

The Wizard of Old

Recently I was in the audience of *The Wizard of Oz* at my son's school. Years before I had contemplated teaching this text to show high school students how an author can write a seemingly simple children's story while also using it as a political allegory. But as I watched these young students perform, ironically I couldn't help but see this as a story about aging!

Maybe it is because I now live in Sanibel, Florida (where many people come to retire) that I was seeing connections to aging in this tale. Or maybe this text truly has something else for us to consider.

First Dorothy meets the Scarecrow, a man who has lost his effectiveness at work. He can no longer scare the crows away, so where he once felt a distinct purpose in life, he now feels diminished and unneeded. He is simply hanging around and hanging on. He continues at his post, but his job is now just a reminder of his failings as the crows' presence mock him.

Furthermore, his brain is brittle strips of straw. He cannot remember directions. His heart cry is "If I only had a brain." My colleagues who were nearing retirement said a version of this when their brain and memory failed them, "Bear with me, I am having a senior moment." A loss of meaningful purpose and a loss of clear thinking often plague us as we age.

And what about the Tin Man? His joints are rusty and he finds it hard to move. Not only does our mind, like the Scarecrow, begin to fail us as we get older, but so does our body. Even though we used to run around with our bodies fully alive, now our bodies can make us feel stuck, even confined in their rigidness. We are at the mercy of others coming to visit us. Freedoms from yesteryear are slowly fading away.

But the Tin Man is troubled by more than just his limited movement. He cries out, "If I only had a heart." Life can certainly harden us to tragedy. We have seen too much sorrow over the years in our immediate circles or on the news, and so we are left a bit heartless. We build armor around our heart, making it less accessible. Like the Tin Man, we need someone to carry us that can of sweet oil to anoint our souls with the balm they need.

The journey in these deep woods ravages mind, body, and heart, but it goes even further; it strips us of our courage. The Lion is there to remind us that we no longer have the boldness we had in our younger years. We don't howl back at our world and take the vibrant risks we once reveled in. We have most likely become

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too comfortable in our routine, the known, and so our battle cry to scare away anything that scares us is potentially muted. Our roar a mere purr. In some cases, we can't scare away the external threats because our inner demons have begun to loom too large. Everything around us feels like it is too much. We see this when the Lion shrinks away from Dorothy's dog, Toto, who is a quarter of his size. Even small things in our path have the ability to rattle our core. Yes, we need to be humbled and see that we are not "the King of the Forest" as the Lion once claimed; however, we still need to have a voice, and we still need to know that what we say matters.

And then there is Dorothy. Her plea is one of wanting to go home. She is given sparkly red shoes to dance down that yellow brick road, but dancing loses its lustre compared to her longing for simple Kansas and that realm of connection. On her journey to recover home, she gathers those she meets and invites them to travel alongside her. Such a beautiful way to take this journey we are given. She infuses her fellow travelers with hope that the all powerful Oz will grant them their deepest desires: a new brain, a new heart, a new courage... and home.

Ultimately, she learns that she had the power to find home all along, she simply needed to recognize it; home was always there. Just like our invitation to find the home that awaits us has always been there. We are like Dorothy: we long for home. And the beauty of aging, amidst all of the losses that await us, is that our yearning for home becomes stronger, and our true home becomes closer at hand. Yes, Oz does answer our deepest longings: He calls us back to where we began our journey. He calls us home.