

like: "It feels so good to be cool and wet again that I can't help sprouting a few more blossoms, just to celebrate!"

Jungians are inclined (one might even say doomed!) to find meaning in mundane events, including the unlikely flowering of lilacs in September. As I grow older, my inclination to envision the hardy lilac as a symbol of long-lived spunk and resilience becomes almost irresistible. Like ladies of a certain age, my lilac has weathered hot summers and cold winters, rain and drought, disease and loss. Its September blossoms invite me to re-imagine the Autumn of life: can it, too, be seen as a season of lilacs?

In his essay "The Stages of Life" (1930), Jung examines the profound changes that occur in midlife, beginning at about age 35. He writes that in the first half of life we are preoccupied with finding our proper vocation, creating a family, and establishing ourselves in the outer world. Having accomplished this, we turn our attention in the second half of life to the development of our inner self, our relationship to the unconscious, and our spirituality. From his memoirs, we know that Jung himself endured a profound mid-life transition between the ages of 38 and 43. Following his break with Freud, he experienced what he called his "confrontation with the unconscious," during which he encountered and meticulously recorded his own archetypal fantasies and dreams. He regarded these years as the most important of his life and felt that they contained "the prima materia for a lifetime's work" (Memories, Dreams, Reflections, p. 225).

I think that we reach another turning point at about age 55, as we enter the "third half of life." To my knowledge, Jung did not write about this stage; however, he most certainly lived it. At age 69 he suffered a serious heart attack and had what we would call today a "near-death experience," including ecstatic visions of the conjunctio. Following this highly numinous experience, Jung slowly recovered and gradually embraced life again, a changed man. In his final years he revised much of his earlier writing, studied alchemy, wrote, painted, sat by the lake, carved in stone, and dictated his memoirs. Without the fruits of this season, his life's work would have been incomplete. In the Autumn of his life, Jung's lilac bloomed again.

I am coming to see the third half of life as a distinct season, fraught with its own perils and blessed with its own joys. It is often heralded by the painful experience of physical limitation, as we become aware that our bodies are changing, our energy level is not what it used to be, and our remaining time on earth is limited. Sometimes, like Jung, we suffer a life-threatening illness that haunts us with intimations of our own mortality. Our life's work seems to be over, our children are grown, and we realize that there are things we will never do, places we will never visit, dreams we will never fulfill. Our inner horizons are contracting rather than expanding, and we wonder "What now? What value can I find in the September of my life?"

We live in a culture that views the limits of age and the inevitability of death as problems to be fixed, obstacles to be avoided at all costs. Age is regarded as something shameful to deny and hide, rather than an accomplishment to be proud of. This one-



Lilacs in September

by Susan Olson

Just outside my front door stands a little lilac bush. Small and spindly, it is a pale imitation of the lush green hedge that grew beside my childhood home in Wisconsin. The recent drought has been hard on my lilac: although I watered it faithfully last summer, a big branch dried up and broke off, leaving the plant about half its original size. It survived, but this spring its leaves and blossoms were few and far between. It will probably never regain its former shape, and it will certainly never bloom with the fragrant lavender profusion of its northern relatives. Georgia summers are too hot and Georgia red clay too hard to suit its Midwestern constitution.

Nevertheless I cherish my little lilac and admire the tenacity with which it clings to life. It also does something unexpected, which never ceases to amaze and delight me: each September, when the temperature finally drops and the cool rain starts to fall, tiny blossoms pop out at the ends of a few of its scrawny branches. The first time this happened, I could not believe my eyes. Lilacs in September -- unheard of! I had never seen this in Wisconsin and I could not make botanical sense of it. Surely the lilac "knew" that it was time to shed its leaves and hunker down for the winter, but instead it decided to bloom again. If it could talk, I imagine it would say something

sided view robs us of the fruits of age, which are not allowed to ripen naturally, according to their season. Among these are the ability to tolerate ambiguity, the patience to reflect before acting, and the sense of humor to laugh at our own pretensions. Our horizons may narrow with age, but if we are fortunate, our depth perception becomes more acute. We develop the capacity to define our core values, to name our ultimate concerns. Our senses become finely tuned to the exquisite beauty of the small: a rose unfolding, a dolphin jumping, the delighted laughter of a child. We want to give back something of our experience to those who will outlive us, and we also know that we have much to learn from them. Like Jung, we can now make time to sit by the lake and reflect on the patterns of our lives. We may also discover within ourselves the energy to venture into new creative endeavors, to undertake new projects, to enter new relationships. Paradoxically, our awareness of limitation seems to be the key which opens the door to these new possibilities. To our great surprise we feel life energy flowing through us, even as our branches shed their leaves and prepare for winter. We find that we are not barren, but can still put forth small fragrant purple blossoms.

Our sense of being part of a larger whole, of being linked to something greater than ourselves (the Self, God, the Higher Power, or whatever we choose to call it) also sharpens as we grow older. Sometimes we can even feel God's hands around us, holding and shaping us even as they break us down. As I was writing this article, my good friend and colleague Jutta von Buchholtz sent me a poem entitled "Shadows," by D.H. Lawrence. It distills in a few phrases the essence of lilacs in September, and so (with thanks to her and to him) I will close with it:

And if, in the changing phases of man's life
 I fall in sickness and in misery
 My wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead
 And strength is gone, and my life is only the leavings of a
 life;
 And still, among it all, snatches of lovely oblivion
 And snatches of renewal
 Odd, wintry flowers upon the withered stem, yet new,
 strange flowers
 Such as my life has not brought forth before, new
 Blossoms of me --
 Then I must know that still
 I am in the hands of the unknown God,
 He is breaking me down to his new oblivion
 To send me forth on a new morning, a new man.

