighties. He is a man "imprisoned in a weakened body," with faded powers, enforced inactivity, yet a man who, according to Luke, "embraces this confining process with love rather than dragged into it protesting, resisting his inevitable imprisonment."

Lear exhibits the innocence of the true feeling value: “So we’ll live and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies,” he says. “And take upon the mystery of things as if we are God’s spies.” To see the sacred in all things, to find the vantage point of the whole and not just our small part, to be touched by wonder and moments of unclouded vision—this, indeed, makes us “God’s spies,” says Luke. This is the work of old age.

No matter how blind, unbalanced, one-sided a person may be in youth, says Luke, they will be saved in the end if they have had true devotion to something beyond the ego—“a projection of their hidden and often unconscious awareness of the Self.” Prospero, in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*,

is redeemed in old age by his willingness to let go of the powers, the gifts, the creative genius he built up in himself all his life to control and dominate (characterized by the spirit Ariel in the play). He can do this only after he confronts his own darkness, faces his own truth, and accepts the good and bad of himself “as an essential note in the music of God, however discordant.”

Forgiveness—of oneself, of all others—seeing oneself “in unity with all in the love which is the dance of creation,” without any feelings of superiority or specialness, allows what Luke calls “the Glory” to enter us. We realize we know nothing, pass beyond all meaning and meaninglessness to that “something else” that is the eternal in man, in kinship with all things.

Luke calls this letting go, this forgiveness and acceptance of oneself as unified with the whole, a “piercing through to the Mercy.” This is the work of old age: to let go of everything, even what we identify as the best in us, our gifts, that which has made us special, that passion to which we have devoted our life. We become, once more, pure through, God’s music, “the emptiness that is the Mercy, the Compassion, which contains all opposites.”

Using T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding” in *Four Quartets*, Luke points out how three gifts offered by Eliot as coming with old age—the loss of energy and enchantment, the helpless rage at the terrifying folly of men (a projection of our own hidden darkness on to others), and our memories that suffer us to look back at how we might have been less saintly than we thought—allow us to be more aware of our oneness with everything and everyone other.

We begin to hear the “music of God in everything happening,” whether of pain or of joy. Through memories re-

experienced as story, says Luke, one’s life begins to move in a circle around the still point of the Center, no longer a straight line, but as a small pattern, unique and constant, in the dance of creation. We experience a joy that comes when we no longer seek happiness, no longer seek anything. Resting in the present moment—the only place the Self can live—we just are.

Luke ends her reflections by pointing out the difference between suffering and a neurotic state of meaningless depression—between the weight of our experience which we carry with full consciousness (as part of the working out of the divine dance of opposites in us) or a weight under which we fall and lie in self pity.

“Every time a person exchanges neurotic depression for real suffering, he or she is sharing to some small degree in the carrying of the suffering of mankind, in bearing a tiny part of the darkness of the world.” This allows meaning to enter our suffering and to build an undercarriage of suffering upon which the superstructure of our life may securely rest. This happens only when we can come to a standpoint which consciously accepts blessing and curse as one in the psyche.

Such a standpoint, such a conscious standpoint, can happen at any age. As Luke says, every individual remains free to choose whether he or she “will let go of everything else so that the new creation of us will be born.” In old age, this choice can mean the difference between radiance and retreat into useless clinging, between “allowing the Glory to enter” and railing in desperate despair.

I have provided here a postage-stamp view of a profound work of depth. Helen Luke’s *Old Age* will sit on my own bedside table well into my old age, a companion, a healing, a hand to help me let go to “the emptiness that is the Mercy, the Compassion, which contains all opposites.”

Luke reminds me of something I myself wrote some years ago: “When the shell of our life falls away, when the voice from within becomes the only sound we can hear, when the night dreams we have collected over the years take on a life of their own, we will dance old age, laughing. We will climb upon the back of the soul that has accompanied us on this magnificent journey and ride it, singing, into death.”

Helen Luke has helped me to experience this letting go, in my body, through images and words, while I am still in my sixties. I am more ready, more clear about what that means, thanks to her own generous backward glance. ■