

**THE SECOND  
HALF OF LIFE**  
**Opening the Eight  
Gates of Wisdom**

**Angeles Arrien,  
Ph.D.**

**Softcover**  
**5 1/4" x 8 1/2"**  
**240 pages**  
**ISBN**  
**9781591795728**  
**\$14.95**

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**7" x 7"**  
**208 pages**  
**ISBN**  
**1591792525**  
**\$21.95**

## The Second Half of Life Reclaiming Elderhood

There are more of us entering the second half of our lives than at any other time in history. Our numbers are growing rapidly, and as life expectancy continues to rise, more of us will find ourselves living much longer as elders than did our parents and grandparents.

These extra years, even decades, extend the blessings of life. Yet in many ways we are not prepared to live these years fully. Our American culture has lost the capacity to acknowledge and value elders the way many other cultures around the world do. We have forgotten the rites of passage that help us learn how to become wise elders who actively participate in our communities and live deep, fulfilling lives. Unfortunately, our culture's current perspective is that the second half of life offers only decline, disease, despair, and death.

If we are to live our best second half of life, to embrace these years and flourish in them, we need to consciously shift our cultural perspective. It is time. To know that things must change, we have only to look at the shocking fact that America has the world's highest suicide rate among elders. We can no longer ignore the wisdom that is irrevocably lost to future generations when our elders are marginalized or rendered invisible. The more challenging our world, the more we need our elders with us to share the lessons they have learned, to lend us their problem-solving skills, and to enhance our lives by imparting their unique gifts.

The rites of passage from birth to fifty years of age are well defined. We may go to school, get our first job, find life partners, raise a family, develop a career, and contribute to our communities. But the skills we developed during the first half of life are not adequate, nor are they appropriate, to support us during the second half; the tasks and requirements for growth and change are completely different. From age fifty onward, we know that there will be four broad frontiers to face:

Retirement: from what, toward what?

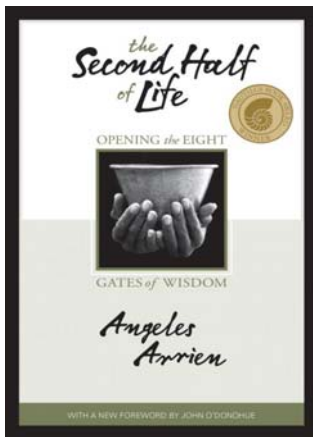
- The possibility of becoming a mentor, a steward, or a grandparent.
- Coping with the natural challenges of maintaining the health of an aging body.
- Mortality: losing our loved ones, and the inevitability of our own death

Each of these frontiers will demand from us very different attitudes, disciplines, and life skills, many of which have not yet been clearly associated with increased longevity. Each frontier will challenge us to be courageous in the face of our fears. This new terrain promises to be both daunting and exciting.

Many world tales and perennial wisdoms point to eight metaphorical gates of initiation through which we must pass in order to develop fully into wise

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people, or elders. These gates are archetypal passageways to deepening our experience of life in our later years. They offer powerful tools to help us shift our perspective. They map a new landscape for the second half of life, grounded in multicultural traditions that honor elders.

As we explore each archetypal gate, we will encounter myths, stories, and songs from around the world that teach us to see with fresh eyes. We will reflect upon art, poetry, symbols, and metaphor to gain understanding. Learning from wise people across many disciplines — psychology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, and others — we will deepen our experience and add new dimension to our lives.

The second half of life is the ultimate initiation. In it, we encounter new, unexpected, unfamiliar, and unknowable moments that remind us that we are a sacred mystery made manifest. If we truly understand what is required of us at this stage, we are blessed with an enormous opportunity to develop and embody wisdom and character. We enjoy limitless possibilities to restore, renew, and heal ourselves. And because of our increased longevity, for the first time in history we also have the opportunity to create a map of spiritual maturity for future generations to use as they enter their own later years.

How can we meet the challenges and opportunities of the second half of life? How can we do it better than has been done before? Our personal and collective work at the eight gates of initiation is an essential tool that can enable us to reclaim the rites of passage into elderhood. At each gate, we will learn from cultures that regard elders as living treasures; symbols, images, and metaphor will offer direct experience of the mysteries of initiation; and the initiatory process itself will ignite, deepen, and cultivate our wisdom and insight.

The second half of life presents us with the opportunity to develop increased depth, integrity, and character — or not. The choice is always ours. If we choose to grow and achieve ever-deepening wisdom, we must be willing to do the personal work necessary to pass through the eight gates. There are rich rewards to be had for our efforts. The tasks, challenges, and gifts presented at each gate prepare us to be wise and engaged elders who provide meaningful contributions to other individuals, families, organizations, and communities.

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