

Arrien, A. *The Second Half of Life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom* (2005)

Transitions from Inner to Outer Worlds: Reflection and Practice in Moving from One Stage to Another With Integrity

A book review by Alexandra Pett

Coaching on a one to one or group basis involves careful consideration of the stages of life, from birth to childhood, adolescence to early adulthood, mid life, and then maturity to aging. These stages of life, however, can be deceptive, in my opinion, since individuals back track to search out earlier stages and also anticipate old age in youth. Progression through life is not, I maintain, linear, but circular.

Much of the best self help literature has emerged from the writing and research of Carl Jung and from global mythic studies by Joseph Campbell. From Jung comes the distinction between inner and outer experiences (as well as the categories of introvert and extrovert), the concept of synchronicity (connections in experience that may seem mysterious), and the belief in inner journey. Campbell, whose work can be related to Jung's, establishes the archetypal process of heroic development (from initiation, to rebirth, and then to return). Dreams are important as portals to the unconscious.

Both Jung and Campbell believe in the important of threshold as a crossing from the known to the unknown in life experiences. Drawing on this heritage in psychology and anthropology, American writer Angeles Arrien sets out to chart the passages of the years after 50, as a second stage of life, which she calls the "extra years" (p.1). Her book describes eight archetypal gates as aspects of unfolding selfhood in stages of life that are often a blurr in other writings about passages in the overall life journey. Her main point is that living deeply is a form of qualitative research, by which she means that we explore all aspects of life to their fullest potential.

One intriguing feature of the book is the focus on hands and feet as a way to measure progress and transitioning over each bridge. She states: "Hands and feet are both extremes of the body and are obedient to our instinctual desires and thoughts. Many cultures of the world purify or mark hands and feet before or after an initiation, in recognition of their capacity to bridge the profane and sacred worlds" (p. 3). Hands and feet are important, moreover, in being useful; they are linked to reciprocity of love and going to places where human beings can be of service to others. This, I would suggest, is part of the idealism of Arrien's approach to transitions.

Another strength of the book lies in the reflective questions, affirmations, and practices or rituals outlined with each chapter or gate. At the end of the book a comprehensive bibliography provides ideas for further reading and study.

In places, as in the section on intimacy, the book is too generalized to be easily applicable, at least in terms of my own experiences, and too evasive of the physicalities of life to translate to daily living. It verges on being too genteel. For myself, more guts and gore would help to peg down the facts of aging.

Still, I have to admit that the phrase "fiesta of the body" is fun. Arrien tells us: " We learn to engage the body as a 'fiesta' and celebrate and honor it for what it teaches us about ourselves" (p. 79).

Arrien is well read and makes several observations that could be applicable to business research. She spells out the ways in which quantitative investigations (statistics and number

crunching) are of the outer world, whereas qualitative studies (flow of experiences) deal with the inner world. The thesis of her book is that we must explore qualitative experience. When I realized that, however, I wished that she had offered some interviews of individuals to establish the varieties of personal experience.

In terms of organization, the book is flawless. Here are the eight gates: one, the silver gate that asks us to face new experiences and the unknown; two, the white picket gate that deals with changing identities and discovering one's true face; three, the clay gate that covers intimacy, sensuality, and sexuality; four, the black and white gate that summarizes the issues of relationships (love, generosity, betrayal, and forgiveness); five, the rustic gate that focuses on creativity; six, the bone gate that is about authenticity and wisdom; and, finally, the gold gate that takes us toward surrender and let go.

In my reading, I found the most insightful chapter of the book came near the beginning, in the section on the silver gate. Arrien lists some questions about work and the workplace that she links to five stages of soul development (the call, the search, the struggle, the breakthrough, and the return).

You have probably already encountered these questions, if you have been working with a coach. I am including these questions because the process of answering them is ongoing, whether in the first or second part of life.

1. Where are you being called in your work? What specific actions can you take to support the call?
2. What are you searching for in your work? What actions can you take to support the search for what is important for you?
3. In what ways is your workplace struggling? Do you see patterns in this struggle?
4. What breakthrough do you want to create in your work that would lead to a major advance in this organization?
5. What do you want to return to that you have found effective in your work? What action can you take to implement effective return?

Statements of challenges with prayers to deal with difficulties accompany the transitions from one gate to another. Inevitably, the last chapter suggests the need to prepare for death.

Although I occasionally found the tone and orientation of the book depressing, I ended my reading with a lot of respect for Arrien's commitment to map out territories of experience that tend to be overlooked in a lot of other self help literature. She is not preachy, even when pointing out the loss of the wisdom of elders in contemporary cultures. Her dedication to integrity as the backbone of personal development is strong, and so is the message of her writing.