A Synopsis of
The Second Half of Life:
Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom
By Angeles Arrien, Ph.D.

Enter by the narrow Gate.
The Gate is wide that leads to perdition,
There is plenty of room on the road,
And many go that way;
But the gate that leads to life is small and the road is narrow,
And those who find it are few.
Jesus of Nazareth, Sermon on Mount, Gospel of Matthew

The Eight Gates of Initiation in the Second Half of Life
From the Foreword by John O'Donahue:
“The assumption behind [Arrien’s] work is that a human life can be understood in terms of a narrative of its thresholds...There are times when life sharpens, things come in to focus and, gradually, you become aware that you are standing before a threshold. There is no way back to here you were before, and there is no way out but through...If people were to take this book up, work with it and act on its invitations, it would lead to huge cultural change. People would suddenly come into possession of their creative agency, potential and responsibility.”

From the Introduction:
Extra years, even decades, extend the blessings of life; yet we are unprepared. Our culture does not value elderhood. We have forgotten rites of passage that help us become wise elders who actively participate in our communities and live deep, fulfilling lives. Our culture’s perspective is that the second half of life offers only decline, disease, despair, and death – the 4 D’s.

[I choose the 4 G’s – growth, grace, generosity, and grit]

To know that we need cultural change, we have only to look at the shocking fact that America has the highest suicide rate among elders. We can longer ignore the wisdom that for generations has kept elders from becoming marginalized and invisible. The more challenging our world, the more we need our elders to share lessons they have learned, to lend us their problem-solving skills, and to enhance our lives by imparting their unique gifts.

The skills we developed in the first half of life are not adequate to support us during the second half; the tasks and requirements for growth and change are completely different. From age fifty onward, there are four broad frontiers:
• Retirement; from what, to what?
• Becoming a mentor, a steward, or a grandparent
• Coping with the challenges of maintaining a healthy body
• Mortality: losing loved ones, and the inevitability of our own death

Many world tales and perennial wisdom traditions point to eight metaphorical gates of initiation through which we must pass in order to develop into wise people, or elders. They are archetypal passageways to deepening our experience of life, help us shift our perspectives, fresh eyes, deepen our experience and add new dimensions to our lives. For the first time, we have the opportunity to create our own map of spiritual maturity, perhaps for future generations to use.
The second half of life presents us with the opportunity to develop increased depth, integrity and character – or not – the choice is always ours. We must do the personal work necessary to pass through each of the eight gates.

Threshold Work at the Eight Gates
A threshold is a place or moment where transformational work, learning or integration occurs. A gate is a place of initiation or entryway; it is the protecting and testing that must occur before entry is permitted.

“The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds – and at the same time, is the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.” - Mircea Eliade

Threshold into the Mystery
“…the actual task is to integrate the two threads of one’s life…the within and the without.”
– Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

As transitions take place during our later years, a fundamental and primal shift from ambition to meaning occurs. We must integrate our internal journeys – the archetypal vertical journey of descent and ascent in which we claim the authentic self and release the false self (cf. Richard Rohr, “falling upward” in his spirituality for the second half of life); and the horizontal journey, integrating the two threads of our internal (qualitative) and external (quantitative) experiences. They are both essential tasks.

Mastery of the inner world, with a relative contempt for the outer, must inevitably lead to great catastrophe. Mastery of the outer world, to the exclusion of the inner, delivers us over to the demonic forces of the latter, and keeps us barbaric despite all outward forms of culture. – Carl Jung

Beyond Polarity and Duality
A shift occurs after we integrate the internal and external experience: we move beyond polarity and duality and learn to see both worlds at once. We contain this paradox and are able to see the many options available to us. This more accepting and expansive way of thinking increases our tolerance for ambiguity, which is a function of wisdom.

The Story of the Eight Gates
This story features the major universal themes Arrien has found in world tales of aging and elderhood. As is true in any universal story, we are not alone. We find many helping allies, as well as obstacles, unexpected gifts, and unforeseen circumstances that catalyze our growth and strip away what is unnecessary in our lives.” In this story, our allies are gnomes, which are “archetypal representations of the deep wisdom that waits to be expressed and embodied by each human being. Cross-culturally, gnomes appear in fairy tales as very wise and mischievous little people who delight in magically and practically helping people through difficult circumstances and times of transition. In the second half of life, they are significant guides who point the way through the initiatory gates and into their mysteries.”

An old gnome, wearing green boots and a rust-colored felt hat, stands at the base of an oak tree, tapping his foot on the tree’s exposed root and shaking a ring of rusty old keys. With a gnarled finger, he beckons us to come closer and says with irresistible conviction:

“There are ancient mysteries to remember and never forget as you pass through eight gates in your later years. Listen closely…

You came in through the Silver Gate, and you will leave through the Gold Gate. At the Silver, you are born. At the Gold, you will die. You will pass through many gates in between.

The Silver Gate heralds the beginning of your adventure. Its reflective, shimmering surface will mesmerize you. It will urge you to leave the safety of your familiar world and approach the inner mysteries. You will be asked to summon the courage to face the unknown.

Next, you will come to the White Picket Gate, a place of changed identities and roles. You will meet the masks you have worn previously in life and find ways to discover your true face.
Then, you will arrive at the Clay Gate, where two old wizened gnomes stand: one will offer you a bowl of white liquid and the other a bowl of red liquid. As you pass, they will say, ‘You have entered a mystery you will never understand.’ The Clay Gate will teach you to foster intimacy, embrace your sensuality, and respect your body.

“The Black and White Gate is flanked by flaming torches. Their fire roars powerfully, for at this gate, love is the flame that burns everything, and only the mystery and the journey remain. You must pass through this gate with someone else. When you do, the fire will say, ‘You shall both be humbled.’ Here you will be asked to burn in the crucible of relationships.

“And then you will come upon the Rustic Gate, etched with distinctive designs and opened to a vast green meadow flanked by high mountains. In the middle of the meadow burns the fire that takes no wood. On a boulder near the fire sits a gnome who wags his finger and says ‘You’ll never find your way out unless you reconnect to the creative fire.’ The Rustic Gate requires that you leave behind the work of your life-dream as an offering to others.

“You will find the hidden path that takes you over the mountains to the Bone gate. Behind the gate, ashes fall out of the sky into large vats. When you cross the threshold you will be stripped of your false self and its remains will be burned to cinders. The Bone Gate demands your honesty and authenticity.

“Next, you will pass through the Natural Gate and enter a deep dark wood surrounded by a beautiful desert in the heart of that wood, an elm tree and an ash tree form an arch. It is said that all of the women in the world come from the elm tree, and all of the men come from the ash tree. This is where you will find deep contentment and satisfaction. All the happy moments of your life are found at this gate, which is flooded by natural light.

“At last, you will arrive at the Gold Gate, which is glowing and filled with a numinous light. There you will embrace your spirit and learn about surrender and release. The Gold Gate will urge you to let go and trust your own faith and indomitable spirit, as you finally pass into a mysterious invisible world filled with golden white light.

“As you travel from Silver to Gold, remember that after each gate you must reflect and practice, reflect and practice, and reflect and practice some more.”

With this, the gnome snaps his fingers and disappears.

The Silver Gate
Facing new experiences and the unknown.

The White Picket Gate
Changing identities; discovering one’s true face.

The Clay Gate
Intimacy, sensuality, and sexuality.

The Black and White Gate
Relationships: the crucible of love, generosity, betrayal, and forgiveness.

The Rustic Gate
Creativity, Service, and Generativity

The Bone Gate
Authenticity, Character and Wisdom

The Natural Gate
The presence of Grace: Happiness, Satisfaction, and Peace.
The Gold Gate
Nonattachment, Surrender, and Letting Go.