

What Stage Are You In?

*Reflections on Later Life Through
the Life of a Tree*

A ThriveSpan Reflection

Dr Denise Taylor

This reflection is an early order gift with ThriveSpan: Walking Gently Into What Matters Now

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I have spent a great deal of time in woodland. Walking among trees, managing four acres of my own, watching how they grow, how they shed, how they endure and how, eventually, they return to the earth. And I have come to believe that trees offer us something that most models of ageing do not: a way of understanding later life that includes everything.

The cycle of a tree — from seed to decay — does not rank one stage above another. The snag is not a failure of the sapling. The bare winter branch is not inferior to the summer canopy. Every stage has its own integrity, its own purpose, its own quiet dignity.

What I find most useful about this metaphor is that it does not ask us to place ourselves neatly in a single stage. Later life is rarely that tidy. You may be simultaneously mature in experience, seed-like in a new idea beginning to form, and consciously releasing something that no longer belongs to you. That may feel like confusion at times, but it is often something more whole.

What follows is an invitation to sit with each stage, not as a ladder to climb, but as a landscape to recognise yourself within.

Seed: The Quiet Beginning

Every tree starts as a seed. Small, complete, and full of potential that is not yet visible. A seed does not need to prove itself. It simply holds what it contains and waits for the right conditions.

In later life, there are often new seeds forming, ideas, longings, or quiet callings that have not yet found their moment. Something you have been carrying without quite naming.

Reflection: *What seed is quietly forming in you: an idea, a wish, or a possibility you have not yet spoken aloud?*

Germination: Taking Root

Germination is invisible at first. The roots reach downward before anything shows above the soil. There is growth happening that cannot yet be seen, and this can be uncomfortable, especially if we are used to visible progress.

In human terms, this is the stage of trying something new, of laying down inner foundations, perhaps through reflection, therapy, a course, or a quiet shift in how we understand ourselves. The roots of a new chapter.

Reflection: *Where in your life is something growing beneath the surface, not yet visible, but real? Can you trust that process?*

Seedling: Tender and New

The seedling is visible now, but tender, and in need of the right conditions. Not everything will survive this stage, and that is part of the natural order. But the seedling that does take hold has a particular kind of aliveness to it.

In later life, this might be the early days of a new project, a new relationship, a new way of spending your time. Something that feels hopeful but still fragile, needing care and the right conditions rather than pressure.

Reflection: *What new thing in your life is still tender? What conditions does it need from you in order to grow?*

Sapling: Finding Strength

A sapling has survived its vulnerable beginning. It is growing with purpose and beginning to find its form. It bends in the wind rather than breaking, developing the flexibility that will serve it in maturity.

We can be saplings at any age, when we are establishing something new, building resilience in unfamiliar territory, or learning to bend without losing ourselves.

Reflection: *Where are you building resilience right now? What is strengthening in you, even through difficulty?*

Maturity: Full and Grounded

A mature tree has reached its full size. It provides shade, shelter, and habitat for others. It has weathered seasons and grown rings of experience that tell its story. Maturity in a tree is not the end, it is the fullest expression of what the tree has always been becoming.

This is the stage where depth, presence, and the accumulated wisdom of a life can be most fully offered. Not in grand gestures, but in who you are and how you show up.

***Reflection:** What does your maturity offer to others, not as achievement, but as presence? What shade do you provide?*

Flower, Fruit, Nut: Giving Outward

In season, a mature tree flowers, fruits, and seeds. This is its outward gift, not only to those who enjoy the fruit, but to the future, through the seeds it scatters. The tree does not hold back its flowering for a more convenient time. It gives when it is ready.

In later life, this might be the work of mentoring, creating, sharing, writing, or contributing, offering the fruits of a life lived to those who come after, or those alongside us now.

***Reflection:** What are you ready to offer now, what fruit, what seed, what gift is waiting to be given?*

Reproduce: Passing On

A reproducing tree is contributing to what comes next. It is not diminished by giving its seeds away, it is fulfilled by it. The act of reproduction in a tree is generous and unhurried. It does not count its acorns.

This is the territory of legacy, not as a grand project to be completed, but as the everyday passing on of values, stories, skills, and ways of being. The quiet continuity of a life given generously.

Reflection: *What are you passing on, not just in material terms, but in the way you live, love, and engage with the world?*

Decay or Snag: Returning and Contributing Still

A snag is a standing dead tree, and in ecological terms, it is one of the most valuable things in a woodland. It provides habitat for hundreds of species. Its decay feeds the soil that will nourish future trees. The end of its individual life is not the end of its contribution.

This stage asks us to consider what it means to let go, of roles, of productivity, of the self we have been, while recognising that even in releasing, we are giving something back. Decay is not failure. It is transformation.

Reflection: *What are you releasing, and what might be nourished by that releasing? What does letting go make possible?*

You Are Not One Stage

If you have been reading this and finding yourself in more than one stage at once, that is exactly right. You may be mature in your sense of self while still germinating a new idea. You may be releasing one role while flowering in another. You may be a snag in one corner of your life while a sapling in another.

The tree cycle does not ask you to be in one place. It asks you to look clearly at where you are, and to trust that wherever that is, it has its own integrity.

Later life is not a single season. It is a whole woodland.



Dr Denise Taylor is a Chartered Psychologist and writer exploring later life, meaning, and the experience of ageing. She is the originator of ThriveSpan and author of *ThriveSpan: Walking Gently Into What Matters Now*.

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