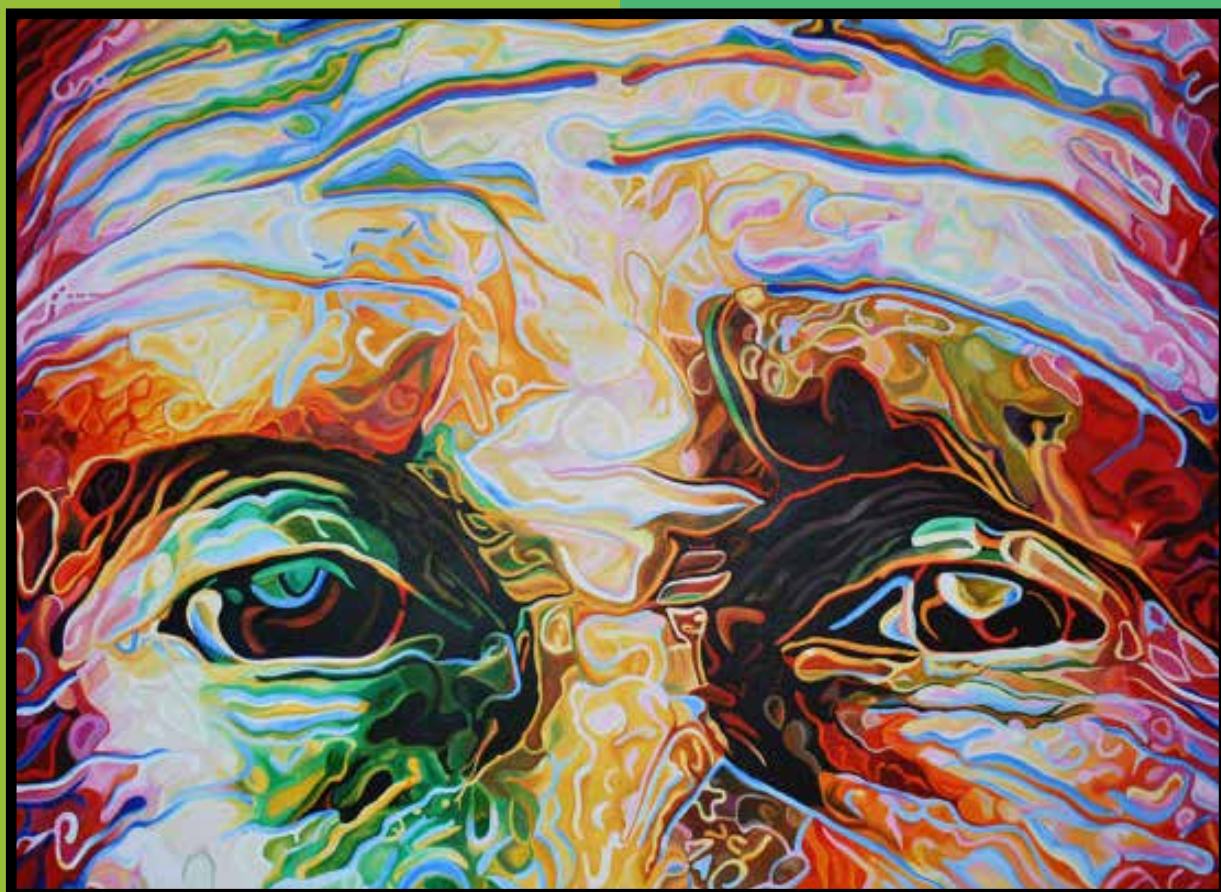


Fall 2013

Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

Test of Time: The Art of Aging



I wish for myself and for all who are growing older release from fear and anxiety so that we can fully receive the valedictory gifts of vision and completion.

— Peter Laarman '93 M.Div.

COVER ART

"Beauty of Age"
by Colleen Deery

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John Lindner — Editorial Director

Ray Waddle — Editor-in-Chief

Constance Royster — Senior Advisor

Peter W. Johnson, YPPS — Graphic Designer

Campbell Harmon — Online Coordinator

Test of Time: The Art of Aging



From the Dean's Desk



Gregory E. Sterling
The Reverend Henry L. Slack
Dean of Yale Divinity School
& Lillian Claus Professor
of New Testament

In June I attended a conference at the University of Bern, Switzerland. As people were introduced, I realized two things: I was the only American in the group – not the first time that this has happened – and I was the oldest person in the group – the first time that this has happened. As I reflected on the group through the eyes of my young European colleagues, the aging demographic of the baby boomer generation was no longer just a national trend, but a personal realization.

How do we think of the aging process or the final decades of our lives? Do we view aging much like those who read Qoheleth 12:3-5 allegorically to describe the increasing limitations of age?

"... In the day when those who watch the house tremble (limbs quiver), powerful men are bent (the legs), the women who grind stop because they are too few (the molar teeth), those who look through the windows grow dim (the eyes), when the double-doors into the street are shut (the ears no longer hear), the sound of the mill becomes dim (the voice weakens), one rises at the sound of a bird (sleep is difficult), all the daughters of the song become low (the joy of music is diminished); when one fears heights and terrors are in the road (mobility is a challenge); the almond tree blossoms (hair turns white), the locust droops (erectile dysfunction), and the caper fails (stimulants fail)."

While the specifics of the translation and allegory are debatable, the basic image of aging was negative much as it was in other Ancient Near Eastern literature.

Or do we celebrate the aged, in the spirit of other biblical texts? "Gray hair is a crown of splendor, acquired through the path of righteousness" (Prov 16:31; see also 20:29; Sir 25:3-6).

One of the first steps in developing a positive image of aging and of the aged is to understand the issues and challenges that face older people and their position within our 21st-century world. This fall issue of *Reflections* provides an occasion to ponder a wide range of ethical and pragmatic questions about the aging society through the voices of those who either face them personally or have devoted careers to reflecting on them. Whether you read Stanley Hauerwas' very personal thoughts about his retirement or Leo Cooney's summary of insights after 40 years as a leading geriatrics specialist at Yale, you will hear the voices of sensitive thinkers who have grappled with the questions in personal ways.

All of us will have to do so: life forces this upon us; we have no choice. It begins with the deaths of our grandparents and the generation of people whom we considered old when we were children. It intensifies when we watch our parents retire, deal with aging, and finally die. Following the deaths of first my mother and then my father, as the first child I felt that I was standing on the upper floor of a building with no one above me. The deaths of parents force us to stare at our own mortality. If we didn't know before, we now realize that – if we are fortunate – we will face these issues ourselves when our almond tree fully blossoms.

Churches have something vital and clarifying to offer to this intensifying demographic drama. The Christian faith shapes the way that we view the meaning of life, the journey of life, and the end of life. Most importantly, it gives significance and hope to every stage of life – including the final stages. Congregations are gathering places for discerning the shape and meaning of all aspects of life, a spiritual venue that facilitates shared experience and offers resilient hope. May their voices be heard.

Thanks to our contributing writers for exploring this theme in its many dimensions. A special thanks goes to Leo Cooney for his guidance and consultation in outlining various important dynamics of aging.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gregory E. Sterling".

Gregory E. Sterling
Dean

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A Fitting Conclusion to a Life Well Led

By Leo M. Cooney, Jr., M.D.

The fast-changing demographics of the population pose a special challenge to contemporary America. Those who are 85 and older are the fastest-growing segment of society. These older individuals are spending a longer part of their lives in retirement, and their needs will test their communities. Families, congregations, and other organizations must focus as never before on an urgent goal: helping older citizens attain a meaningful and fulfilling late life.

The probability that a 50-year-old will reach the age of 90 has tripled in the past 50 years (today, 16.4 percent of men, 28.2 percent of women). These added years, however, can be fraught with complications. During the last year of life for those 85 and older, up to 45 percent spend some time in a nursing home, 60-70 percent have difficulty with walking, dressing,

Most older individuals are unlikely to bequeath great works of arts, monuments, or edifices. They leave behind how they lived their lives.

or toileting, 40-50 percent have cognitive impairment. Of those who are cognitively impaired, 25 percent don't recognize their own family and 20 percent have dementia-related behavioral problems.¹ Indeed, the prevalence of dementia doubles with every five-year period after age 60. This condition affects 12 percent of those aged 80-85, 25 percent of those aged 85-90, and more than half of those who are 90 and older.² Although older Americans are more physically independent than they were 20 years ago, 50 percent of individuals aged 85 and older need some help with daily activities.³

True Quality of Life

The task facing society is to help older citizens attain a high quality of life without diverting substantial social resources from other needs. These challenges

cannot be met until families and communities have a full understanding of the priorities valued by older individuals. What gives them satisfaction? What can make their lives meaningful and fulfilling?

Perhaps surprisingly, good health is not the holy grail of life satisfaction for older individuals. One study of patients with cancer, chronic lung disease, and heart failure, all of whom met the hospice criteria for terminal illness, found that 40 percent reported that the quality of their life was "good," while an additional 17 percent stated that "it couldn't be better." In another study, 37 percent of chronically ill patients requiring frequent hospitalizations and physician visits reported that the quality of life was "about as good as it could be."

If "good health" does not necessarily define quality of life, then what does? Older individuals identify other factors that are more important to life satisfaction than health – frequent contacts with friends, the ability to continue to plan for the future, the sense of a role in life, relationships with their family, and a feeling of control over their lives. They also enjoy their role as a link between generations. Individuals with a poor quality of life are characterized by low self-esteem, exhaustion from their experiences of grief or other setbacks, a loss of interest in life, and lack of any sense of control over their lives.

More than anything else, older persons want to retain their identity in their last years. They want to be able to carry on the rhythm they have had

throughout their lives. The pace and beat may vary, but they want to sustain a familiar rhythm to their particular personality. Preserving that identity depends on staying focused on what is most important to them, understanding who they are, and keeping a strong perception of their own worth, value, and fulfillment.

This can be difficult. Older persons' identities are challenged by changes in their bodies, transitions in their way of life or residence, and loss of individuals important to them.

But there are a numbers of steps that older persons can take to maintain their identity. These include:

- **Stay connected.** It's important to continue making an effort to be active in family life and community. It requires staying in touch with the people and institutions that are vital to the older person. Older persons must make sure they are not separated from friends and families by moves. They will need a network of family and friends more and more as they age.
- **Maintain a personal role.** We all fear the thought of feeling superfluous, of having little value to others, and of becoming a burden. Everyone wants to feel needed. In later life roles should be adapted to new or declining levels of function. Older people still have a major role to play, even if they can no longer provide physical support to their families. They serve as advocates and mentors. They approve the direction of the lives of their children and grandchildren. They stand as a living symbol of family tradition. They embody an intergenerational link that keeps those traditions alive.
- **Adapt to altered capabilities.** Older individuals must constantly adjust to changing circumstances and accordingly adjust feasible goals and expectations. They should emphasize competencies they possess in abundance – their specific skills and knowledge – and place less emphasis on abilities they are less likely to possess, such as physical endurance. To maintain a sense of value and self-esteem, they must minimize the discrepancy between expectations and achievements as much as possible.
- **Adjust to medical problems and choose interventions wisely.** This ability in late life is essential to life satisfaction. Medical problems come with the territory, can take over one's life, dominate conversations, and affect interactions with others. This is no way to spend the last years. Older people need

The peaches arriving at the office were very different from the ones that I was used to. These were fuzzy, white, irregular in shape, bursting with juice, delicious. This special fruit told me that it was harvest time at Mr. Wilson's orchard, and he was in to see me.

I had known Mr. Wilson in two different circumstances. Twenty years ago, he brought in his wife to see me. She suffered from a particularly disabling variant of Parkinson's disease. When she stood up, her blood pressure would drop precipitously, eventually resulting in multiple falls and two fractured hips. When Mrs. Wilson later developed dementia, another complication of her disease, her care became quite difficult. I marveled at Mr. Wilson every time I saw him with his wife. He was incredibly calm, competent, and attentive. He supplied superb care for her in a devoted and selfless manner. He made every effort to provide for her contentment in the face of a devastating illness.

A few years later, after his wife had died, Mr. Wilson returned with his own problem, a type of arthritis. I now saw him every six months, as he did well with treatment. As the years went by, I looked forward more and more to his visits, and not just for the peaches.

Mr. Wilson has met the most important challenge of his last years. He has preserved his identity, his sense of self, despite a number of physical and personal changes. He has made the adjustment remarkably well from devoted caregiver of his wife to steward of his garden and orchard.

Now 92, Mr. Wilson is mentally fit and has a full life. Although generally healthy, he is aware of the limitations that come with age. He has decreased his travel, hiking, and social life a good deal (he visited national parks with his son every two years until age 90). Most days he focuses on his house, his garden, and his orchard. He is satisfied with his day if he can get a bit of work done in his yard. He recognizes the limitations of his back, and has placed chairs strategically throughout his yard so he can sit as needed. He has adjusted his sights remarkably well, and his good nature and chuckles attest to his contentment.

Mr. Wilson has not let his physical limitations affect his enjoyment of life. A man who was hiking mountains until his late 80s can now walk only a few feet before his back calls for a chair. He still finds the opportunity to trim his wonderful peach trees and tend to his garden. His limited chores bring him as much satisfaction as he previously found in extensive physical activities. Despite going from chair to chair in his garden, he is still who he is. His smile outdoes even his delicious peaches.

— Leo M. Cooney, Jr., M.D.

to learn to roll with the punches, get treatment, and then get on with their lives. They should avoid feeling sorry for themselves and focus instead on calming the concerns of family members. An older person's last years need not be filled with worry. They should not sit around and wait for "the other shoe to drop." They should focus on the quality of each day, not on apprehensions about the future. Because late life brings a new role, that of a patient, older individuals need to decide what they want from health care. Do they want to extend their lives at all costs? Alternatively, do they want to maintain the particular flow of their lives, their connections to those most important to them, and an ability to do as much for themselves as possible?

- **Maintain independence.** Staying independent is important to continuing to be "who you are" in late life. Older people need to consider, for example, whether they want to stay on medications that might extend their lives a bit but prevent them from performing daily activities. They should determine whether a major medical intervention might incapacitate them further and reduce their contact with those most important to them. These are daunting issues, but on another front the news is good: older Americans are substantially more physically capable than they were 20 years ago. Data from the National Long Term Care Survey demonstrates that 73.5 percent of individuals 65 and older had no chronic disabilities in 1982; that number increased to 81 percent by 2004. For those aged 85 and older, the percentage of people who are fully independent has gone up from 37.9 percent to 50.3 percent.⁴ If an older person is having difficulty with daily activities, an evaluation by a physician and therapist can be very helpful. The clinician needs to identify the "rate limiting factor" to independence and intervene appropriately.

- **Learn to cope with disabilities.** Physical and cognitive disabilities often accompany late life. Coping with these limitations is essential to satisfaction in the last years. Older individuals can learn a good deal from others who have managed with disabilities. They'll discover that many disabled people learn to maintain a sense of control over their lives, find a positive aspect of their illness experience, keep perspective by staying mindful of those who are more disabled than they are, and use problem-solving coping strategies throughout. They understand their restrictions and introduce order and predictability into their lives.

- **Leave a legacy.** Older individuals want to leave a legacy. They should thus think about how they want to be remembered and what they wish to leave behind. Most older individuals are unlikely to bequeath great works of arts, monuments, or edifices. They leave behind how they lived their lives. They need to consider how they will pass on their values and beliefs and preserve themselves in the memory of

An older person should never be placed in an environment that he or she dislikes simply to provide "peace of mind" to the children.

those who follow them. We are all products of those who come before us. We have been given values, traditions, beliefs, and approaches to life. We take that cultural heritage and hone these concepts and values in the context of our own life and times. Acting as a link between generations is an important role in late life. To live on in the lives of others, however, we must stay connected with who we are even as we face life's challenges in our last years.

Congregational Welcome

Families, communities, and religious organizations should use all of these priorities as a litmus test when devising plans to help their older members and evaluating proposed interventions. The question to keep in mind: will these efforts help these older individuals maintain "who they are" to the very end?

Families and communities can help older persons stay connected by providing transportation to religious services and public gatherings, physician's visits, and other necessary appointments. Transportation is a major problem for older Americans, given the limits of public transportation and the driving problems that often come with age.

Loved ones should make sure that older relatives still have a major role in the family. Community and religious organizations should make use of the special expertise of their older members. Ensure that they participate in the decisions and direction of the larger group. The institutional memories of these senior members can add greatly to these deliberations.

Public buildings and facilities should accommodate the cognitive and physical limitations of older residents. Signs and instructions should be clear, succinct, and easy to read. Seating in lobbies, waiting rooms, and auditoriums should be high enough to allow for easy transfers, and should be stable and

with comfortable arms. Low couches and cushioned “easy chairs” should be kept to a minimum. Most importantly, toilets should have raised seats, with available “grab bars,” and be large enough to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers.

Older persons should be allowed to maintain control of their lives to the very end. Their most

important decisions in these last years are where they will live and what medical interventions they will undergo.

When making decisions about living sites, the criterion should be the satisfaction of the older person. An older person should never be placed in an environment that he or she dislikes simply

Maggie: Neighborhood Angel

I got to know Maggie through the stories about her. My favorite was the insulin with breakfast.

For years, Maggie would start breakfast in her family home by preparing and dishing out oatmeal to her three children, then go next door to administer Mrs. O'Brien's insulin shot. She would rush home to give her children their juice and toast before injecting Mrs. Walsh, who lived around the corner. Finally, in the midst of getting the children ready for school, she would stop downstairs to give Mrs. McIntyre her insulin. Maggie had no nursing training or medical background, but these neighbors needed her help. Their own families couldn't deal with the injections, so Maggie stepped in. She was always there for those in need.

Later stories told of her great impact on her community, helping to found a homeless shelter for women and serving on the town's board of alderman. As her physical abilities declined with age, she continued an active role as a mentor and supporter of community agencies.

Maggie's knee arthritis eventually robbed her of her independence. She fell frequently and needed a good deal of help with her mobility. She joked about the sight of a car driving across her lawn to park at the front door so that she could swing from her wheelchair into the front seat. She needed a stair glide to get up her stairs, but she made this an amusement ride for the neighborhood children.

Her husband's dementia was a challenge. Maggie had to give him step-by-step directions on dressing, getting ready for bed, and tooth-brushing. She occasionally rolled her eyes at him but never wavered from 60 years of love and devotion.

Maggie worked hard to maintain the rhythm of her life to the end and to preserve her special legacy. Husband John's disabilities and her immobility led many to suggest a higher “level of care.” Would their needs not be better met in an assisted-living facility, where mobility aids, daily assistance, meals, and bathing help could be provided?

Would their needs not be better met in an assisted-living facility, where mobility aids, daily assistance, meals, and bathing help could be provided? “Not on your life!” Maggie roared.

“Not on your life!” Maggie roared. She knew that so much of who she was resided in her home. She arranged it so that her friends could look through the front door window into the kitchen and see Maggie and John at the table. A cup of tea and a sweet treat awaited, as well as some wonderful stories of the old days.

Most importantly, Maggie knew that she couldn't dispense insulin from a distant facility. Her kitchen table was a source of inspiration and strength to so many who entered daily. To leave that home would have disrupted her rhythm and lessened her neighborhood legacy.

In her last year, when new challenges affected this special couple, their family, and their entire neighborhood, Maggie went back to dispensing insulin. She treated family and neighbors from her chair in her kitchen, sustaining them at a difficult time with her strength, her wisdom, and her example. She gave them a daily dose of life-sustaining medicine by infusing their spirits with the will to carry on.

When her work was done, Maggie suddenly developed fatigue and jaundice, and a widespread cancer was found. She was blessed with a special last period to bid us farewell. Propped up in a bed in her parlor, she presided at a specially organized ceremony, a kind of wake, where she dispensed her wisdom and wished us well. During these extraordinary last few days, Maggie raised our spirits by grasping our hands with strength and intensity, giving us her final lesson: “This is how to live your life and how to depart from it.”

— Leo M. Cooney, Jr., M.D.

to provide “peace of mind” to the children. Concerns about older individuals’ “safety” should not adversely affect the quality of their lives.

As long as they are able, older persons should make their own healthcare decisions. If they cannot, family members need to honor the elders’ wishes that were articulated while still fully competent. Families should resist the urge to push older relatives into medical interventions they do not want. Older persons should be comfortable with the impact and consequences of any intervention they undertake.

For centuries, one of the most important roles of elder citizens was to pass on the essential knowledge, skills, and communal cultural heritage to the next generation. They were given the responsibility of ensuring that this heritage be protected and transmitted. Though this information may now be entrusted to written and electronic media, the communal role of elder members should carry on.

In an enlightened and accomplished society, elder members should not be moved to the periphery. They should expect to continue to have robust and close relationships, a sense of control of their lives, the ability to continue to grow and develop, and the opportunity to leave a legacy to those who follow. Humane societies should ensure that the last years of their older citizens are fitting conclusions to lives well led.

Dr. Leo Cooney, Jr., M.D., Humana Professor of Medicine (Geriatrics), established the program in geriatrics at Yale in 1976. He was the first director of the Continuing Care Unit, now known as the Yale Acute Care for the Elderly Unit. At Yale his focus includes assisting elderly individuals to attain the highest level of independence possible, and preparing medical residents and students to care for the multiple problems of the frail elderly. He has won numerous teaching awards and is a past president of the American Geriatrics Society.

Notes

- 1 Y. Liao, D.L. McGee, G. Cao, et al., “Quality of the Last Year of Life of Older Adults: 1986 vs 1993,” *JAMA*, vol. 283 (4), (2000), pp. 512-518. See also H.R. Lentzner, E.R. Pamuk, E.P. Rhodenhiser, et al. “The Quality of Life in the Year before Death,” *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 82 (August 1992), pp. 1093-1098.
- 2 C.P. Ferri, M. Prince, C. Brayne, et. al., “Global Prevalence of Dementia: A Delphi Consensus Study,” *Lancet*, vol. 366 (2005), pp. 2112-2117.
- 3 K. Manton, et al., “Change in Chronic Disability from 1982 to 2004/2005 as Measured by Long-term Changes in Function and Health in the U.S. Elderly Population,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 103, no. 48 (2006), pp. 18374-18379.
- 4 Manton, et al.

LIFE'S RAINBOW

By Sheila Banani

Beginnings are lacquer red
fired hard in the kiln
of hot hope;

Middles, copper yellow
in sunshine,
sometimes oxidize green
with tears; but

Endings are always indigo
before we step
on the other shore.



Beyond the Intergenerational Social Contract

By Jennifer A. Herdt

*We are an aging society, indeed an aging world, with birth rates declining and the elderly making up a growing percentage of overall population. Edmund Burke, critiquing Rousseau's notion of a social contract between the sovereign and the people, famously wrote of society as a kind of partnership between the generations: "Society is indeed a contract ... The state ... is ... a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."*¹

Today, that contract seems to be eroding quickly. Public intellectuals such as Harvard's Niall Ferguson are warning of a coming age war that will displace the class warfare of the past.² An ever-smaller workforce is being asked to shoulder the burdens of supporting an ever-growing population of retirees. Though many societies in the past had a high ratio of dependents to workers, the body of dependents was primarily children. In more and more parts of the world today, by contrast, the retired and elderly make up the largest class of dependents. Given the diseases and disabilities of age, together with the dramatic advances of modern medicine, supporting this sector of the population is particularly expensive, and becoming more so every day.

Breach of Partnership

The problem is complex, and there is no quick fix. As funding for Social Security in the United States faces the prospect of exhaustion, baby boomers feel betrayed. They have paid into these funds throughout their working lives, on the understanding that they would be supported in their retirement. Is the nation not obligated to find a way to uphold its end of the bargain? On the other hand, can the rise in taxes needed to fund future Social Security – or the severe spending cuts needed elsewhere to rescue it – be borne without crippling the national economy? Ferguson argues that "in the enormous intergenera-

tional transfers implied by current fiscal policies we see a shocking and perhaps unparalleled breach of precisely that partnership."³ Fulfilling commitments made to those in retirement might make it impossible to extend the same care to those to come.

I have no neat solution to offer. I do think, though, that we might make a start by questioning the Burkean metaphor of contract, lasting as it has

In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, says Gal. 3:28. And, we might add, no longer young or old.

been. Burke sought to draw attention to the unifying force of tradition, of culture, of bonds of sentiment. We cannot reinvent society anew in each generation, he argued, even if we recognize elements of injustice and oppression in our societies. Lasting reform is a slow and organic process; revolutions simply breed revolutions. There is wisdom here, even if Burkean conservatism can also be used to excuse indifference to reform.

Burke argued that we need to appreciate our indebtedness to those who have gone before us and our responsibility to those who come after. These are not bargains that we have chosen to strike up; we have not haggled over terms in order to make

them favorable to ourselves. Rather, we come to consciousness of ourselves as defined by unchosen relationships and identities and obligations, and it is our task to negotiate these with integrity.

But the language of contract actually works at cross-purposes to Burke's best aims. True, the language of an intergenerational social contract calls on us to fulfill commitments we have undertaken, but it also licenses us to neglect all other commitments except those to which we have freely and explicitly consented. Further, it encourages us to identify solely with those of our own generation. It is easy to be cynical and assume everyone votes for his or her own self-interest, but the evidence does not support this assumption. Instead, individuals vote for policies that they take to be in the best interest of their core affinity group or groups.⁴ The discourse of an intergenerational social contract encourages people to think in terms of generational identity politics. In supporting the lobbying efforts of a group as vast and powerful as the AARP, for instance, we are serving something larger and higher than self-interest – but we are also reinforcing tendencies to think of the set of retired Americans as a “we” arrayed against a host of “theys” who are eager to deprive us of resources and rob us of our rights.

The tendency to structure American social life according to generational cohorts reinforces this generational identity politics. Due in part to increasing geographic mobility and the priority of the nuclear over the extended family, ever-greater numbers of retirees are moving to retirement communities and nursing homes in which most of their social contacts are with members of their own generation, instead of remaining within the intergenerational communities in which they have spent their working lives and eventually moving in with family members.

There is a great deal to be said in favor of these retirement communities, which offer robust social and medical support systems for their members, helping them maintain their independence and live healthy lives. But we need to be conscious of the ways in which they also work, in tandem with the social forces that have fed their development, to undermine cross-generational forms of identification.

We're In This Together

We will continue to identify with our generational cohort and lobby for its interests. But in order to meet the challenges that lie ahead we need also to cultivate cross-generational bonds of affinity and identification, bonds capable of counteracting the more negative aspects of what Jonathan Haidt in *The Righteous Mind* terms our “groupish” tenden-

cies.⁵ Burke wrote not only of a contract between the generations but of an intergenerational partnership. We might explore the potential of this social metaphor of partnership as we cultivate concrete social practices that bring the generations together in shared projects, harnessing the energy of the young and the wisdom of the mature.

The churches have always been and must continue to be places where these practices are cultivated: “in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female,” says Galatians 3:28. And, we might add, no longer young or old.

If we can understand ourselves to be “in this together,” with collective goals, shared identities, and common goods at stake, we can begin productively to re-frame debates about social assistance for the aging. Instead of girding our loins for an “age war,” we can reflect together on the conditions that allow a flourishing life for all, at every stage of life, in recognition of our shared humanity, our shared finitude, and our shared longing to be taken up into the life of God.

Jennifer A. Herdt, who joined YDS in 2010, is Professor of Christian Ethics and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs. Her research interests include early modern and modern moral thought, classical and contemporary virtue ethics, and contemporary Protestant social ethics and political theology. She is the author of *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1997) and *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago, 2008).

Notes

- 1 J. C. D. Clark, ed., *Reflections on the Revolution in France. A Critical Edition* (Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 261.
- 2 “Prepare for the Clash of the Generations,” *The Telegraph*, 30 September 2007, <http://www.niallferguson.com/journalism/finance-economics/prepare-for-the-clash-of-the-generations>.
- 3 Reith Lectures, New York Historical Society, 18 June 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/financialcrisis/9338997/Reith-Lecture-Were-mortgaging-the-future-of-the-younger-generation.html>.
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GETTING READY FOR AN AGING SOCIETY: An Interview with Bernadette DiGiulian



Bernadette DiGiulian '83 M.Div. is a Catholic laywoman in Branford, CT, with long experience as a chaplain and elder care advocate. She operates her own geriatric case management company and is founder/president of the Shoreline Elder Care Alliance, which provides elders with resource referrals, education, and professional services.

REFLECTIONS: *Are congregations ready for the surging numbers of older people in society?*

DIGIULIAN: It's an irony that churches are filled with older people now and yet, in many cases, churches aren't preparing members to embrace aging. There's a lot of denial. I talk to church leaders about aging, but it's clear that what I have to say isn't sexy in the way issues of youth, social justice, or social action are. But the aging issue *is* social action. Clergy just need to see it that way.

REFLECTIONS: *What about individuals? Have you seen a shift in attitude?*

DIGIULIAN: The culture is changing. There simply are more older people out there – on the street, in movies, in TV ads about elder care. It's bound to raise awareness. Some years ago there was a widespread lack of preparation. The attitude was: "I'm not old yet! I'm not ready, and I don't need to be." The plan was to wait for a crisis. Nothing was in place. More people realize today you have to prepare. The myth of individualism says being independent means never asking for help. But that's nonsense. As you get older, get help when you need it – and accept it. This might mean having an aide come in to help you get ready in the morning or drive you to places. A little help gives you some energy for other activities that enhance independence.

REFLECTIONS: *How does spirituality change with age?*

DIGIULIAN: Older people get labeled as stubborn and rigid, but I don't find that to be true. In my experience, older people seek God in a broader way, a less parochial way, than they did before. They become more reflective. Churches can help them along on that – give them opportunities to discuss how they feel about their earlier life, their current life, the afterlife.

REFLECTIONS: *What should congregations be doing?*

DIGIULIAN: Bring specialists in to speak. Sponsor a series on hearing loss, diabetes, memory loss. Have someone speak from the Visiting Nurse Associations of America or a local home health care providing agency. Do a health fair. Bring in an elder

care attorney. Talk about what preparation means. Have you arranged for power of attorney? Do you have a trustworthy person to talk to about finances? Consider getting a healthcare agent who you can tell what you'd want if you could no longer speak for yourself. It will enable you to share your thoughts about life and death and have someone in place to speak for you if it is ever needed.

REFLECTIONS: *How can a congregation stay connected with a member who can no longer get to church?*

DIGIULIAN: It's very sad to see how many older people are forgotten once they can't go to church. They might have been members for 60 years, but then they go to assisted living or a nursing home, and the church gets a new minister, and soon they're left out.

Congregations should think creatively, and some do. I knew a woman who was the church organist for many years but then went to an assisted living facility. Her church arranged for the minister to visit her every other week, and a lay group came on the alternate weeks and did a Bible study with her. They'd record her voice reading from Scripture, and then play the recording at worship the next week. What a wonderful idea that was.

REFLECTIONS: *In your experience, do people have trouble adjusting to retirement?*

DIGIULIAN: Often it's hard. People saw themselves as doing important work, and now they don't feel important. Men especially experience this, but in the future more and more women will. Lots of factors are involved. It's important to be connected to friends or family: you still feel valuable when other people still care. I think people with a strong faith commitment do better. They're more accepting of this new phase, more trusting of God.

Life review is important, recounting one's talents and abilities and how these helped the world. For younger seniors this helps them see how they might put some of their talents to use in new ways, such as volunteerism. For older seniors it gives them a way to feel good about themselves and celebrate that.

REFLECTIONS: *What are you learning with age?*

DIGIULIAN: I'm hoping to become more tolerant of myself, tolerant of change. I was very active in church and community, but younger people inevitably take over and do things differently, perhaps better. So I try to see the bigger picture: I was part of something and made a contribution, but there comes a time to step aside and let it go. It's no good to feel regretful. I want to praise the new contributions of others.



Among School Children

By Peter Laarman

I steal my title from a W.B. Yeats poem for a reason. In recent years I have sometimes known the kind of awkwardness that is felt by Yeats' narrator, a "sixty-year-old smiling public man" who wishes to reassure the children in a school he visits that he is "a comfortable kind of old scarecrow."

Age crept up on me when I wasn't looking, when I was deep into the responsibilities of my paid work. One can keep oneself as busy as one wants, brushing away thoughts of getting older, but unflattering encounters with mirrors will still happen. And one can stay reasonably fit, but appalling things will still happen to the skin after age 50 has come and gone.

I was able to put off scaring myself in the mirror for a long time, inasmuch as younger people whose company I appreciate still seem to appreciate mine.

I really was not prepared for either the exhilarations or the bewilderments of older age.

But aging makes it hard to sort out my role among them. I am happy to be a mentor, but I have never wished to be anyone's surrogate father. With time's winged chariot thrumming ever more loudly in the background, I would like all my friendships to be free of hidden complications.

We dance to the music of time, no matter how graceful or graceless our steps. My own steps have been a bit wobbly: I really was not prepared for either the exhilarations or the bewilderments of older age.

First, bewilderment, even shock. My mother died this past summer. She was 90, and she was ready, but there was still the jolt that comes from knowing that the person who birthed and nurtured you is really and truly gone. A good friend described for me his own experience of feeling that as long as at least one of his parents remained alive, he was shielded from his own mortality. That generational shield is now gone for me.

Knowing how much assistance and care my mother required in her final years confronts me now with questions I had not yet thought to ask: *Will I have the courage that I know I will need – the courage she had – to face my own final years? Who will my caretakers be?*

Call of the Past

My mother's death has exposed for me the delicate issue of cultural touchstones. I grew up on a family farm. My aunts and uncles could remember "when the radio came in." They made their own music around the farmhouse piano. My grandfather's preferred humorists were long-forgotten writers like Bill Nye and Ambrose Bierce. My mother's were Dorothy Parker and S.J. Perelman, always cracking wise.

I was a little kid in the 1950s in an atmosphere still redolent of the fashions and folkways of the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. I still feel the romance in this – also the strangeness of belonging so much to another era. Only when one is older does one grasp the full import of Faulkner's line that the past is not dead – and it isn't even past. I know now that I will go to my grave using some turns of phrase that Victorians used. I rather prefer the antique locutions, the antique manners and morals, of long-vanished forebears.

But I do not wish to become the curmudgeon who resents everything new and judges it all to be made of inferior stuff. It is precisely because so many things actually *are* going to hell in a hand basket (earth's climate, American democracy) that it is ethically important not to make a big deal out of relative trifles – the decay of grammar and usage,

the apparent inability of the young to say “you’re welcome” instead of “no problem.”

My bewilderment extends to theology. It surprises me a little that there seem to be so few theological guideposts for aging. Our churches could be a stronger resource in a wider culture so bereft of help, apart from its constant reminders to us gray-hairs and no-hairs to eat right, exercise, and stay on top of our financial planning.

We in the churches still have the Book, for example. Its Wisdom literature is filled with wonderful bittersweet stuff on the particular joys available to those of my vintage, still commanding the heights but looking out over a downward slope. Qoheleth, the writer of Ecclesiastes, is absolutely clear-eyed about the basic unfairness of life and the folly of our human strivings:

Again, I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful: but time and chance happen to them all. (9:11)

Qoheleth is brutal about universal extinction:

I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same: as one dies, so dies the other ... Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? (3:18-21)

Yet the writer of Ecclesiastes does not wallow in misery over this stark reality – far from it:

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. (5:18)

Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. (9:7)

Could not our churches create more study and reflection circles around the *spiritual* challenge of aging – and make more information available to the public around aging?

I do recall from my YDS days a religion and psychology class in which we read *Stages of Faith* (first published in 1981). This was an effort by James Fowler to repackage Jean Piaget’s insights and relate them to spiritual life. According to Fowler’s scheme, I am by now supposed to be well past any cognitive dissonance issues in my faith and have adopted a

“universalizing” faith perspective – what Buddhists might call “compassionate mind.”

Intellectually I am there, but it’s still a challenge to me to feel compassion more deeply and practice it more consistently. I admit I am far too susceptible to the promptings of my lizard brain. I confess that

I now think I know what the Talmud means when it says, “You are not obliged to finish the work, but neither are you permitted to desist from it.”

I still give certain people a “watch out, now” glare that makes them shrink away in terror. The difference is that I used to think this was normal – and acceptable.

The Jesus Figure

What I have discovered about the substance of my faith in this last third of my life is that all else pales next to the figure of Jesus. And the more compelling Jesus becomes, the more I feel the urgency of becoming a “doer of the word” and not a mere hearer – or, often in my case, a mere preacher. This is the primary question: why do I – why do so many of us – cry “Lord! Lord!” with complete ease and yet fall so very short of radical discipleship? My usual answer is to refer to the Bubble, the mental hegemony exercised over all of us, Christians included, by American consumer culture. This paralyzing, demobilizing bubble: I can preach about it – I can inveigh against it – but what exactly am I going to do about it?

Not bloody much, probably. This may be the hardest part of passing from older middle age into true old age: the acceptance of limits, the paring down to essentials. I now think I know what the Talmud means when it says, “You are not obliged to finish the work, but neither are you permitted to desist from it.” As an activist, I see the limits to my capacity as never before. As a realist, I watch what remains of our democratic culture receding rapidly under Mammon’s tidal wave. What is my responsibility?

I’ll seek an answer in the exhilarations of these days. My steps may have wobbled on the way to older age, but now that I have crossed the threshold my walk is growing stronger and my heart beats with something akin to a teenager’s anticipation of all that still lies ahead. I feel a quickening, a sense of enlargement akin to the feeling of coming out of a tunnel into a broad expanse of open possibility to do new things and do old things differently.

At year's end I will retire from the day-to-day leadership of a social justice organization it has been my privilege to serve for the past 10 years. My goal is to pass the mantle of institutional leadership with modesty and grace while engaging at a deeper level with particular causes and projects that hold my imagination. I want to help promising younger leaders settle more deeply into their own vocations. I relish the prospect of doing all this.

A Wise Heart

In God's time, says Psalm 90, our human years "are like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers." We are enjoined and invited to count our days "*that we may gain a wise heart.*"

I crave that compassionate core wisdom, and in coming years I will follow Ecclesiastes' advice to eat and drink with a merry heart and also to feast on all the beauty in the world and in our life that is of a piece with the passage of time itself.

I expect to become re-acquainted with the music and art I have always loved. I have never needed a spotlight, and now as I head toward retirement I realize that what I really want for my older age is a good reading light. I intend to read more history, a primal passion that I have not been able to indulge sufficiently. I will write more, but write more chastely, if I may use that term, than I have been able to do while under constant time constraints.

If I can have these few things, then all other talk of "having fun" will be beside the point. Not for me will there be skydiving at age 75 or a half-marathon at 80. I will be content with what Wallace Stevens called "the pleasures of merely circulating." Such pleasures, in the movement of the spirit, will be enough. They will be more than enough.

I wish for myself and for all who are growing older release from fear and anxiety so that we can fully receive the valedictory gifts of vision and completion. I pray for all of us that we, like the elder Yeats, can move past any awkward self-consciousness among school children to end our song in pure doxology:

*O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?*

The Rev. Peter Laarman '93 M.Div. will retire at the end of the year as executive director of Progressive Christians Uniting, based in Los Angeles. Before joining the PCU staff in 2004, Laarman served for 10 years as senior minister of New York City's historic Judson Memorial Church. He also has a background in community organizing and media work for the U.S. labor movement. An ordained UCC minister, he is a regular contributor to the online magazine Religion Dispatches.

There was terror and anger
at coming into sixty.
Would I give birth
only to my old age?

Now near sixty-one
I count the gifts that sixty gave.

A book flowed from my life
to those who needed it
and love flowed back to me.

In a yard that had seemed full,
space for another garden appeared.
I took my aloneness to Quaker meeting,
and my outstretched palms were filled.

I walked further along the beach,
swam longer in more sacred places,
danced the spiral dance,
reclaimed daisies for women
in my ritual for a precious friend
and received poet's wine
from a new friend who came
in the evening of my need.

The Journey of Life: An Interview with Thomas Cole



*Thomas Cole '71 B.A. is a historian, author, professor of medical humanities, lay chaplain, and humanistic gerontologist. In his acclaimed book *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge, 1992), Cole examines how the West's ancient and medieval understandings of aging have been upended by a scientific worldview. In previous centuries, growing old was a spiritual mystery in the eternal order of life. Now, Cole points out, it is a scientific problem to be managed or solved. But a scientific orientation, no matter how valuable, offers no existential grasp of the journey of life. He says we need to recover a moral language that illuminates the experience of aging – its meanings, truths, and gifts.*

*Cole is director of the McGovern Center for Humanities and Ethics at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. He is co-editor of *The Oxford Book of Aging* (1994) and author or editor of a dozen books. He spoke with *Reflections* in August 2013.*

REFLECTIONS: *In *The Journey of Life*, you say aging is a “season in search of its purposes” in the secular-scientific West. That was 1992. Is the search still on?*

COLE: The search continues. The shift from a religious to a scientific way of thinking about aging is still the dominant movement in our time. Our pursuit of individual health and wealth intensifies the pathos of aging. The challenge is: with the collapse of collective meaning systems, how do we find a worldview that gives a meaning to getting old? I think we *are* in a cultural moment of surging interest in spiritual dimensions of aging – in academic life, in religious communities, in the arts and care of elders. But it's small compared to the privileging of youth and medicine, the tremendous fear of aging.

REFLECTIONS: *How do you reorient the discussion?*

COLE: We need more focus on the moral world of elders. That is, we basically agree that society has obligations to older people, but are older people ever asked to have obligations to society? A moral order requires mutual obligation. I think many older people would like to accept such a role and expectation. This is a moral issue we could discuss in our congregations, churches, and synagogues. But we don't talk about it. We are afraid.

REFLECTIONS: *Why the reluctance?*

COLE: Religious institutions have internalized the dominant values the rest of us have: everyone wants to stay middle-aged and not get any older. I think we need an interdenominational approach to research – Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and others – into our sacred texts and wisdom, and share our findings and engage people about the moral meaning of aging.

As it is now, we are thrown back on our own individual resources and families. And that's too much a burden for individuals to bear.

REFLECTIONS: *We're hearing more about the bioengineering possibilities of delaying or even overcoming old age. Is the dream of earthly immortality a worthy aim?*

COLE: It probably won't be long before most people live to be 100. We know the limit of the human life span is about 120 years. But there's no stopping the attitude that says, "With enough vitamin supplements and rest and exercise and research, we can beat this thing. We can beat aging." I don't know how successful it will be. Is it a worthy goal? I don't think so – not compared to the priority of climate change or the needs of the underprivileged.

REFLECTIONS: *In your work as an ethics consultant and lay chaplain, you've seen life and death up close. How is it that some people face old age with resilience and serenity, and others are shattered by it? Do particular inner resources make the difference?*

COLE: I think the answer is more psychological than theological. People do better who have loving relationships and spiritual resources and who were not damaged by too much childhood trauma. I recall what the Talmud says: a person who is a fool in youth is a fool in old age, and a person who is wise in youth is wise in old age. Perhaps. But there's not much room for spiritual development in that view.

I think we have to push against the idea that says learning and creativity are supposed to stop after a certain age. We have to try to grow morally and spiritually all the way to the end.

REFLECTIONS: *Are we making progress against ageism, the culture's prejudice against old age?*

COLE: We hear "60 is the new 40," but is that really progress against ageism? On the one hand, it suggests that we are overcoming the idea that your 60s means you're only good for the rocking chair. It grants the possibility that the 60s, and well past the 60s, is a time of strength and vitality. But it also implies that if you can't maintain your prowess and independence at any age, then your life is without value. That attitude prevails. And now, as Margaret Gullette has argued, there's a trend of middle ageism, which is reflected in today's economic patterns of midlife downsizing and hiring discrimination.

REFLECTIONS: *What would the world look like if it lifted its prejudices against age?*

COLE: For one thing, we'd nurture a moral and spiritual awakening among people 55 to 85, invite them to imagine new roles for themselves, with a new

sense of social obligation and opportunity. People would feel less pressured to live forever. They'd die better deaths. They'd be less willing to agree to aggressive end-of-life efforts that keep a person alive at all costs. I know so many stories of demented people with multi-system organ failure who are kept alive no matter what. Instead of trying to do everything possible out of fear or guilt or lack of preparation or family communication, we might consider the Buddhist idea of conscious aging and conscious dying. Aging is a passage. We should very consciously be there for it.

REFLECTIONS: *Your next book focuses on a more specific aging question – what it means to be an old man today.*

COLE: We tend to live a cultural script that stops in middle age. We don't know what script to follow. Men find it difficult. In a middle-class acquisitive culture, we're expected to accumulate power, wealth, and control. Then we retire, and we have to learn to give up control. We have to give up the imagined privileges we had as men. We typically have fewer relationships than women. That is, women cultivate relationships all their lives, while men tend not to make friends outside the workplace. So, getting older, we try to piece a script together if we can. This is where congregational life can help, offering texts and wisdom and the understanding that God loves us: we are valuable because we are, not because we do.

REFLECTIONS: *How do you prepare for this challenge in your own life?*

COLE: I look forward to the experience of getting older and learning what it means to be an old man. My fears haven't gone away. But I know there are moral and spiritual practices that help me deal with feelings of being out of control, or fears of abandonment and nonbeing. I meditate. I do Torah study. I attend worship services. Loving my wife and children and being loved by them is supremely important. It also helps to be able to make a difference in other people's lives – students, hospital patients, my congregation. I need to be needed. As an educator, I enjoy helping students become compassionate with old patients. I am also a lay chaplain at a hospital. My favorite patients are older. They're more real. They can't maintain denial the way younger people do. The conversations I have with older people are about meaning and what matters. It's about healing, not about cure. In one of his last poems, Yeats wrote: "Now that my ladder's gone, I must lie down where all the ladders start, in the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." We need to undertake the impossible work of linking physical decline and spiritual growth.



Noticing the Life Worth Living

By Kathleen LaCamera

On their 70th wedding anniversary, my in-laws, the Rev. Canon Alfred Loughlin and Mrs. Edith Walker Loughlin, received a card from the Queen (Elizabeth II) congratulating them on their truly remarkable achievement. It was their third such royal congratulations. The others came on their 60th and 65th anniversaries.

Watching Edith and Alfred enjoy this milestone in their typical unassuming, unself-conscious way reminded me of the last lines of Mary Oliver's poem, "The Summer Day," about the brevity and value of ordinary life:

*Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

Like so many others I know, I lament that plans for the future and ruminations about the past continually distract me from my one fleeting, "wild and precious" life, the one that's happening right now, in the present moment, right in front of me.

Edith and Alfred seemed to have caught on years ago that there is no time like the present to get on with living, however it finds you.

Despite his rather advanced dementia, Alfred – 99 at the time of their anniversary – often commented about his marriage that "life sentences are shorter." A grin always followed. Alfred was still committed to enjoying his life and a good joke (at his wife's expense) even in his compromised mental state.

Edith, who had achieved a mere 97 years of age, would casually roll her eyes upwards, make a "tutting" sound and respond with "Oh, Alfred, honestly!"

Wonder and Affection

In the midst of great age, it was still obvious that Edith and Alfred celebrated life and showed amazing resilience despite the losses that come with it. They had said goodbyes to multiple homes, careers, physical and mental abilities, personal autonomy,

and people – so very many people. They had even said goodbye to each other in some ways. Yet both continued to make new friends, try new things, and transform their own relationship in the midst of their frailty, limitations, and vulnerability.

"How can I get that www dot thing on the phone?" Edith asked me one day after listening to a current affairs radio program that encouraged audience response. Even as the world became a more confusing place for Alfred, he often managed small exclamations of wonder about the world as he still saw it. "Look at all those windows," he'd muse as we drove past a large city center building.

Both individually and together, these two had something: an adaptability that nurtured life and affection, that allowed for new relationships and friendships and fended off cynicism and bitter-

Experiencing people who wore their aging so lightly and graciously gave me insight I want to take with me as I approach my own "third age."

ness. This, in spite of all the change they'd had to adjust to over their century of experience. That special "something" was evident from the first moment I met them 21 years ago until the time of their deaths: Alfred at 101 in December 2011, and Edith four months later at 99.

I was privileged to get to know and love Edith and Alfred during their last two decades. Experiencing two people who wore their aging so lightly and graciously gave me insight I want to take with me as I approach my own "third age."

I'm grateful as well to Coral Bury, whom I met at a local hospice, four months before her death from a progressive lung disease at age 58. Coral was one of four extraordinary people I interviewed for my film *Last Laugh*, which challenges taboos around death and features the spirited perspectives of people who are dying. She was a fiercely independent woman, devoted to friends, family, and her high-flying social work career. Among her biggest pet peeves as a dying person were people who only wanted to hear "good news" from Coral about her health, those who avoided any talk of death, and especially those who simply avoided her altogether because she was dying. She was adamant that she was going to bring as much life as she could into her final days, including personal candor, humor – and fast cars.

Why Stop Laughing Now?

Coral was especially animated when she talked about her love of driving. She explained that her illness-related mobility problems meant she had bought and specially adapted a new car. Coral being Coral, she decided against a boring "practical" vehicle. She wanted a Sirocco, something "cool, sporty, and zippy," and despite a few raised eyebrows, she got herself one. When she discovered

She was adamant that she was going to bring as much life as she could into her final days, including personal candor, humor – and fast cars.

that the Sirocco was too small to hold her wheelchair, she bought a smaller wheelchair. In her filmed interview for *Last Laugh*, Coral said whenever she was behind the wheel of her Sirocco – oxygen bottle strapped to the passenger seat next to her – "I don't feel at all at a disadvantage. I am just me."

Coral finished off that interview by offering to tell her favorite joke about death. Its key elements included a dead woman, plastic surgery, and a conversation with God. (You can see Coral tell the full joke at dyingmatters.org/page/last-laugh.)

"Laughter is a part of everything for me," said Coral, "so why wouldn't it be a part of this (death)? Why should I stop laughing now?"

Coral and fellow *Last Laugh* "stars" Billy Grimes, Carol Saunders, and Jean Coverdale all shared stories of their determination to be themselves – complex, funny, wholly human, and eager to embrace as much life as possible – even as they faced death. They showed me how the rest of us need to "get over ourselves" when it comes to mortality. They urged

people to see death as something that can help us live better, more vividly, and with real gratitude. *Last Laugh* had its launch in a UK-wide public information campaign on radio, TV, and in print the week Coral died. Appreciative responses to the film came in from all over Britain, the U.S. and from as far away as China, and I had the chance to read some of them out to Coral the day before she died. She was thrilled and "chuffed to bits" that her dying was working so hard to support life.

I am lucky (and a bit mad) to divide my life between writing/filmmaking and professional healthcare chaplaincy for the UK's National Health Service. The longer I do both, the more these two seemingly unrelated vocations inform each other. Which is how I ended up meeting Coral at hospice, and eventually Rose (not her real name) during her stay on a dementia ward.

It was Rose who reminded me to pay attention to something I had neglected: the restorative power of domestic life.

Rose's Recipe

I was doing a general ward visit one afternoon when I found Rose in an agitated state, pacing back and forth mumbling something about "potatoes" and not having "enough time." It was the first time I'd met her, and I eventually managed to get her to sit down with me. Both of us were confused, which turned out to be a very good place to start a conversation. I soon discovered that throughout her life Rose had found great meaning and enjoyment in domestic tasks, especially providing meals to her family and others. The more she talked about home, food, and cooking, the more coherent she became. The conversation became so animated and vivid, regarding her favorite meat pie and how to prepare it, that I actually went straight home from work and made that pie for my own family's supper. She had been so precise I didn't even need a recipe.

The next time I visited the ward I brought along a cookbook that had lots of photos accompanying the recipes. As we turned the pages together, Rose and I had a great time talking cake and biscuits (cookies in American-speak) and the differences between British and American baking traditions. Like Coral, Rose longed to enjoy the ordinary, normal things that had always been a part of her life until recently. She was grieving the loss of her role as a contributor and provider of valued things and of the ordinary rhythm of life those things provided. Living with dementia, she was now almost always on the receiving end of care and attention, rarely in a position to offer something back that she would understand as

valuable. According to a *Guardian* newspaper report (Aug. 27, 2013), Rose is one of more than 800,000 people living with dementia in the UK.

My view of life, death, and aging has been transformed by encounters with Edith, Alfred, Coral, Rose and many others. Purpose, identity, belonging, meaning – all these elements are part of negotiating the very tricky challenges of older age, often

Making space in congregational life for people living with dementia or life-threatening conditions means seeing them as more than just people who need our prayers.

in compromised mental and physical states, and ultimately in the face of death. No matter what one's age, all these elements contribute profoundly to spiritual health and well-being, and all affect our ability to live as fully and richly as we possibly can in the present moment.

Religious groups – churches, synagogues, mosques, temples – have always taken on important care and support for people facing crisis and vulnerability throughout their lives and at life's end. At a recent conference I attended on spirituality and mental health care, a leading world authority on spirituality and health, Dr. Harold Koenig, reported that participation in religious activities has significant, measurable benefits for people suffering from mental and physical health challenges.¹

Contributions to Make

And yet barriers exist to this beneficial participation that we churchgoers don't always notice. Making space at the heart of congregational life for people living with dementia or life-threatening conditions means seeing them as more than just people who need our prayers. They have a contribution to make at the center of our congregational life. We need to spend the time finding out what that contribution might be and then nurture it.

A defiantly creative model is offered by the Cleggs Lane Methodist Church, located in Greater Manchester in one of the UK's most deprived neighborhoods. Five years ago, faced with the prospect of closing its doors, the church took a gamble on a partnership with a local public health improvement team and started a weekly men's health group. Men aged 20 to 70-plus who often isolated themselves in a health crisis found a safe place in the group to talk about their challenges. A gardening project

created on land behind the church quickly started out of the group. It now supplies vegetables to the church's new community café. So positive have been the outcomes for the men that the church now receives referrals from social workers, local doctors, and mental health specialists.²

Cleggs Lane has worked hard not only to welcome but value the people that many, including those men themselves, no longer saw as contributors.

Congregations need to be alert to other obstacles in our midst. Too often in our religious communities, people find it hard to talk openly about loved ones who have died, or about an illness that is frightening, or even about a faith that is being tested by crisis.

Put Fear Aside

If there was just one thing I could pass on from all my years of pastoral work it would be this: make contact with people who are living with pain and loss. Get in touch. Put aside fear of being a nuisance or burden or "making it worse" when someone is in crisis. They will tell you if it's all too much. More likely, they will be pleased to know you care and took time to think about them. If you don't know what to say, say that. Let them know you are sorry for what they are going through. Let them know that it is okay, if they want to, to tell you how things really are with them.

Only this morning in the hours before I wrote these words, I was called out to a hospital ward where an older woman asked me through tears why the people in her church had not rung her or visited her. She is likely within days of her death and had been in the hospital for many weeks. When I rather feebly offered that some people might worry that their visit could be a burden to her because of her illness, she looked astonished and said, "Why would they think that?" Indeed.

In a recent *Huffington Post* article, blogger Linda Robertson (JustBecauseHeBreathes.com), wrote about her appreciation of support she and her husband received after the death of their son. But she went on to confess that Sunday services were also a place where people said "some of the most painful things" imaginable to her and her husband. Like Coral, Linda found that a number of people were "overly happy and bright," needing her to be cheerful and to avoid talk about her son's death or even mention of his name. Even more sadly, she says, some avoided her entirely, "turning away when they saw us coming." The article's title is "Weep with

Those Who Weep ... Please.”³ Surely we – and I include myself here – can work harder to do just that.

A recent trip to the U.S. to help my own parents move into a retirement community coincided with my 38th high school reunion. It was quite different from our 15th reunion, the only other I've attended. There, the tone was quite competitive. The latest one was much smaller, for a start. The words “gratitude” and “grateful” were abundant throughout the evening in various conversations. We were mostly just grateful to get this far. Being together inevitably made us aware of absent classmates and others who hadn't been so fortunate in life and health. An increasing awareness of mortality seems to have made Lakewood High's Class of '75 more gentle, more gracious, and more content.

Aging has so many positives in the midst of its plentifully documented challenges. I hope I can do justice to it – and to those who have taught me much about how to do it well.

Kathleen LaCamera '83 M.Div. is a filmmaker and health-care chaplain living in Manchester, England. She is part of a team currently developing a course under the auspices of the UK's National Council for Palliative Care to help congregations better support those living with bereavement and life-threatening conditions. Two of her recent films that explore death, dying, and bereavement are: Last Laugh (PictureWise Productions, 2011 [duration: six minutes] dyingmatters.org/page/last-laugh) and Dying for a Laugh (PictureWise Productions, 2010 [duration: seven minutes] dyingmatters.org/page/dying-laugh).

Notes

- 1 Presentation by Harold Koenig, “Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health: A Review and Research Update,” July 11, 2013, at the Spirituality and Good Practice in Mental Health Care Conference, Durham University. See spiritualityandhealth.duke.edu/index.php.
- 2 See *Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability and Inclusion* by Mark Pinsky (Alban Institute, 2012), pp. 92-95.
- 3 “Weep with Those Who Weep ... Please,” by Linda Robertson, *Huffington Post*, Aug. 8, 2013, huffingtonpost.com/linda-robertson/weep-with-those-who-weep_b_3711292.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000003.

Coming into eighty
I slow my ship down
For a safe landing.
It has been battered,
One sail torn, the rudder
Sometimes wobbly.
We are hardly a glorious sight.
It has been a long voyage
Through time, travail and triumph,
Eighty years
Of learning what to be
And how to become it.

One day the ship will decompose
and then what will become of me?
Only a breath
Gone into nothingness
Alone
Or a spirit of air and fire
Set free?
Who knows?

Greet us at landfall
The old ship and me,
But we can't stay anchored.
Soon we must set sail
On the last mysterious voyage
Everybody takes
Toward death.
Without my ship there,
Wish me well.

My favorite painting, "The Thankful Poor" by acclaimed African American artist Henry O. Tanner, depicts an older gentlemen seated at a dinner table with a young boy. They are returning thanks for a meal. The piece, like Tanner's other famous work, "The Banjo Lesson," promotes a theme of family and mentorship. Admiring the painting as a child, I placed value on the older figure's influence on the younger. However, as I get older I realize the contribution of the younger subject to the relationship. Young and old share a common desire to be heard and appreciated.

One of the most meaningful relationships of my life is with Mr. Reuben V. Burrell. I met Mr. Burrell during my time as a student at Hampton University. I was an aspiring photographer and historian. He had lived life at the intersection of everything I hoped to learn about and preserve. He attended Hampton during the 1940s, left to fight in World War II, and returned to teach. Self-taught with the camera, he later became the official university photographer. His timeless works capture historic moments on campus such as Marian Anderson's visit and the first Hampton Jazz Festival.

I secretly anointed myself president of his fan club, yet lacked the courage to introduce myself. My opportunity came when a fellow history major and friend interviewed him for an oral history project. I convinced her to let me accompany her on a visit. I felt like I was meeting a Beatle: he gave his photography the precision and artistry of a perfectly crafted tune.

We travelled to his campus studio, and my gregarious friend introduced us. He offered a slight smile but remained unmoved. I beamed with excitement while pretending not to notice the astounding negatives and prints that lined the room. Our visit was brief, but it came with an open invitation for me to stop by when I liked. I called his bluff, and made it a practice to drop in from time to time. I am not sure what I expected. Did I want to learn his approach to photography, or find a mentoring elder? Possibly I wanted to prove I was different from the other young people he knew.

For I soon learned that he had grown emotionally distant after decades of working on campus. He lamented the changing values of students who treated him like he was invisible. "They never speak, nor do they say thank you when you hold the door open for them," he would remark. I would be different. Our relationship began with test visits. I came, we talked, and I left, careful not to overspend my

welcome allowance. At first I thought my presence was an attempt to live out my parents' teaching of respect for my elders. As college became more challenging, I found that he was the one offering the service. He became an anchor, reminding me of what truly mattered in life.

During our many exchanges, I pleaded for a photography lesson. He became a master at changing the topic or appearing too busy to appease my interest. He later revealed that he was concerned that I would become so engrossed with photography that I would neglect my studies. My lessons could wait.

My proudest moment was my graduation. I was surprised to learn he would be honored with a special recognition at the ceremony. There he was, marching in full regalia behind the president. A printed bio in our programs described his graduate studies at NYU and other accomplishments. I was floored to learn about everything he omitted during our many exchanges. It was akin to finding out Clark Kent's other identity.

Since then, our relationship has been sustained by regular phone calls and written correspondence. I marvel that he keeps a better record of the happenings in my life than most of my friends and family. I visit him whenever I am in town, knocking at his door unannounced just to capture his instant smile, which soon merges into characteristic nonchalant ease. He remains a presence as a friend, even a grandfather figure. My grandfather and namesake was my childhood best friend. He had brought meaning to the tough middle school years, as Mr. Burrell offered in college. He died when I was 12, leaving a void that will never be filled. What Mr. Burrell offers is a similar dry wit and the measured support my grandfather gave me.

Fast forward to spring 2013. My cousin toured Hampton's campus and met Mr. Burrell. He greeted my cousin, her mother, and my grandmother with charm and enthusiasm, disclosing to them that I call him every two weeks, something even I had not realized he looked forward to.

My 94-year-old friend has taught me more history than I can ever read, been a model companion in uncertain times, and reminded me of the lesson that Tanner showed me in his paintings: we all strive to be reminded that we are loved. Which is the greatest gift Mr. Burrell has given me.

Elijah Heyward III '07 M.A.R. is former director of the Youth Scholar Academy in Washington, D.C. He started a Ph.D. in American civilization this fall at the University of North Carolina. Burrell's work is featured in One Shot: A Selection of Photographs by Reuben V. Burrell by Vanessa Thaxton-Ward, published last year by University of Virginia Press.

Will the world reap its “longevity dividend”?

A report says this global era of aging will contribute greatly to civilization – if societies act to meet the healthcare and other challenges of an aging world.

“Increasing longevity is one of humanity’s greatest achievements,” declares *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and a Challenge*, a report produced by HelpAge International.

“People live longer because of improved nutrition, sanitation, medical advances, health care, education, and economic well-being.”

Life expectancy is now over 80 in 33 countries. Five years ago, only 19 countries had attained this, the report says.

“... With the right measures in place to secure health care, regular income, social networks, and legal protection, there is a longevity dividend to be reaped worldwide by current and future generations.”

The report’s findings include:

- By 2050, the number of centenarians worldwide will increase to 3.2 million. There were 316,600 in 2011.
- Japan is the world’s only country with more than 30 percent of its population aged 60 or over. By 2050, there will be 64 such countries.
- Globally, 47 percent of older men, and 27 percent of older women, are active in the workplace. Up to 90 percent of older people work in developing nations.
- Today, life expectancy is about 78 years in developed countries and 68 years in developing nations. By 2050, newborns can expect to live to age 83 years in developed and 74 in developing regions.
- Most older people are women. For every 100 women aged 60 or over worldwide, there are 84 men. For every 100 women aged 80 or over, there are 61 men.
- Old age is experienced differently by gender. Older women are often more vulnerable to discrimination, including poor access to jobs and health care, denial of the right to own and inherit property, and lack of minimum income and social security.

The report warns against stereotyping older people. They are not a homogeneous demographic but are as diverse as any other age group in ethnicity, education, income, and health. They are making global contributions as caregivers, voters, volunteers, and entrepreneurs.

The diversity extends to geography. Aging patterns differ remarkably by region. Last year, 6 percent of the population in Africa was 60 and over. This compares to:

- 10 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean
- 11 percent in Asia

- 19 percent in North America
- 22 percent in Europe.

By 2050, the projection is: 10 percent of Africa will be 60 and over. That will compare to:

- 24 percent in Asia
- 24 percent in Oceania
- 25 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean
- 27 percent in North America
- 34 percent in Europe.

The report notes other trends.

In various parts of the world, families have the responsibility for the care and support of older dependents. The costs can greatly burden working-age generations, depleting savings and productivity.

But those financial and living arrangements of older people are changing along with other social traditions. Family sizes are decreasing. Significant numbers of “skipped-generation” households consist of children and older people, especially in rural areas, as a result of rural-to-urban migration of “middle-generation” adults, the report says. In many cases, the evidence says older individuals provide assistance to adult children and grandchildren.

“With one in nine persons in the world aged 60 years or over, projected to increase to one in five by 2050, population aging is a phenomenon that can no longer be ignored,” the report says.

It need not be regarded as a crisis. The report spells out 10 priority actions. They include:

- “Recognize the inevitability of population aging and the need to adequately prepare all stakeholders (governments, civil society, private sector, communities, and families) for the growing numbers of older persons.”
- “Ensure that all older persons can live with dignity and security, enjoying access to essential health and social services and a minimum income through the implementation of national social protection floors and other social investments ...”
- “Invest in young people today by promoting healthy habits, and ensuring education and employment opportunities, access to health services, and social security coverage for all workers as the best investment to improve the lives of future generations of older persons. Flexible employment, lifelong learning and retraining opportunities should be promoted to facilitate the integration in the labor market of current generations of older persons.”

Source: HelpAge International (helpage.org)

Unprepared: Our Flawed Retirement System

By Teresa Ghilarducci

“If we take a late retirement and an early death, we’ll just squeak by.”

The New Yorker cartoon of an older couple talking in their living room produces a chuckle and strikes a chord. To succeed under the current American retirement system, it seems you need to know exactly when to plan your retirement party and when to die. In a system that relies on voluntary, commercial, and individual-directed accounts, getting the retirement income flow right requires that you have a good handle on future rates of financial returns, medical care cost inflation, future costs of home health care and assisted living, and all other factors that will affect your future wages, financial returns, and health until you die.

The American way of retiring requires, in other words, superhuman effort. It’s a system built for robots with Excel spreadsheets and crystal balls, not real people who live with uncertain labor markets, volatile housing prices, family members with money problems, and a for-profit money management industry that promises to manage your retirement savings but whose top loyalty is to its Wall Street employers.

An Untrained Population

The U.S. is the only industrial country that depends on untrained individuals supplementing their own basic Social Security and long-term savings with a system of voluntary contributions and retail investment products. It’s like requiring everyone to do their own home electrical wiring and dental work. Since the 1980s, the 401(k) and Individual Retirement Account (IRA) system has dominated workplace pensions, yet *still only half the workforce has such a pension*. In theory, 401(k) and IRAs plans were meant to be convenient for employees, a way to beef up their pensions. In practice, they shifted complex decisions and a great deal of risk from employers to workers. There has been no improvement in workplace retirement account coverage in 30 years.¹

Although a 65-year-old man has a one in five chance – and a 65-year-old woman a one in three chance – of living until 90, we are advised to save as if we will in fact reach our ninth decade, because no one wants to run out of money. To plan properly under the American system is to hoard a lot of cash. And, because the system requires individuals to save in individual retirement accounts that can be tapped at any time, people are forced to invest

The retirement savings system is built for robots with crystal balls, not real people who live with uncertain markets, volatile housing prices, and family members with money problems.

short term in liquid, high-priced mutual funds. The rates of return are much lower than they could be because 401(k) plans and IRAs are retail product managed by for-profit firms with large sales forces.

Also, the system is highly subsidized with taxpayer money. Policymakers exempted regular pension and 401(k) and IRA contributions from tax, hoping to ensure that all workers had enough savings for



retirement. But because those tax advantages are tax deductions rather than refundable tax credits, the highest-paid employees with the highest contributions and highest tax rates get the most subsidies. Eighty percent of the tax breaks for retirement accounts go to the wealthiest 20 percent of taxpayers.²

But the problem of most Americans is not too much cash in retirement accounts. As 70 million Americans aged 50-64 head into their retirement years, we need to stop pretending the American system works. Less than 30 percent of older lower-middle class individuals – those with less than \$20,000 per year – have any kind of retirement account. Meanwhile, 75 percent of Americans nearing retirement age in 2010 had less than \$30,000 in their accounts. If an elder needed to stretch that money over 20 years, it would be \$4 a day, not adjusted for inflation. “Nothing” is a better description of what most people save for retirement.

Because of the tax break, the richer you are the more likely you will have a retirement account. Nevertheless, a big chunk (23 percent) of older Americans earning in the top quarter of the income distribution have no retirement savings. Using simple

If you're inadequately prepared for retirement, it's very likely not your fault. The money-management industry is not on the side of its clients.

algebra and making reasonable assumptions about interest rates, employment rates, and mortality tables, most people at age 50 or so should have ten times their annual salary in a retirement account. The average person between 50 and 64 has \$30,000 in her accounts when she should have half a million.

Who to Blame?

Who or what is to blame? The lack of knowledge about saving? That's impossible to believe. A multi-billion dollar industry that advertises the need for retirement savings is growing. Media gurus abound – Suze Orman, Dave Ramsey, and others.

Is it that average Americans spend too much and don't care about retirement? Lots of pundits will blame the victim. Financial planner David Bach³ made a splash when he suggested the root cause of the retirement crisis was a “daily latte factor” – flawed humanity's need for small luxuries and a reluctance to delay consumer gratification. To make the point that their lack of planning and budgeting is the reason people don't have savings – and not low wages or an inadequately designed national retirement savings structure – McDonald's and Visa have featured a “Practical Money Skills” website that

shows how saving for retirement is in reach of a fast-food worker. (Critics pounced because the budget allows nothing for children or extra heat in the winter and it budgets \$20 per month for health care.)

But wages are the only source of savings for most people. Over the past year, hourly earnings have risen only 1.9 percent and minimum wage was last raised in 2009 – now \$7.25 an hour, which, adjusted for inflation, is 20 percent less than in 1968.

Continuing the argument that modern personal behavior is the reason the faulty system is faulty, the Investment Company Institute⁴ (the lobbying arm of the mutual fund industry) shows that humans can attain retirement comfort if they act in ways humans don't act. The spreadsheets show that if a worker starts saving early, earns 5 percent adjusted for inflation over a 35-year span, and never uses the money for 35 years, he can have enough to maintain a good standard of living in retirement. Yes, a robot with a spreadsheet could save 5 percent of every paycheck for its entire career, but human beings are embedded in social and familiar relationships where a pile of money just sitting there would be immoral to keep if a loved one needed education, health care, or bailing out of jail.

We've become convinced that the jam we're in is all our fault. But it's not. This isn't just a personal problem. It's a pension-design problem that will fast become a national problem affecting large numbers of poor and near-poor Americans facing retirement and old age.

Further Ideas and Arguments

- For an explanation of the retirement crisis, see Ted Siedle's recent article, “The Greatest Retirement Crisis In American History,” *Forbes*, March 20, 2013 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/edwardsiedle/2013/03/20/the-greatest-retirement-crisis-in-american-history/>
- Sources for personal retirement planning include Dana Anspach, a fee-only financial planner who writes clear and honest articles on retirement for About.com. You can find her pieces at moneyover55.about.com. If you like what you read there, she's also on Facebook and Twitter (with links to be found on her MoneyOver55 page). Fee-only planners: www.wiseradvisor.com
- For more information on shortfalls of the 401(k), see James Kwak's recent article in *The Atlantic* magazine at <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/03/your-401-k-is-out-to-get-you/274408/>

— Teresa Ghilarducci

What is an individual to do with the system we have? First, don't give up on changing the system: vote for Social Security and Medicare strength and expansion, and support politicians who will regulate and reform the system. One key area of reform is fees. What chips away at your wealth when you invest in an actively managed fund is the fees. So, even before finishing this article, switch out of active funds to index or passive funds. Index or passive management can be done very cheaply, by virtue of its hands-off approach. This savings is passed on to the investor. Active management, by nature, costs more.

Here's how it applies to fees. Index funds charge one-tenth of one percent of the assets under management. Your \$100,000 over ten years, earning the stock market average of 5 percent, gives you a return of 4.9 percent after fees, or \$161,300. But the actively managed is likely to charge 20 times more – 2 percent. That means it earns, functionally, 3 percent, and you end up with \$134,300. That's a whopping 44 percent less. Over ten years, you've lost \$27,000 – not to market performance, but just

Human beings may be bad at some things, but we're good at others, like coming together to solve our problems.

to fees. That's the math of compounding interest: every 1 percent drop in the rate of return leads to a 20 percent drop in total return.

Now, a mutual-fund manager will tell you the fees are worth it, because his experts will earn more than the market over 10 years. But statistics tell a different story. Do some managers ever have hot streaks, beating the market several years in a row? Sure. But research shows high fliers last a few years at most.

Given this, why would you choose an actively managed fund? You wouldn't. Simply put: low-fee index funds are all you need. If you must have someone to guide you through the investing process, get a fee-only adviser and pay up front for a personalized plan.

Now What?

If you're inadequately prepared for retirement, it's very likely not your fault. The money-management industry is not on the side of its clients. The voluntary, individual-account business is one of the most profitable but most lightly regulated sectors of the financial industry, and they have a lot of money for lobbyists who are paid to oppose tighter regulations.

So far, they've done so successfully.

What is a person to do with our deeply flawed retirement income system?

1. Fire your brokers and advisors who take royalties or commissions. Invest only in index funds.
2. Eliminate debt, including mortgages.
3. Vote to regulate retirement savings brokers, make them loyal to their clients.
4. Vote to expand Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare.

Our society has made a commitment to its citizens' retirements in deliberate and meaningful ways since the sensible construction of Social Security. All workers need a guaranteed pension to supplement their Social Security for the rest of their lives. All workers, rich or poor, need to have some time to themselves, on their own terms, at the end of their working lives. Human beings may be bad at some things, but we're good at others, like coming together to solve our problems. I believe this can happen, and everyone's voice needs to be heard.

Teresa Ghilarducci is professor of economic policy analysis at The New School for Social Research in New York, where she is also director of the Schwartz Center for Economic Policy Analysis. She has many years' experience in labor economics and as a consultant to union workers. President Clinton appointed Ghilarducci to the Pension Benefit Guaranty Advisory Board, which is charged with protecting the pensions of public sector workers. She is the author of When I'm Sixty-Four: The Plot against Pensions and the Plan to Save Them (Princeton, 2008).

Notes

- 1 For workers trying to save for retirement, the picture has dramatically deteriorated. Using the Current Population survey, I find that from 2001 through 2012 there was a remarkable drop in employer sponsorship of retirement plans, from 61 percent to a historical low of 53 percent. Retirement plan coverage rates fell 13 percent between 2001 and 2012. This is a reversal of recent optimistic trends: between 1950 and 1979, retirement account sponsorship rates doubled from 25 percent to 50 percent and leveled off.
- 2 www.americanprogress.org/issues/open-government/news/2011/01/19/8862/tax-expenditure-of-the-week-tax-deferred-retirement-savings/
- 3 www.finishrich.com/blog/tag/the-latte-factor/
- 4 www.economicpolicyresearch.org/index.php/guaranteeing-retirement-income/580-industry-report-debunked-sp-479474577



Photography in this fall Reflections features the work of Marianne Contarz York. Born in Boston, she recently retired from full-time work after 44 years as a social worker. She received a graduate degree from the Boston University School of Social Work's Gerontology Program. Early on in her career, she began to win awards for her photos of older people. She describes her vocation and passion as visual gerontology, using her camera to advocate for older people and challenge negative images of aging. For decades, her photography has been exhibited and used to illustrate academic books in the field. Today she lives in Marin County in northern California, where she has a private practice offering counseling and group work. She is still using the camera, branching out into videography and planning to do some “digital storytelling.” See www.mariannegontarzyork.com.

REFLECTIONS: *What was the image of aging when you started out in the 1970s?*

GONTARZ YORK: It was pretty negative. Old people were considered a problem. Programs and researchers focused on sickness, poverty, loss of social roles, isolation, and demoralization. But I knew that's not how I wanted to age. I wanted to break those negative stereotypes. I was lucky and studied with a pioneering mentor at Boston University, Dr. Louis Lowy. He saw the coming “Age Wave” of the baby boomers. He knew our society was not prepared. Dr. Lowy was an Auschwitz survivor who impressed upon his students the importance of living a purposeful and meaningful life. So after graduate school, I set out with the simple question, How do older people find purpose and meaning in their life in a culture where they no longer seem to serve any purpose? As a baby boomer, the question became, How can I lead a long and happy life in a culture that values productivity over community? We clearly don't have any maps to guide us.

REFLECTIONS: *Why was this a subject close to your heart even in your 20s?*

GONTARZ YORK: I have a positive image of aging – probably because growing up I had an older father. He was a positive and vigorous person. He worked hard and still took good care of himself. He was interested in vitamins and healthy eating. I was never uncomfortable with older people. I didn't really see age.

REFLECTIONS: *Do you think the culture's attitudes toward aging have improved since the beginning of your career?*

GONTARZ YORK: Now that I'm 65, I'm not so sure. I think the culture still sees older people as a problem by and large. But I am also happy to report that some programs and researchers now study the positive aspects of aging as well as the negatives. My generation seems to want to live for a long time, but what will it really be like? Medical technology has done a great job extending life, but not much attention has been paid to the quality of that life. They say 70 is the new 60. And 80 is the new 70. But in reality, 70 is 70 and 80 is 80. Let's face it: aging may be perceived by the culture as a social problem, but it is an amazing achievement. And I've been cultivating a purposeful, meaningful, long and happy life for a while. I hope many others choose that route as well.

REFLECTIONS: *How do you decide whom to photograph?*

GONTARZ YORK: I look for the spark in people. No matter what the perceived disability, I see strengths and capabilities. I look for a way to connect with people of all ages using a camera as my ready tool. I found that older people appreciate being seen. We live in a culture where they otherwise aren't seen. As a social worker, my intention is to develop a connection with a person as soon as possible. I find that a camera or a photo makes that easier. That's how the photo of the woman looking at the framed photo [see p. 32] took place. I was on a photo project following a geriatrician in Boston when I met her in her home and asked about the framed picture nearby. I learned it is a photo of herself as a young woman. We connected as she naturally shifted into reminiscing about her childhood.

REFLECTIONS: *You recently retired from full-time work. How is it going?*

GONTARZ YORK: I'm enjoying myself thoroughly, doing things I never had time to do. I'm learning conversational Spanish so I can travel in Latin America. I do yoga to keep me balanced. I volunteer at a local public school, working with troubled teenagers in a community garden – using my camera with them, taking pictures of them as they work in the garden. I love seeing them smile. I think it really is an opportunity to build up their self-image. I am also spending time learning the world of digital photography. Life is short. I am in good health. I'm doing things I love.



Facing Finitude

By Teresa Berger

When I moved to the United States many years ago, I encountered a cultural context that – although I spoke the language fluently – was at some points as alien to me as my official “resident alien” status declared me to be. Especially puzzling was the way Americans seemed to engage death, with heads firmly in the sand. I still remember attending a lecture by a famous American ethicist who asked his audience how they wished to die. The answers confirmed what he had expected to hear: “quickly,” “without pain,” “in my sleep,” etc. My own answer made the speaker exclaim that I was “medieval.” I said that I wished to die “knowingly.”

I often think about that scene when I enter my office at Yale Divinity School these days. To my left sits a simple wooden bookshelf: it has the shape of a coffin and is fit to my body’s particular measurements. When I die, the individual shelves will come out and I will be buried in this coffin in a plain shroud.

The idea for this shelf-coffin originated in a course I was co-teaching at YDS with my colleague Markus Rathey, titled “In the Face of Death: Worship, Music, Art.” As part of my research, I read

Visitors to my office wonder: what is it like to work with your own coffin in plain view? It’s not as troubling or strange as it might sound.

about green burial practices – new ways of making funerals ecologically responsible, for example by foregoing toxic embalming chemicals and elaborate coffins. When you consider that cemeteries in the U.S. use 90,000 tons of steel and 1.6 million tons of concrete every year, simpler funeral practices are an important part of creation care.

What also captured my attention was having a simple wooden coffin built that could be used as a

bookshelf while one was still alive. Since I needed an additional shelf in my office anyway, I had a shelf-casket built.

Existential Evasion

Visitors to my office wonder: what is it like to work with your own coffin in plain view? It’s not as troubling or strange as it might sound. It serves as a workaday reminder of a path I choose to be on: I seek to face my own finitude, not as a task for the last few moments of life, but as a lifelong challenge.

The culture we inhabit labors to avoid intimate reflection on death, most especially one’s own. As avid consumers of all things material, we are supposed to have infinite appetites and an infinite capacity to satisfy these appetites. The burgeoning cultural and commercial interest in the “silver” or “golden” years rarely focuses on the existential limit of these years. More surprising than the cultural evasion of dying, however, is the scarcity of contemporary spiritual practices to help us confront our own end. The task of course is a daunting one. Reflecting upon death can be construed as morbid, a condition needing medical attention (recurring thoughts of death are one of the symptoms of depression), or as an invitation for the thanatologically sensitive expert

to advise us on how to “have a nice death.”¹ Either way, the avoidance of our own dying is doomed to fail in each and every case. What can be odder than ignoring such a large-scale failure?

There is an additional personal reason for facing finitude: the engagement with mortality is gendered. Statistically, women have more time between “now” and the “hour of our death” than men, since we

Accepting our own body as it ages means befriending yet another companion on the journey to the hour of our death.

outlive men, at least in the so-called First World (the 2010 U.S. Census reported 22.9 million women who were 65 or older, compared to 17.3 million men). Contemplating death is something women typically have more time to do than men.

Historically, the church has been a place where people learned and practiced together “the art of dying.” For many centuries, preparing for death was an accepted part of the spiritual life. It was something one learned early on and taught to children and grandchildren. I seek to befriend this tradition of deliberately facing the hour of my death, not only with my shelf-coffin in my office, but with other spiritual practices.

Facing the Scriptures

The Scriptures are a good place to begin. They are no strangers to facing finitude. The psalmist prays: “Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is.” (Ps 39:4) For the psalmist, acknowledging mortality engenders not a morbid fascination with death but wisdom for the living of our days: “Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.” (Ps 90:12) The Scriptures also include whole prayers for facing death. Innumerable Christians have died with the words of Psalm 23 on their lips, comforted by the vision of God as a good shepherd even in the valley of the shadow of death. In Psalm 71, the psalmist envisions aging and dying as a continuation of God’s caring presence since birth. A contemporary meditation, written by a middle-aged woman who looks back to her own birth and ahead towards her own death, renders Psalm 71 thus:

*God,
you have been my vision and hope
since the very beginning of my life.
In my mother’s womb, you were with me.*

*You were the midwife who eased me into this world,
You the giver of the gift of life.
You let me flourish, bloom, and ripen.
My praise rises towards you continually
like whiffs of perfume from my body.
In you I trust all the days of my life
my refuge, my shelter, my home.*

*Now, in the middle of my life,
I look both back and to the future.
Do not forsake me as I grow old,
as my strength begins to lessen.*

*Those who always envied me your gifts of energy
and power
will laugh at me:
You are beginning to look really old!
And they will think:
She is fair game now,
no divine power can save her from old age.*

*God, shield me
from those who consider me senile and useless.
Let them see your strength and power
even in my frailty and weakness.
Confound those who idolize youth
with your love for both young and old.
Confuse them with your own repeated trust
in old women,
women like Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth,
whom you called to give birth to hope
even in old age.*

*Since my youth you have taught me
to discern your wisdom and presence in all things
and to walk in your strength.
Do not leave me
as I turn old and gray,
as my body begins to show signs of
weakness and frailty.
Let women friends be at my side
who want to age with me,
who want to become old and wise,
old and young at heart,
old and rich in lived life.*

*And at the very end of my life
be midwife for me once more.
Ease me out of this world
back into your own body, your own world.
Until that precious hour
my mouth will speak of your justice and power
every day of my life.
I will glorify your faithfulness with my lute.
I will gladly sing your praise with full lungs,
God of my youth and of my old age.
To my children and my children’s children
I will speak of your amazing power
which you pour out on all ages.²*

Facing the Light

The wisdom of the Scriptures meets us not only in texts. We find it also in the biblical stories that have been taken up in worship and popular devotions. A case in point is Luke 2:22-38, the story of Jesus' presentation in the temple and the encounter with Simeon and Anna. This encounter between God's own new life and two elderly people gave rise to a particular devotional practice in the medieval church. On Feb. 2, candles were (and in many places still are) blessed in memory of Simeon and Anna seeing the light. The traditional name for the feast is a witness to this custom: "Candlemas." A link

Although a bewildering variety of retail candles is available "for all occasions," dying does not seem to be one of them.

was made between this celebration of Candlemas and the hours of death. The devout would keep at home some of the candles blessed on Feb. 2 to light when someone was dying. It is interesting that in our own times, although a bewildering variety of retail candles is available "for all occasions," dying does not seem to be one of them. We are advised to have ready emergency telephone numbers for medical personnel, living wills, and directives for private bank accounts, but what about religious symbols for the hour of death?

Facing the Music

Using more than words, visual arts and music can offer special solace in the face of fragility and impermanence. The chorales of Johann Sebastian Bach that focus on dying and death are a striking example. The well-known passion hymn "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" from his *St. Matthew Passion* begins with a meditation on Jesus' dying agony, and ends with a prayer for one's own death: "My Savior, be Thou near me when death is at my door; then let Thy presence cheer me, forsake me nevermore." Even if that particular verse of the hymn is rarely included in contemporary hymn books, we can still commit it to our heart, and sing and pray it in preparation for that moment when "death is at my door."

Facing a Cloud of Witnesses

Each of us confronts our own particular death, yet none of us is alone with this challenge. The Christian tradition offers companions for this journey – for instance, the saints and all those who lived and died in exemplary ways. My own Roman Catholic tradition knows saints who offer a "good death," among them St. Birgitta of Sweden and St. Barbara.

The latter especially is traditionally invoked against a "sudden death," a death that finds the person unprepared. These saints are not in great demand today, I am afraid, particularly those invoked against a sudden death. Most people seem to want precisely this kind of death: quick, painless, and, if possible, while asleep, so not to have to face one's own dying.

Yet I think we need these sainted exemplars more than ever. They can enable us to reconceive our dying as something we need never do entirely by ourselves. In a culture where most of us will die alone, in hospitals or nursing homes, we may welcome saints who accompany us when few others will. In the traditional prayers over a deceased person, it is precisely the "saints of God" who are asked to draw near (*subvenite, sancti Dei*), and the angels who are bidden to meet and accompany the departed to paradise. Indeed, these saints could become companions not only at the fateful moment of death but throughout life.

Other companions for this open-eyed journey are those from among our own family and friends who have died. We do well to remember these dearly departed and to offer them continuing hospitality in our midst. Such hospitality can take many forms. Why not, on the anniversary of a death, place a photo of that family member on the kitchen table and light a candle? Children especially grasp these simple symbols instinctively, and the photo and lit candle can prompt stories about the one who has died but who continues to be a part of the family.

The familial dead are not our only companions. Our closest partners in this journey may well be our living friends and relatives. As we age together, we face our mortality together. Some will carry the marks of a terminal illness. There are elders who not only are close to their own death but have accompanied others on that road and have wisdom to share. Our children will ask us out of the blue when we will die, and where we want to be buried. Accepting our own body as it ages means befriending yet another companion on the journey to the hour of our death: whether it is our wrinkles, our graying hair, or the body's changing rhythms, we do embody our own finite state. Why not befriend more willingly this finite body?

Facing the Source of All Life

Whatever the stage of life, confronting death is best done while engaging the larger calling, the attentive, faithful living of life. My faith invites me to face my end as part of the adventure of facing the ultimate source of all life: Godself. I live into my own dying most deeply by each day drawing closer to this

source of all life, God. A person of faith who every day prays the ancient commendation of the soul –“Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Ps 31:5) – might not need to do much more in the hour of her death. Some years ago, I tried to give expression to this larger whole in which my living and dying are held together. I wrote this prayer that, along with my office shelf-coffin, continues to help me face my finitude:

*Graceful God
Weaver of the Web of Life
Mystery at the Heart of the Universe
Holy Wisdom, Vibrant Spirit*

*I enter
the space of my own dying,
the holy ground of facing finitude,
my own.
I stand before you with empty hands.*

*The world of appearances
will fade away.
The performances of authority
and the power of my own life
will lose their defining edge.
I can already sense
the web of my life being unmade.
I stand before you with empty hands.*

*I pray:
as I face my own dying
as I walk on this holy ground
towards the hour of my death,
become for me, yet again,
Holy Wisdom and Vibrant Spirit,
the Mystery at the heart of my own universe,
the Weaver of the Web of Life, your life within me.*

*Grant me the grace to hold still
and to sense your Spirit hovering over the
troubled waters of my soul.
Hold me gently in your arms,
when facing my own dying
brings emptiness and agony.
Teach me to yield to my life's unmaking
but also to discern and fight the evils that
might surround it.
Sustain me as I try to live
while walking towards my own death.*

*And when this holy hour of my death comes,
as it so surely will,
when my life is forever unmade
in that all-defining moment of my life,
let me knowingly yield to you,
Passionate Weaver of the Web of Life,
that you might re-weave my broken web
into the fullness of life that is your own.*

Originally from Germany, Teresa Berger is professor of liturgical studies at YDS. She holds doctorates in liturgical studies and constructive theology. Her most recent book is Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History (Ashgate, 2011). An active Roman Catholic, Berger has produced (with MysticWaters Media) a CD-ROM, Ocean Psalms: Meditations, Stories, Prayers, Songs and Blessings from the Sea (2008). She also contributes to the liturgy blog Pray Tell (praytelltblog.com).

Notes

- 1 I owe this description to Marshall Kapp, who is quoted in the moving article by Mary Lee Freeman, “Caring for the Dying: My Patients, My Work, My Faith,” *Commonweal* (Jan. 30, 2004), pp. 11–15, here p. 14.
- 2 Angela Berlis, Psalm 71. English translation by Teresa Berger. Copyright © 2004. Used by permission.

photo by Teresa Berger



Teresa Berger's bookshelf-coffin

Dementia as a Religious Problem

By David H. Smith

“The demented you will have always with you” is not a saying of our Lord that I recall. Yet it fits the 21st-century condition of our lives. Dementia is a grimly stubborn and growing statistic in the unfolding story of our aging society, and it raises at least three issues for thoughtful Christian persons.

They are: decision-making at the end of life, the psychological mix of feelings and frustrations involved in care for the demented, and the nature of a distinctively Christian response to dementia.

Among certain high-profile scholars writing in medical ethics over the past quarter century or more, decision-making at the end of life has received by far the greatest amount of attention. Many put great weight on a demented person's declaration of preferences before she became demented. Others find this over-simple. They point to the radical change in personality that dementia may bring – to the point of a true change of identity. If this is not the same person, how can previous choices of *another* person be binding or relevant?

Other arguments seek to clarify the nature of our own decision-making about the demented person's care and condition. One issue in play is the contrast between powerful moral theories about personhood and our own moral intuitions about the demented. Kant, for instance, places the value of persons in a class by itself. To be a person means to have the capacity for moral responsibility; the signal is our sense that praise and blame are appropriate for the individual concerned. Yet because in dementia one gradually loses the capacity to take responsibility, the demented individual ceases, at some point, to be a person. One's moral status is diminished, and it becomes logical to seek to identify that point at which one is no longer a person.

I think our basic intuitions should trump theory. Among other reasons, it has proven remarkably difficult to identify criteria or standards persuasively that must be flunked if a person is to fall out of the moral security of personhood and into a lower level

of moral status. A lot of human beings, demented or otherwise, would flunk out.

All the same, I believe a person's mental capacities are relevant to decisions that should be made about her care. The reason is simple: the way a treatment is perceived is a significant part of what the treatment is. To take an example from another stage of life: the fact that my granddaughter doesn't like injections for an infection doesn't mean she shouldn't have them. Her perceptions are short-sighted, we might say. We can be certain that what we are doing is in her best interest even if she hates the prospect. Suppose, however, that the discomfort of the injections is not of short duration or minor but serious and stretches out over weeks, months, or years. At that point most parents or guardians

Not only are the demented frightening. They trigger embarrassment, shame, and guilt. I never concluded my regular visits to my mother without feeling guilty that I wasn't doing more.

would factor her perceptions and feelings into the judgment. That a treatment will be perceived as torment must be taken into account in treatment decisions. This has been a recurrent theme in U.S. court decisions on end-of-life care.

Dementia is Scary

Yet treatment *decisions* are really only a small part of the moral problems presented by the demented. Dementia endures. It is not a problem that can be eliminated from the human community, any more

than one can simply ignore or eliminate a sibling, or skip being a teenager. God willing, we will be able someday to reduce dementia's incidence and destructiveness, but in the meantime our personal and social problem is to learn how best to live with it. That meantime seems an eternity to those whose lives have been engulfed by it, and the end of dementia is a long way away from us.

The hard physical work of caregiving, largely done by unpaid wives and daughters, is only the visible tip of the iceberg of the problems of care. To start with, the demented are scary. They don't listen to reason. When my mother – residing in an assisted-living facility a thousand miles from my home – was uncomfortable with the fact that the facility couldn't feed me when I visited because there was no space, she wanted to go out to dinner together. I'd have loved that, but in fact there was no suitable place within a reasonable distance. I tried to explain this to her, but to no avail. Finally we went out together to a Subway in a disreputable neighborhood. She hated it, and with good reason. I've always been ambivalent about that memory. In my more sensitive moments I feel I was cruel. In others I allow myself to feel that I outmaneuvered her for once in 60-plus years! My example may be

No one who has these caregiving experiences can avoid the question “why her?”, which is pretty inseparable from the question “why me?”

poor, but anyone who has spent any time at all with a demented parent or spouse will recognize the irrationality I am talking about. In my case a mother's love remained after reason gave out, but what if the questionable decision about the restaurant had led to serious bad consequences?

Not only are the demented frightening. They trigger embarrassment, shame, and guilt. I never concluded my regular visits without feeling guilty that I wasn't doing more. When space allowed, and Mother and I were able to go to dinner in the main dining room, she would regularly announce to anyone and everyone that she didn't remember them. I wanted her to shut up; no one would know this lapse of hers if she didn't broadcast the fact. I forgot just what a candid and pathologically open person my mother was, failed to recognize that she was being herself. This humiliated me, and I was embarrassed for her too.

I came to the conclusion that as a practical matter the best thing I could do was to be good com-

pany for Mother. I might have my own histories of guilt and disappointments, gratitude and embarrassment, fear and sorrow, but there was no going back and reliving the relationship or pretending she was not now different from what she was. What she needed from me, I thought now, was to be told that I loved her, to be cheerful and helpful, to talk and to listen, to kiss her and hold her hand.

And also to do what biomedical ethicist Bruce Jennings has helpfully called “re-minding” by reminiscing about our times together over 70 years, and helping her to remember. Mother remembered three things to the last. One was the nursery rhyme “One, two, buckle my shoe” – although we always got stuck at “15-16.” Another was the fight song of the Logansport (Indiana) High School (from which Mother had graduated at 16). Mother had a good voice to the end, but I can't carry a tune in a shovel so our singing this together was comic. Finally, as the last surviving of seven Depression-era farm kid siblings, she was very proud to be able to recite all their names in correct birth order.

In a 24-hour visit we probably went through these texts 30-40 times, but it helped the work of bonding, morale, and reinforcing the mind she was struggling to sustain and to re-mind.

No one who has these caregiving experiences can avoid the question “why her?”, which is pretty inseparable from the question “why me”? It's the difficult moral question of natural evil. As a chaplain once told me: “I'm ministering to two births – one child will live seven minutes and the other 70 years. Where's the justice in that?” The arbitrariness of these fates – a child struck down, a beloved family member's decline into dementia – makes it hard to believe that God is either caring or just. A coherent framework of meaning is shattered. Anyone who claims to have a quick answer to that theological puzzle simply disqualifies him- or herself as a serious Christian.

God and Suffering

When we start with a conceptual scheme and then try to fit suffering into it we have things backwards. We shouldn't first develop a Christian theology and then treat suffering as an intellectual puzzle. Rather Christian theology and ethics must *begin* with recognition that God has identified Godself in Christ with every form and kind of human suffering. Christian faith can't make much sense to those who haven't suffered somehow and in some way. Suffering isn't an afterthought. It's the starting point: it's what makes piety and therefore theology important. As we suffer we are not alone, but aligned with God.

For Jay Chase

Every spring
since she died
I watch her daffodils
rise, new-green and small
from the soil
where she planted them.
Day after April day
I watch them rise
into radiance – gold
and mortal

Wind bends
their slender stems,
nods their heads,
whispers
to lingering grief

Death is real
but is a thin word,
too diminished,
too emaciated
by what is not
to speak of what is

Look on these flowers
in their five seasons
of green rising,
irrepressible budding,
jubilant flowering,
mortal fading
and long dark absence

No season is forever,
all circling
circling
circling

Mortal maker of words,
in whom burns fierce
turbulence of stars,
can you imagine a vocabulary
for what is stored in the heart
of a small gnarled bulb?

In the real world suffering is inescapable. But suffering isn't the last word about human existence. Life and love are. We live in the hope of the resurrection. The ritual of the Eucharist walks us through the cycle of death and rebirth into community with God. It gives all and only what we are promised, and in that sense it is highly realistic. Piety and worship precede theological construction. It can provide help to caregiver and the beloved demented alike. It reminds us that the most important thing we can give to each other is presence.

The best things that Christians can do about dementia involve being present, welcoming, and listening. Many of the relevant skills are not high tech – but they do require character. We hold hands, sing songs, listen and care as best we can. We are the best vicars of the Christ who embodied ministry to the lonely and broken.

David H. Smith '64 B.D. is a Yale senior scholar in theology and medical ethics and a senior lecturer in political science. He was director of the Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics at Yale from 2007-2011 and was director of the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions from 1982-2003. He is the editor of the 2010 book Religious Giving: For Love of God (Indiana).

Dementia Data

Key facts from the World Health Organization:

- Although dementia mainly affects older people, it is not a normal part of aging.
- Worldwide, 35.6 million people have dementia, and there are 7.7 million new cases every year. The number of people with dementia is expected to nearly double every 20 years, to 65.7 million in 2030 and 115.4 million in 2050.
- Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia. It may contribute to 60-70 percent of cases.
- Economic impact: \$604 billion per year. The high cost of the disease will challenge health systems to deal with the predicted future increase of cases.
- Early diagnosis improves the quality of life of people with dementia and their families.
- More research is needed to better understand its causes. Research is still scarce that identifies the modifiable risk factors of dementia and effective treatments.

Source: World Health Organization



How to (Not) Retire Theologically

By Stanley Hauerwas

On June 30, 2013, I retired from the faculty of the Duke University Divinity School. I am now an emeritus professor. I have a continuing appointment in the Divinity School at Duke as a senior research fellow. That means I get to keep my office for at least two more years in exchange for being “available.” Availability means if a student or colleague wants to talk to me I will be more than happy to talk with them. Not a bad deal.

But I have to say I am increasingly coming to the judgment that I do not like to think of myself as retired. Indeed I do not like the language of retirement. But I was the one who decided to “retire” so I have no one to blame but myself. I was, after all, in my early 70s. I had taught for over 45 years. I had directed over 70 dissertations. It seemed time to “move aside.” I do not regret that decision.

But to decide no longer to teach is not equivalent to “retiring.” I am a theologian. How can I retire from being a theologian? I am often asked what I am planning to do in retirement. I can only respond: I do not have any plans for my retirement.

Theology is a discipline that takes over your life because the subject matter of theology is life-changing. I cannot imagine what it might mean for a theologian to retire.

Why should I have plans for my life in retirement when I have never had any plans for my life? I have done what people asked me to do and as far as I am concerned that way of living has worked out well enough. I think it true that I never “planned” my life.

Of course there are many things I wanted to do. I wanted to be an academic. I discovered that I wanted to be a good teacher. I also wanted to write and write well. But again that was more a discovery

along the way than a well-defined project with which I began. I wanted to have something to say that might be of help to me and others. In retrospect I am somewhat surprised by what I discovered I had to say.

I wanted to be an academic, a teacher, and a writer because those roles made it possible for me to be a theologian. I think one of the reasons I wanted to be a theologian is I thought, and continue to think, that theology is a discipline that takes over your life because the subject matter of theology is life-changing. I cannot imagine, therefore, what it might mean for a theologian to retire.

For these reasons, and likely for other reasons not yet identified, I do not like the concept of retirement. Walter Reuther, the great labor leader, suggested retirement is the time in a person’s life when one is too old to work but too young to die. That is why I suspect retirement for many seems like “a little death” due to the loss of a sense of worth associated with a job well done.

Retirement: A Brief History

Of course, one of the frustrations of the job I have had is you are never sure that you have done it well. To be a theologian comes with a kind of ambiguity that means you are unsure whether what you have done is theology, not to mention whether it is theology done well. Nor can you ever be sure, even if you think you have done theology well, that that is the end of the matter. To do theology well means you have a sense that you are never finished.

So, I think the idea of retirement is not a good idea – not only for theologians but for anyone. Once there was no retirement. In the ancient world no one “retired” because “old age” was not thought to be a reason to quit working. Of course work was quite varied, but it was assumed that the elderly would continue doing what they had done most of their lives.

Old age became a different reality with the economic developments we call capitalism. Once work was determined by economies of money, a problem was created for the elderly. That problem quite simply was how to get the elderly out of the way to make room for younger and more energetic workers.¹

Retirement was the name given to social policies aimed to encourage older workers to stop working in order to provide a place for younger workers. German chancellor Bismarck, in the 19th century, is usually given credit for making the state responsible for supporting people who had reached the age of 65 in their retirement. Bismarck not only thought this to be an important economic policy but also a way to instill in workers loyalty to the state. That, of course, is the kindest way to describe Bismarck’s policy. For in effect he was trying to find a way to provide an alternative to the attraction of socialism among the working class in Germany. In 1882, by an act of the German parliament, workers were given the opportunity to retire in the hope they would as a result look on the state as a benevolent benefactor who cared about their lives.

The Uncreative Years?

It is quite interesting that the public policy that established the practice of retirement preceded attempts to establish the contours of aging through the biological and psychological sciences. In 1905, however, William Osler, an extremely influential doctor and scientist of the day, identified the biological ages he thought determine our lives. According to Osler, after our youth we have before us our creative years that fall between the ages of 25 and 40. After 40, we live through the “uncreative years” in which little can be expected from us. His “science” nicely confirmed the new economic realities in which the young were given special considerations. Osler’s scheme justified the social policy challenge of how to get the elderly out of the way for those who are in their creative years.

The answer, pioneered by the railroads in America, was a social policy that paid them to retire. In 1935, it was suggested that those willing to retire should be paid \$200 a month. The railroad pension plans became the paradigm for the later creation

of Social Security. Once Social Security is in place, retirement is no longer a lifestyle choice. Rather, it is increasingly assumed that older workers have an obligation to retire.

Though Social Security is generally celebrated as a good thing, it was not always regarded positively even by those who might be freed from physically demanding jobs. Many who received pensions from the railroad, as well as those who later got Social Security, were ambivalent about losing their jobs. People usually want to work even if the work is not all that interesting. What they often miss is not the work itself but the people with whom they worked.

Moral Strangers

In 1960, builder Del Webb tried to remedy the sense of loss associated with retirement by creating Sun City in Arizona. Sun City expressed Webb’s creative idea that after a life of work a person should be rewarded with a life of leisure. Florida and Arizona became destinations associated with the formation

The resulting retirement culture not only isolated the elderly from those who “have to work,” but the elderly now were identified as those who have to work very hard at playing.

of cultures for the elderly that were based on play. The result not only isolated the elderly from those who “have to work,” but the elderly now were identified as those who have to work very hard at playing. The resulting isolation of the elderly indicates that we now live in a culture that believes we have no stake in developing people of wisdom and memory necessary for the sustaining of good social orders.

Perhaps the climax of these developments was the creation of the American Association of Retired Persons as a lobby on behalf of the elderly. The elderly, the retired, have now become an interest group to lobby Congress to get their fair share of resources to which the young might lay claim. No longer can the elderly and retired be thought of as people who have wisdom crucial to the discovery of the common good across generations, because now the old and the young are fundamentally moral strangers to one another.

This admittedly potted history of retirement as an idea and social policy may seem to have little to do with what it might mean to retire as a theologian. But I think this history is important because it reminds us that retirement entails a politics. If a

theologian cannot retire, this means a theologian serves a very different politics than that represented by recent social arrangements.

Growing Old in Christ

I think it quite fascinating that there is nothing in the New Testament about retirement. It surely never occurred to Paul to think, "I've done the best I can but I am never going to get those Christians in Corinth to straighten out. I am tired of traveling and controversy. I think it is time for me to retire." Nowhere in the New Testament is there a hint that the early Christians think there is a time when they might retire as Christians or from being Christians. I do not think this was only due to the early death of many Christians. Rather I believe Christians could not conceive how their lives could make sense if they did not assume they had particular responsibilities and obligations as they grew old in Christ.²

In particular those who were lucky enough to "grow old in Christ" had as one of their responsibilities to share the vulnerability of the body with their brothers and sisters in Christ. They well understood that we are creatures whose lives move always toward death. Accordingly, to grow old does not grant permission to be free of responsibility. Rather it obligates the elderly to live lives shaped by their baptism so they might help those who are not yet old learn how to grow old and even die. Often that means no more than to be bodily present, but to be so present means if you are a Christian you never get to retire.

That retirement is not an idea or practice applicable to our lives as Christians, however, may seem irrelevant for the role retirement plays in our lives given the jobs and work many have to do. No one as far as I know has suggested that anyone can or should retire from being a human being, much less a Christian. Rather, retirement is only relevant to the work or job we do. Retirement can be a godsend for those who do hard physical work that is difficult if not impossible to do as we grow older. Retirement is a welcome relief for many whose jobs often seem to be quite meaningless or boring. I have no reason to deny retirement can be a quite positive alternative in such circumstances. But I do not think that is the end of the matter.

That retirement is the only alternative for many who have jobs that give little satisfaction is surely not a sufficient response to work so conceived. Rather, what is needed is a sense that even jobs such as picking up the trash should be meaningful if we remember that those who do such work are performing a vital service for the community. The

problem is not that the work is "meaningless" but rather that we have no way of gesturing how important such work is for the common good.

For others, of course, there is the opposite problem: their work is so consuming they cannot imagine a life without it. This may be particularly true of those whose jobs are a constant challenge to the imagination. I suspect it is also true for farmers and builders. People engaged in such activities find retiring difficult because to no longer do what one has come to love can seem to be a loss of self.

Another form of this problem is associated with those whose work is generally regarded as so significant that any thought of quitting implies a loss of status for the one doing the work. This seems true particularly of positions that make the holder of the position "well known." American politicians and entertainers seem prone to this stance. When public figures retire, this can signal a loss of control that makes it impossible to ensure they will continue to be seen. If they are not seen they are not sure they exist. They may as well be dead. These are complex matters with a thousand variations, which suggest that retirement is no simple act.

Fame, Power, Loss

Indeed, these last observations I find particularly relevant for my retirement. For better or worse, without trying, I have become a contradiction in terms, that is, I am allegedly a famous theologian. But I have wanted to make a difference in the world of theology and even more in the world of the church. How that can be done without taking oneself more seriously than is appropriate is not easily negotiated. Self-deception looms.

Yet I cannot deny, given my ambition to make a theological difference, that retirement can and does feel like a loss. I do have the modest ambition

It surely never occurred to Paul to think, "I am tired of traveling and controversy. I think it is time for me to retire."

to make every Christian in America aware that as Christians they should have a problem with war. By retiring I feel like I am losing some of the power I had to enact that ambition. To be sure, the power I think I am losing I may never have had, but it does not mean the feeling I have lost power is any less real. At the very least it means I no longer have students whom I hope to try to recruit for the task of convincing Christians we have a problem with war.

When asked what I plan to do in retirement I usually say, "I will do what I have always done." I will



get up, read a book, and write. Reading a book and writing is my way of saying I will continue to think about what I have always thought about, which is the difference God makes for the living of our lives. The exploration of that difference is never finished, which means the theologian always has something to do. I take that to be a great gift.

This does not mean that the theologian's relation to that work does not change. Because theologians are never sure they have competence, and competence may just be a description of what it means to have a soul, they must say the same thing again and again, only differently. That means they must constantly rethink what they have thought. This has everything to do with the wonderful simplicity of what we believe as Christians, but that very simplicity requires thought. That is why theologians can never retire. They never know enough to retire, but more importantly they must think about that which they are never sure they understand.

Karl Barth, Performance Artist

Karl Barth's life and theology cast light on this subject of retirement. He is surely one of the great performance artists of Christian theology. He was so because he discovered that theology cannot help but begin and end with a truth that has been given to it only by God through the church. That is why "theology cannot appear as a quest for truth or a philosophy of general truth," he writes. "So far as theology bows to the truth of revelation, it understands that the different world views which are designated 'truth' are, at best, only relative, tentative, and limited truth."³ Rather, for theology truth is to be found in the worship of God and in particular the sermon, which enables the church to serve the Word of God so that the world may hear time and time again the Word in this particular time and place.⁴

Hearing the Word at a particular time and place means, according to Barth, that the problem of language is always at the forefront of theological work. The question of what form should the Word take so that it might be heard as the Word of God remains central to the theological task.⁵ Theology must, therefore, always begin and end with revelation, with the Scriptures, and not with personally achieved psychological or pedagogical assumptions, so that God becomes apprehensible.⁶

That Barth so understood the theological task helps account for his lack of concern for not finishing the *Church Dogmatics*. In the preface to *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 4, Part 4, he begins by reporting that over the last years he has been asked often about the non-appearance of the remaining parts of the

Church Dogmatics. He replies by calling attention to the "not inconsiderable bulk" of the *Church Dogmatics* that already exists as an *opus imperfectum*. He notes that most of the medieval *Summae* as well as many cathedrals were never finished. Mozart, due to his untimely death, was unable to finish his *Requiem*. So not to finish is a testimony to our finitude. Barth concludes by pointing out he had argued in *Church Dogmatics* 2/2 that perfection or completeness is an attribute that can only be ascribed to God, which means "it is better not to seek or to imitate perfection in a human work."⁷

In an interview close to the end of his life, Barth responds to a question about the relation of his theology to Mozart by declaring, "I am not ultimately

I do have the modest ambition to make every Christian in America aware that as Christians they should have a problem with war. By retiring I feel like I am losing some of the power I had to enact that ambition.

at home in theology, in the political world, or even in the church. These are all preparatory matters. They are serious, but preparatory. We have to learn to stand in them, but we have also to learn to look beyond them."⁸

The Final Word: Jesus

The interviewer, who quite understandably seems taken aback by Barth's disavowal of being at home in theology, attempts to make Barth confirm who the interviewer thinks Barth is by asking Barth to say something about "grace." Barth responds by first observing that "grace itself is only a provisional word" – a remark that only a theologian as accomplished as Barth can make. He explains, "The last word that I have to say as a theologian or politician is not a concept like grace but a name: Jesus Christ. He is grace and he is the ultimate one beyond world and church and even theology. We cannot lay hold of him. In him is the spur to work, warfare, and fellowship. In him is all that I have attempted in my life in weakness and folly."⁹

Barth retired from teaching but could not retire from the subject that had gripped him from the beginning: Jesus Christ. Barth did not have to finish the *Dogmatics* because he had confidence that we had seen the end in Christ. For Barth there was nothing absolute or finished about the work repre-

sented by all 14 volumes of the *Dogmatics*.¹⁰ That is why Barth was a great theologian.

I have not done theology in the systematic way Barth did theology, but I have tried to take seriously the need as he stressed to get the order right because I think the order – beginning and ending with the centrality of Jesus Christ – has everything to do with our ability to discover the difference God makes for how our lives are lived. To show the difference has been central to everything I have done because if we are unable to show the difference we will lack the ability to know, much less show, why we believe what we believe as Christians.

A Never-ending Adventure

To try to show the difference means not only the way you do theology can never be finished but you cannot stop doing it. You cannot stop because what you have said makes it necessary to respond to the problems that are created by what you have said. If you have said anything well you will discover new challenges you had not anticipated. You may not be sure how to go on but you must try. This can be very tiring because like most people I would like to find a place to stop, or at least rest for a bit.

A form of rest is available if you understand rest to be activity in which the end and the means are commensurate. Theologically the name for rest so understood is worship. Worship, moreover, is but another word for prayer. The work of theology is a second-order activity that depends on the actual existence of a people who have learned to worship

Theologically the name for rest so understood is worship. Worship, moreover, is but another word for prayer.

God. Too often, particularly in recent times, theologians have proceeded as though theology is an end in itself. I am not suggesting that worship is immune from theological critique, but the critique will be possible only on the basis of a more truthful worship of God.

That I cannot stop doing theology given the way I have done it also accounts for the range of my work. I confess when I think about the diverse topics I have addressed it not only makes me tired but it elicits in me a sense of embarrassment. I am not smart enough to know what needs to be known in order to address questions that range from the nature of personal identity to the ethics of war. But I have a stake in both of those topics, and many more, if I am to do the work I take to be the work of

theology. This very essay, an attempt to think theologically about something called “retirement,” is an example of how theology is self-propagating if it is an outgrowth of worship. For when one worships the Triune God, one becomes keenly aware of the inescapability of him. There is no sphere of human life that evades theological implication, because we were made to worship him.

The good news, at least for me, is I am not dead yet, so I continue to have good work to do. But even more important is the fact that there now exists those who graciously describe themselves as my students who can do the work far better than I have done.

The work of theology is never done. That is very good news. The work of theology can never be done alone. That is even better news.

Stanley Hauerwas '65 B.D., '67 M.A., '68 M.Phil., '68 Ph.D. taught at Notre Dame for 13 years before joining the Duke Divinity School faculty in 1983. His book A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic (Notre Dame, 1991) was selected as one of the 100 most important books on religion of the 20th century according to Christianity Today. Other books include Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir (Eerdmans, 2010) and Without Apology: Sermons for Christ's Church (Seabury, 2013).

Notes

- 1 The following account of the history of retirement is gleaned from many sources. For a short but, I believe, accurate account of the idea of retirement see Mary-Lou Weisman, “The History of Retirement, From Early Man to A.A.R.P.,” *New York Times* (March 21, 1999).
- 2 This is a dominant theme in most of the essays in *Growing Old In Christ*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas, Carole Bailey Stoneking, Keith Meador, and David Cloutier (Eerdmans, 2003).
- 3 Karl Barth, *God In Action* (Wipf and Stock, 2005), p. 47.
- 4 Barth, *God in Action*, p. 55.
- 5 Barth, *God In Action*, p. 55.
- 6 Barth, *God in Action*, p. 56.
- 7 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4/4 (T & T Clark, 1969), p. vii.
- 8 Karl Barth, *Final Testimonies*, edited by Eberhard Busch. (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 29.
- 9 Barth, *Final Testimonies*, pp. 29-30.
- 10 Raymond Kemp Anderson, *An American Scholar Recalls Karl Barth's Golden Years As a Teacher* (1958-1964) (Edwin Mellon Press, 2013), pp. 13-14.

In August, marking the 200th anniversary of Richard Wagner's birth, I reflected on what I have learned about aging from the four operas of Wagner's Ring Cycle – *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*.

I have always been impressed by how Wagner's Ring portrays real families as well as the family of the gods. Wotan is the aging father and ruler of the gods who realizes in the first two operas that he as an individual has done many things he now regrets. As he wanders the world he questions whether the conflicts of the gods – fueled by power lust, greed, and oppression – must continue. One theme central to Wagner's Ring is the need to come to terms with the burdens of the past and find hope for the future. Indeed in the final opera in the cycle Wotan agrees to the end of the rule of the gods if a mortal is found worthy. Heroes Siegfried and Brunnhilde convince Wotan that the age of human decision-making should begin.

Wotan becomes an archetype of the aging process. The task of aging, both for individuals and societies, is to make peace with the burdens of our past and impart hope to the next generation.

Even in 1971, when the first White House Conference on Aging was held, it was clear that the aging of baby boomers would have a major impact by the turn of the 21st century. Yale stirred with innovation to meet this demographic drama. In cooperation with the New Haven Housing Authority, the Divinity School began providing chaplains in every low-income housing unit for the elderly in New Haven and at the Masonic Home in Wallingford. Undergraduate volunteers started a successful jobs program for seniors called WHEE (We Help Elders Establish Employment). The University endorsed a VISTA program that put older VISTA workers in every neighborhood center to work with elders.

During those years (1971-74 and 1979-83), I taught two courses a semester at YDS on “Elders and Community Change” and “Spirituality and Aging.” Research by several students doing the coursework found that many low-income seniors in New Haven had no doctor, and regional HMOs began to admit senior individuals.

An important element of the Spirituality and Aging course was to stress to ministers-in-training the value of inviting older churchgoers in the parish to write their spiritual autobiographies. Such writing exercises by 80-year-olds and other elders allow them to confront the past, find the power to let go, and receive spiritual guidance and hope for the fu-

ture. The operatic journey of Wotan lives on in the spiritual journaling of elders who grapple with the dramas of their own pasts and identities. I began to think of these seniors as geron-theologians.

As I reflect on the last 30 years of our aging society, particular emerging themes strike me as urgent.

- Pastors who are clear about the power of geron-theology unlock tremendous leadership potential in their congregations. Older parishioners are a major source of mentoring in public schools. They give leadership to gun-control groups and anti-racist efforts in hundreds of communities. They become leaders in Area Agencies on Aging, advocating for housing and services for older Americans. Like Wotan, they point to excesses of greed that threaten our culture and the need to bring down gods of materialism, violence, and ecological devastation.
- The need for community research and innovation has never been greater. Churches and their aging leaders can seek partnership with foundations and government grant agencies to forge new models of housing and care. Aging in Place communities and new forms of nursing care at home instead of institutional settings are current models being tested.
- Divinity school students today face the largest demographic shift in the history of the world. The future envisioned in 1971 is upon us. Lower birth rates and longer life expectancy threaten our national budget and the survival of many of our social programs. We are called to create communities of discernment that envision new futures. YDS graduates must defy prejudice against age and embrace the elders in their churches as colleagues in discernment. There is no better way to do that than to sit down with parishioners and listen to the joys and struggles of their past and together focus on new futures that call us beyond ourselves.

In Wagner's Ring cycle, the protagonists signal to us to turn back the gods of destruction and conflict and devise better visions for the sustainability of earth and society. We should enlist elders in our churches as wise ones who will help us in this task.

Brenda Stiers '83 M.Div. was founding director of Sage Advocate Program in New Haven (1970-74) and executive minister of the Riverside Church in New York City from 1994-2000. She now lives in Boulder, CO.



Who Is My Neighbor?: Elders Among Us

By Joseph M. Pankowski, Jr.

John and Nancy probably never knew each other, but they would have been good friends. Their teenage years were shaped by the Great Depression, each served in the military in World War II, and both enjoyed a middle-class life thanks to the post-war boom. Neither frankly expected to live beyond the age of 80, and each now wondered whether passing that milestone was a good thing.

John, a widower who lived at home, suffered from mild dementia and went about his days in a quiet way, just trying to get through. John's son, Bob, had moved in with him four years earlier after the death of John's wife. Some neighbors on the cul-de-sac thought it was nice that Bob was caring for his father, but others questioned whether Bob was taking advantage of him. After all, the new car in the driveway was not exactly something John would drive.

Nancy, who had never married or had children, lived by herself in a small apartment about 20 miles from John. Thanks to her Social Security payments

In a world obsessed with youth, it may sound like a fantasy to think a neighborhood or church could find the time to care for the elderly. Yet I have seen it happen.

and pension, she was not hurting financially, but she rarely had visitors. Unfortunately, Nancy had suffered a nasty cut on her foot a couple weeks back. It would heal, right?

Hazardous Conditions

John and Nancy's names, as well as small details, have been changed to protect their families' privacy. Though both died some years ago, their stories illustrate the unfortunate incidents that pastors, physicians, and attorneys are seeing more and more frequently because of our growing senior population.

In John's case, I was retained by his daughter, Sarah, to determine exactly what was going on in

John's household. Sarah, a successful businesswoman, believed John's mind was failing and her brother was milking her father's bank and brokerage accounts for all they were worth. After learning from Bob that John did not have an attorney, I suggested that Bob, Sarah, John, and I get together at John's home to talk about John's circumstances. Bob stalled, made excuses, and then ultimately refused to have such a meeting. It was later established that Bob had stolen more than \$150,000 from his father while living with him.

What could have been done differently to allow Bob to take care of his father while eliminating the temptation to steal from him? Ideally, before John's mental abilities were compromised, he would have established and funded an irrevocable trust. A person of John's choosing, perhaps an experienced accountant, would serve as trustee. The trustee would manage the trust's assets and make sure John's needs were met. With the trust in place, Bob could have lived with his father rent-free and perhaps have been paid a small salary as his father's caregiver. Bob would have driven John's old Chevy, however, instead of a new car.

Nancy's matter, sadly, was more tragic. The wound she had suffered festered for two months, and no physician saw her until she was admitted to the emergency room. At that point, a doctor determined that tissue in Nancy's right foot had died from gangrene. Nancy's foot had to be amputated.

Discharged from the hospital, Nancy was sent to a nursing home. Her mental state deteriorated, and none of Nancy's extended family members stepped

up to assist her. In such situations, a facility will typically petition a probate court to select a conservator to oversee the patient's personal well-being and financial affairs. Nancy's court-appointed conservator was me.

Each week, I would go to the nursing home to meet with Nancy and her caregivers. Often, I would bring my two-year-old son and a pizza (Nancy's favorite food) to brighten her day. I knew she really looked forward to our time together, but I was left to wish that, somehow, I had been able to prevent the circumstances that led to the loss of Nancy's foot.

It would be nice to say that cases like those of John and Nancy are rare. Yet, at least once a month I encounter a shut-in who is living in filth, a retiree who is the victim of a scam, an elderly person who is a danger to himself and others because he refuses to give up his car keys ... the list goes on and on. The common thread in each instance? The senior is isolated from a community of people who could provide the help that he or she desperately needs.

When encountering a senior in difficult circumstances, the attorney, physician, or pastor is typically not in a position to solve the problem immediately. The professional cannot compel the senior to hire a cleaning service, stop driving, or fund an irrevocable trust to preserve the senior's assets. Such matters are each senior's call until he or she is found to be incapacitated in a probate court proceeding. A further complication is the professional's duty of confidentiality. Absent consent from the senior, an attorney may not contact the senior's family members to discuss the senior's care or financial circumstances.

Pitching In

With professionals' hands tied, what can be done to assist the elderly who are on the margins of our society? In a world obsessed with youth, beauty, and the acquisition of material objects, the care of seniors would seem to be way down the list of important things to do. Indeed, it may sound like a fantasy to think a neighborhood or church could find the time and resources to care for the elderly. Yet I have seen it happen.

Back in the mid-1950s, a middle-aged man suffered a heart attack and died while working on his roof. His childless widow, Lee, continued to live in the house for the next 40 years. In the 1990s, it became clear to Lee's neighbors that she was not exactly making ends meet. Rather than ignoring the elderly woman in their midst, the neighbors pitched in. One took her grocery shopping, another mowed her lawn, and one couple paid Lee's heating oil bills

out of their own pocket. Lee was able to live in her home to within a year of her death because of the help she received from caring people around her. The best part? Those who helped Lee said her thankful smile made their exertions totally worthwhile.

The neighborhood effort with Lee is one model of care for the elderly persons who live near us or attend our religious services. Another is Stephen Ministries or similar programs sponsored by religious congregations. In the case of Stephen Ministries, lay people are trained to offer one-on-one companionship or care to a hurting person in the community.

In my church, the lay ministry program is called the "CareNet." Members are assigned to individuals who have suffered a death in the family, loss of a job, or other traumatic circumstance, and to seniors who simply need a friendly visitor to check in on them. In some cases, the senior will be easygoing and enjoy the attention. In others, it is all you can do to convince the senior even to meet with you.

Team Shirley

In the mid-1990s, my pastor decided that, since I was attending YDS, he'd give me one of the most difficult CareNet assignments in the church, a woman I will call Shirley. Shirley was not a shut-in by any means. She loved attention and very much enjoyed our outings to lunch, to community events, and even to the Divinity School, where I had her sit with me in classes one day. However, no matter what I did for Shirley, she recited the same specific problems of her life each time we met. Nothing I could do would change those facts. After beating my head against the wall over and over, I learned something very important about pastoral counsel-

I learned something very important: I could not even begin to solve problems like loneliness and grief. All I could really do was sit and be present with the person in my care.

ing: I could not even begin to solve problems like loneliness and grief. All I could really do was sit and be present with the person in my care. The key was to listen actively and help where I could..

Churches, of course, are not unique in trying to assist our elderly. Some towns are launching Aging in Place initiatives to help seniors live longer in their own homes while retaining important connections to their established communities. Corporations and not-for-profits are developing assisted-care facilities that offer multiple phases of support as health

transitions unfold. There, a senior can start out in her own apartment with limited services, then, as her needs change, move to assisted-living and if necessary to 24-hour care and supervision. Such initiatives will be critical as our senior population surges.

As I stressed earlier, clergy and other professionals are not in a position to unilaterally solve our seniors' problems. Nevertheless, it is important to keep a watchful eye on our elderly because we may be the first to notice significant issues. Working with seniors – in some cases, their families and neighbors – we can help them take steps to avoid the personal and financial disasters that, sadly, too often define the twilight of life in 21st-century America.

Joseph M. Pankowski, Jr. '96 M.A.R. is a partner in the law firm of Wofsey, Rosen, Kweskin & Kuriansky in Stamford, CT, where his practice focuses on estate planning, elder law issues, and probate court matters. He is chairman of the Darien Commission on Aging and a lay pastoral care minister and occasional preacher at The First Congregational Church of Darien.

I am eighty today
How can I have lived so long
Such a complexity of work, people, events
And turn to the window
To catch in my dazzled eye
A scarlet tanager
In the cherry tree.

The last time I beheld
That scarlet and black
Sumptuous bird
Was when I moved into
This house by the sea
Twenty years ago.
He flew to the flowering
Andromeda.

I have travelled so far
Through time
To arrive at this moment
Awestruck.

The complex forms of being
And a magic bird
Gathered up
Into one overwhelming
NOW!

Nothing else exists
Ecstasy and peace
Are mine forever
On this birthday.



Frances “Bitsie” Clark retired at 72 after years as a Girl Scout executive, a New Haven (CT) arts advocate, and community volunteer. Then life revved up again. She was elected a New Haven alderman for eight years. Now, at 81, she directs an innovative local retirement organization that could change the way Americans live out their later years.

Clark is executive director of HomeHaven, part of a national, grassroots “aging in place” village movement that allows older people to stay at home as long as possible.

It’s not a traditional village or subdivision but a self-governing organization of local volunteers and others who provide supportive services to older people at home.

“People saw that something had to be done,” Clark says. “We know the demographics will overwhelm municipalities and existing facilities in future years. Even 10 years ago it was clear that people were living longer. We were seeing more and more 90-year-olds. This village concept is something everyone knows is needed.”

HomeHaven staffers or volunteers provide transportation, computer help, and companionship. They organize museum trips, concert outings, restaurant get-togethers, and make referrals for yard work and home improvements.

So far, about 180 older people are HomeHaven paid members with access to these various forms of home help and community-building. (Single membership is \$600 annually, \$800 for a couple; some are subsidized.) HomeHaven relies on 64 volunteers to make the visits, offer help, serve on committees, and welcome new members. The aim is to keep older people involved in the environs they know and love – home and neighborhood. See www.homehavenvillages.org.

“We saw that older people who are not kept busy begin to get depressed, and their health declines,” she says. “Staying engaged in the neighborhood, being among friends, going on outings, is as important as medicine or exercise.”

HomeHaven is made up of three villages that cover three geographic areas of New Haven – East Rock, Westville Village, and Amity Village. It is based on the Beacon Hill Village model, which was formed 12 years ago in Boston by a dozen people who had a vision of helping older people who had few options but to stay at home or little desire to move away to a nursing facility. By now there are about 120 villages across the country, with 200 others in development.

Clark says the urgency for such a model is obvious, but the baby boomer generation is not an easy sell on the subject of making preparations for the later decades.

“Growth of the villages can be a slow-moving thing. Baby boomers grew up being told never to trust anyone over 30! They have a vision of eternal youth: ‘I don’t want to think of myself as old. I don’t need services. I have my friends.’ But what gets people interested in the villages is the activities we offer – and meeting a new set of friends. They are at the age where their friends are dying.”

About 30 new members join HomeHaven per year. Clark hopes to expand into other neighborhoods, whether middle-class, working-class, or others.

She takes the long view of the aging-in-place movement. A century ago, similar grassroots organizing stirred to meet a changing, urbanizing nation.

“Aging in place is a very interesting movement that mirrors similar initiatives from a century ago,” she says.

“Country day schools, the Girl Scouts – these were grassroots organizations where people in the community, usually women, saw a need. This fascinated me – they were started not by professionals but by citizens who saw this was going to be needed for decades to come.”

Last year, a survey of the aging-in-place villages was conducted by the Rutgers School of Social Work, giving a national overview of their work.

The report says 29 percent of village members requested services in a typical month; 34 percent of members attended group events. Transportation was the village service most frequently used by members in the past year. Home repair and preventive health screenings were also popular.

As the report notes, a defining feature of the villages is their practice of referring members to vetted, outside service providers. Frequently requested referrals included home health care, nursing aides, housekeeping, technology assistance, and transportation. Villages also referred members to providers who offered discounts.

“Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing body of research, policy, and practice focused on transforming social and physical environments to improve older adults’ quality of life and ability to age in place in the context of their broader communities,” the report says.

To Bitsie Clark, the aging-in-place model is a pragmatic answer to a national population challenge, allowing elder individuals to thrive in the heart of the neighborhood.

“I see this movement coming out of an American tradition of community. It’s terrific, and the nation is ready for it.”

— Ray Waddle

Epiphanies of Senior Spirituality

by Carole Johannsen

In the community hospital where I work as a healthcare chaplain, about one-third of the patients are over 70. When I visit, I ask if they would like me to contact clergy or a congregation for them. Many older patients, even if they indicated a religion for the record when they were admitted, have no one to call. I assure them that it doesn't matter to me unless they want to discuss it, and often they do. What I hear are stories not about people who lost their connection with religion because of some slight or because of changes in liturgy or denominational teaching. They just drifted away. And why not? Their spiritual needs were not being met — were not, in fact, even recognized.

The older I get, and the more I spend time with elders in my work, the more I am convinced that even though we certainly never outgrow spirituality, we *might* outgrow religion — at least organized religion as it is offered to us today.¹

Case in point: because I was working on a doctorate in spirituality and aging, some of my clergy colleagues asked me to spend part of a monthly

I asked how many clergy had programs or discussion groups to help the elderly deepen their spiritual lives? No hands. No surprise.

meeting discussing my subject and my passion about it. I began by asking how many of them had more elders in their congregations than children. Most raised their hands. I asked how many of them had curricula or programs for teaching the children about our faith. All raised their hands. And how many had programs or even discussion groups to help the elderly deepen their spiritual lives? No hands. No surprise.

In my experience, faith communities give little attention to the spiritual needs of elders. They may

host luncheons, provide rides or visit shut-ins, all of which are needed and usually appreciated. It is no small thing to continue to receive sacraments, join in community prayer, or study Scripture with others. But I believe more is needed. Just as children and teens need age-appropriate spiritual support, so do elders. The lack of it can lead to the spiritual weariness I see in so many hospital patients.

Add to this the cultural burden put upon the elderly that they are no longer “productive” once they're no longer working or raising children. If we feel unproductive, where is the meaning in our lives? Therein lies that greatest of spiritual malaises: meaninglessness. The pain of it attacks in the middle of the night when there are no distractions, and it is debilitating.

Peggy Lee and the Vedas

I am an Episcopal priest whose work gives me deep satisfaction. I minister to sick people, their loved ones, and their caregivers every day. Some of my work is sacramental, most of it is pastoral, and for all of it, I am thankful.

I am also an elder, age 71 and counting. And I wonder: what about when I retire? What happens as I lose physical strength? Have I already experienced

the best of life? I resonate with the words Peggy Lee sang in the 1960s, “Is that all there is?”² I hope not.

What else then? Writers as long ago as 2000 BCE understood that every stage of life had its particular role, both practical and spiritual. The Vedic writers on the Indian subcontinent laid out a system of four stages of life. These stages, or *ashrama*, were limited to men of a certain status, but their application stretches beyond that time and those men.

The idea was simple. In stage one, the student, or *brahmachara*, studied with a guru to learn the writings of his people and all that he needed to know to be a householder.

In stage two, a man became a *grhastha*, a householder, who was expected to rise in his profession, be visible in his community, produce children, worship the gods, enjoy sex and other pleasures, and gain wealth because the householder had to support himself and his family through the other stages.

When his last child became a householder, the man could leave his responsibilities and enter stage three – become a forest-dweller, a *vanaprastha*. Now the man, with his wife if they so chose, could begin to let go of worldly goods, take time to reflect on what had been, perhaps study what he had no time for previously. This third stage was part of the plan, not just the fallback position of an aging body. His physical condition, his station in life, his spiritual yearnings were directed toward downsizing, turning inward, making sense of it all.

I would argue that these three stages apply in our culture as well. (The fourth Vedic stage relates more specifically to Hindu belief in reincarnation.³) The main difference is that we do not engage the third one – the forest-dweller phase – as a new and welcome set of tasks particularly suited to that aging body and a mind full of memories. It is a time for storytelling, not just to reclaim momentarily our younger days, but to examine and evaluate them, to grieve and to celebrate.

Modern Variations

Twentieth-century psychology expanded on the Vedic stages, again stating what should be obvious: that the human being grows and develops from birth to death, and that each stage of growth is different from the others in its needs and its gifts. Carl Jung wrote:

A human being would certainly not grow to be 70 or 80 years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morning. ... Whoever carries over

into the afternoon the law of the morning – that is, the aims of nature – must pay for so doing with damage to his soul just as surely as a growing youth who tries to salvage his childish egoism must pay for this mistake with social failure.⁴

After Jung came developmental psychologist Erik H. Erikson, whose eight Stages of Life, set out in his 1950 book, *Childhood and Society*, laid the foundation for modern studies.⁵ Erikson's stages cover a lifespan, with each stage defined by the use of contrasting words that indicate either a successful passage through the stage or an incomplete one. For the eighth stage, Maturity, the contrast is “Integrity vs. Despair.” In this stage, a person either accepts her life, with all its mistakes and blessings (Integrity), or finds the past not only unacceptable but realizes that death is on the horizon and there is no time for do-overs (Despair). The move toward Integrity is spiritual work. Looking back, taking stock, giving thanks, knowing shame, reconciling where possible and forgiving when necessary, oneself as well as others, and accepting God's forgiveness – all this is the work of the human spirit collaborating with the human mind. Yet most elders are left to do this alone.

Life Review

Narrative psychologist Dan P. McAdams takes a slightly different tack, describing the life journey through personal stories, or myths.⁶ We are born into a family myth, he writes, that includes what the family knows about itself: where it came from, its place in the neighborhood, the foods it eats, the

Each person was asked to make a list of three people they needed to forgive, and three things for which they needed to forgive themselves.

worldview it espouses. Not until late adolescence do we begin to separate and form our own personal myth, built on the foundation of the family myth but veering off according to our personal preferences. Early adulthood is spent integrating our various selves into the myth as a professional, spouse or partner, parent, citizen, man or woman. By middle age, we are concerned about our legacy. Have we done enough? Will we be remembered? What will we pass on through our efforts and our DNA?

The final phase in McAdams' scheme, the post-mythic, occurs when the end of the story is almost in sight. Now the work is not about refining the myth, but about examining it – what clinicians call life review. Referring back to Erikson's “Integrity vs. Despair” stage of life, McAdams suggests that



the myth is now a gift to *ourselves*, to value or not. “To experience integrity is to accept the myth with grace. To experience despair is to reject the myth as unworthy.”⁷

The purpose of this vital period of an elder’s life is to review, understand, and accept – doing so, ideally, within community. For the faithful person, this assessment must include one’s relationship with God. For the non-theist, it might involve a connection with creation. It is spiritual work, and organized religion could, *should*, assist it.

Workshop Revelations

I applied these ideas from the Vedas as well as Jung, Erickson, and McAdams recently with two groups of elders who joined me in a demonstration project for my thesis.⁸ One group lived in a Quaker-run senior facility on the Hudson River in Westchester County, NY. The other resided at Morningside Gardens in New York City’s Harlem. The participants were Christian, Jewish, atheist and agnostic, white and African American, middle class and affluent, mostly college educated, several with Ph.D.s.

We began by writing spiritual autobiographies. I asked them for two or three pages that roughly described their journey with God or the creation, nothing too elaborate or meant for publication. This was a new process for most of them, but a deeply satisfying one, especially when they shared their

We planned where our funerals would be held (*in a church – in my studio – on the dunes at Fire Island*). Death lost quite a bit of its sting by the time we finished.

stories with the group. The exercise established a bond of trust, honesty, and affection over the course of the workshop.

The next step involved forgiveness. Between sessions, each person was asked to make a list of three people they needed to forgive, and three things for which they needed to forgive themselves. The consensus was that this was the most difficult work they had to do in the workshop. One person commented that it was made easier only because he was aware that other group members were struggling through this as well – not unlike the mutual support of a 12-step program.

From there we turned to their legacies. Of what were they most proud in their work and in their lives? How well had they integrated their knowledge and skills with their values and beliefs? What had they done that made a difference? Then, having inventoried the past, they were asked to write an ethical

will, a letter to someone who would outlive them, stating what they most wanted to pass on out of their own experience and faith.

Although I had not incorporated end-of-life into the original workshop design, assuming they could access the abundance of material found elsewhere on that subject, my groups wanted to discuss their dying and death. This was very much present in their thoughts; it could not be left out of their self-assessment. So we worked on it, not with anxiety but with creativity and even humor, answering questions like, What do you want to hear and see when you’re dying? (*My grandchildren’s voices – laughter – someone reading Tillich to me – the sound of the ocean – surround me with books – the faces I love – have my dogs nearby.*) We planned where our funerals would be held (*in a church – in my studio – on the dunes at Fire Island*). We planned the liturgies and even the food and background music for the receptions to follow. We chose Scripture readings and poetry and hymns and jazz pieces and the clothes in which we would be buried. We made our departures our own and committed our plans to paper – together. Death lost quite a bit of its sting by the time we finished.

Finally, we collected what we’d done and discussed what this said about how we are living and what we still want to do, learn, be, and give back. The forgiveness issues would go on, now that those cans of worms had been opened. The ethical wills might be rewritten, the funeral liturgies revised, but now participants had time to do what they were created to do in this, the penultimate phase of their lives: reflect, reconcile, integrate, accept the life they’ve lived, give thanks for it, finish unfinished business, then enjoy a new freedom, a new openness to whatever is ahead.

This workshop could be recreated in any faith community, where the fund of common beliefs has the added advantage of enhancing discussion. What matters is taking seriously the idea that elders are still growing spiritually, and they need support and connectedness to do it well.⁹

A friend of mine, the former executive director of a large community senior center, readily admits he tried anything just to get older people in the door of the center and connect with other elders. “We are not meant to grow in isolation.”¹⁰ Amen to that.

Out of this spiritual process comes wisdom. Regardless of common folklore, evidence shows that we do not automatically grow wise with age. Wisdom comes with the blending of knowledge and experience, seasoned with reflection and reconciliation. It is work to be done in community, and what better place than in a *faith* community. If only our faith communities would notice.

The Rev. Carole Johannsen '86 M.Div. is an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of New York and a board-certified healthcare chaplain. She received a D.Min. degree from New York Theological Seminary in 2013. During her ministry, she has been deeply involved in interfaith relations and education, and in 2011 was given an award "for her commitment to building bridges among our diverse faith communities" by the Westchester-based American Muslim Women's Association.

Notes

- 1 I regard spirituality as the part of us that finds meaning in life and relates to that which is greater than we are. See also Philip Culbertson, *Caring for God's People* (Fortress Press, 2000), p. 6: "Human spirituality may also encompass gatherings of family or friends, a good physical workout, meditation on a fine piece of art, or the beauty of nature. Spiritual wholeness requires repeated awakening and deliberate nurturing of the spirit, for as any other part of the wholeness wheel can atrophy, so can one's spirituality."
- 2 Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, "Is That All There Is?". Recorded by Peggy Lee for Capitol Records, 1969.
- 3 The fourth stage, *sannyasa*, is the time to release all ties to worldly things, to relinquish all attachments so that one can end the cycle of rebirth and become one with Brahman. Though this is particular to Hindu belief, the need to "let go" is not uncommon among people who are near death.
- 4 C.G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), p. 125.
- 5 Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*. 2nd Edition (W.W. Norton & Co., 1963), pp. 247-69.
- 6 Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (Guilford Press, 1993).
- 7 McAdams, p. 279.
- 8 Carole Johannsen, *Wisdom-Making: A Spiritual Job Description for Elders* (2013), doctor of ministry thesis, New York Theological Seminary.
- 9 Out of 40 surveys completed by elders during several presentations on spirituality and aging, the word that came up repeatedly in response to the question "What does spirituality mean to you?" was "connectedness."
- 10 Samuel E. Deibler, former director of the Greenwich (CT) Commission on Aging.

TO BE CALLED

By Elizabeth Carothers Herron

In fall foliage
the spangled lantern
of Japanese maple
lights the morning garden.
The hawthorn's red berries,
sun-struck, glisten.
Last night the gibbous moon
ignited frost on the trash can lids.
Day or night
reverence rises from the ordinary.
To behold the moment, desiring nothing,
is to behold eternal presence simply
waiting recognition. The quiet heart
receives. The ungrasping eye sees
how the world longs to give itself,
how underneath all longing
we long to be called
to praise.

“WALKING ALONGSIDE THOSE I SERVE”

by Robert Loesch

My first contemporary spiritual mentor was also a world-famous theologian, humanitarian, and elder. Dr. Albert Schweitzer was 80 years old when I met him as a young teenager at his home in France. He was on a short break from his medical missionary work in Africa when he responded to my request to visit him during our family vacation. I had started reading his books the year before, drawn to his ethic of compassion which taught me to appreciate the wisdom of those who were older. To meet him was a highlight of my life.

A fondness and respect for senior citizens has helped shape my ministry and theology for 47 years as a pastor. That appreciation came early on – in my grade school years, when I learned how to relate to elderly neighbors on all three sides of my home. As an active child, I was taught by my parents to be attentive to the needs and views of seven women in their 70s who were either single or widows.

By the time I started studies at Yale Divinity School, I became friends with Prof. Roland Bainton, whose great biography of Luther I had read in college. He had retired in 1962, a year before my arrival. But he still biked from his home in Milford to the YDS campus to do research in the library.

Dr. Bainton represented for me an active, vital senior citizen. During this period, at age 69, he accidentally fell from his roof and fractured both legs. When I went to visit him, he expressed his positive attitude: “This will not be a problem, Bob. I need to be reading through the proofs of my next book on Erasmus of Rotterdam. Being forced to be in bed for a couple of months will keep me from other distractions.”

Since my ordination nearly 50 years ago, I have served as a pastor in nine different United Church of Christ congregations. I’ve learned much about the elders in our midst. I’ve loved them and received their love in return, and seen God’s grace working in them.

I’ve learned that it is important to listen carefully. Whenever I ask an older person “How are you?” I try to take the time to listen carefully to the answer and respond appropriately. The information could be vital.

I regularly visit our shut-ins in their homes, assisted-living facilities, and other institutions. Ministering with them, I keep abreast of unmet needs and provide help as their situations change.

So many become isolated in settings where their only human contact is the aide who checks in on them. In nursing homes, I always encourage them to take advantage of activities there. I’ve seen how isolation leads to depression and speeds up the aging process, particularly the aging of the mind and emotions.

In my current parish, all of our worship services, ministries, and activities are consciously intergenerational. We do not provide programs exclusively for the aging. We do not refer to them as a separate or homogeneous group, but regard each person as unique in the eyes of God. It’s important for everyone to have relationships with other age groups.

A person usually finds a meaning in old age that corresponds to the meaning he or she has always lived by in life. For many, and for myself, that meaning stems from the “greatest commandment” cited by Jesus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 21:37)

The meaning of aging for a Christian is found also in living out each moment, facing the high, middle, and low experiences that are natural to the aging of body, mind, and spirit. Seeing the purpose in each day, and reflecting on it, is a way of loving God, loving oneself, and loving others.

The meaning of aging involves a focus on the future – making the plans and decisions about dying and death, preparing the disposition of possessions, helping those who will be the survivors. Confronting one’s mortal span sharpens awareness of God’s presence and support. It awakens an ability to show love for others. It helps a person be more willing to accept the changes of an aging body and mind as part of God’s natural order.

Entering my 70s, I see a new dimension to my pastoral relationships. I am now a peer with those I visit. Although I have always been attentive to the perspective of the aging, I now have a deeper personal empathy. I am walking my journey alongside those whom I serve.

As I go deeper into the experience of aging, I regard the past, present, and future with faith. Aging is a unique time to affirm the faith that God has been caring and loving to each of us, and always will be.

The Rev. Robert Loesch ’66 B.D. is pastor of Zion’s United Church of Christ in Sand Lake, NY.

Counting the Years with Desert Fathers and Mothers

By Roberta Bondi

When I was young, even though I had an excellent imagination, it was way beyond me to picture myself as ever being old. I couldn't envision getting from young to old, either. How I could get from here to there? How could people ever become different from what they are now? My great aunts, it seemed to me, were born old. Even my mother and father had always been what they always would be: smart, powerful, and absolutely fixed in their unthinking convictions about everything. (Did adults think? Impossible! Adults pronounced.) They were not only immortal. They, like all grown-ups, were immutable.

By the time I was in my 20s I had changed my mind about all sorts of things. I realized, to my dismay, that I would become old, maybe sooner rather than later. As a 26-year-old woman, I was convinced I was already in my prime. Still barely in graduate school, I was already headed downhill. As everyone knew in those days, a woman's prime was when she was

my husband, living in a cabbage-scented house, dirt-poor, judgmental, pious and repulsive, with gray underwear. As an old woman, I would be of no significance to anybody. Old age meant losing everything. Wherever these convictions – these stereotypes – came from, I found the whole prospect of aging pointless, depressing, and inescapable.

Joy allows me to delight in the world and see it as it must really be in God's sight – trees, flowers, animals, people, earth. This delight has plenty of room for silliness, fun, and pleasure.

most attractive to look at and most beguiling to men. And that, of course, could only be when she was young, unwrinkled, pliant, and unthreatening both to men and the larger status quo. Intelligence, education, depth of character – these were to be apologized for..

So I was sure that I was well on my way to getting old (by now my imagination was working full time). To me, this meant I could expect to be lumpy and saggy of body and mind, rigid, sour, bossy, helpless, shopping a lot, slow-witted, bored and boring, politically reactionary, totally under the thumb of

Timely Desert Wisdom

Then, in graduate school I met the abbas and ammas of early monasticism of Egypt and parts beyond, as well as the great masters of the spiritual life of the eastern Christian church of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. They immediately began to transform everything for me. Slowly, slowly, as I studied their texts they taught me that my value as a woman came from being a human being created in the image of God, not by winning acceptance from the 1950s and 60s culture around me. At the same time, they convinced me that there is a real trajectory to the Christian life – to human life, rather – summarized in Jesus' great commandment: we are to spend our lives learning to love God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. And they convinced me of something else: because this really is our lifetime's work, it will get easier and better as we grow into that love. This insight was totally



contrary to the prevailing conventional view that old age means life gets worse. As Amma Syncletica said:

“In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing toward God, and afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire: at first they are choked by the smoke and by this means obtain what they seek. ... So we must also kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work.”¹

So aging has not turned out to be anything like I expected, but it is no joke either. Though I am healthy now, I have lived through some serious medical problems since I retired. Though not much of my underwear is gray, I am indeed saggy and will only get worse. In March my mother died at 96, bewildered, hurting, unable to hear to carry on a conversation, and terribly weak. If we live long

The first floor of our house in the mountains has slowly been filling up with large looms since I retired because, more than anything else, I discovered I wanted to learn to weave, to work with fiber, color, and texture.

enough, few of us will be spared all this, and for most of us it might very well be terrible. In a devastatingly real way, aging is truly about loss.

Happily on the other hand, at the age of almost 72, I find myself in a place where the fire is beginning to burn clear. I experience it as an internal place of increasing freedom from, for example, the still lingering expectations of my mother, who once said and meant it, “I don’t care how many books you write, if you don’t keep those baseboards clean, you won’t have a friend in the world!” There’s freedom, too, from the expectations of male colleagues that I be exactly like them or get out of academics where women don’t belong anyway.

Freedom from the compulsion to meet other people’s expectations has allowed me to discover all the things I love to do but had no time or energy for when I was younger. The first floor of our house in the mountains has slowly been filling up with large looms since I retired because, more than anything else, I discovered I wanted to learn to weave, to work with fiber, color, and texture. I am still learning and will be for the rest of my life, but weaving makes me extraordinarily happy. It isn’t only me who has found a new vocation: so many friends I could name who are my age and older are now finding creative

expression in wonderful painting or bead work or gorgeous pottery to rival the ancient Egyptians.

Ditching Judgmentalism

This kind of freedom allows me – us – to give up a large portion of the dreadful judgmentalism of others that our culture, and let’s face it, our churches, trained us in. Modern advertising, clubs and cliques, the clothes we wear, preoccupations with weight, what we believe in religion or politics, differences in education, even the food we eat that differs from our neighbors’ – all give us an excuse to separate ourselves from others.

With this judgmentalism we hold ourselves apart from other people and regard them as alien or contaminating. There is no greater destroyer of love and positive energy than this. This is why the ancient monks spent their whole lives learning to give this up. Abba Theodore said:

“If you are temperate, do not judge the fornicator, for you would then transgress the law just as much. And he who said ‘do not commit fornication,’ also said, ‘Do not judge.’”²

That we human beings are all of equal value to God, subject to mortality, makers of mistakes or worse, internally wounded, sufferers of loss, celebrators of joy – this deep realization comes to me as I age, and it is truly freeing. We need it desperately: it allows so many of us in this stage of life to let go of hurts from our past and forgive our injurers, including our own selves. It is vital to the growth of our love for God. Abba Macarius said:

“If we keep remembering the wrongs [people] have done us, we destroy the power of the remembrance of God.”³

Most profoundly for me, aging has meant learning to recognize and accept for the first time God’s gifts of gratitude and joy, allowing me to be present in my own life. This is gratitude for the very existence of beloved family, for friends and strangers, for former and present teachers, for all that is beautiful and good, for the knowledge that creation itself is where God dwells wholly in us, separately and collectively, and us in God, as Julian of Norwich expresses for us.

This joy allows me to delight in the world and see it as it must really be in God’s sight – trees, flowers, animals, people, earth. This delight has plenty of room for silliness, fun, and pleasure. It makes all things sparkle if we just squint and watch for it out of the corners of our eyes. It does not negate loss and grief and suffering, but I believe it provides confi-

dence that all things belong to God and in God. With this comes the knowledge that nothing and no one is ultimately lost, not ourselves, or our dear ones, or strangers, enemies, or the indifferent. We can't know how this might happen, but what God has created in love God will bring to completion in love.

Churches are in a pivotal position to help us live through aging with attention and creativity. Here are four suggestions.

First, accept that Christian aging can bring great gifts. It is a time of loss and pain, yes, but what it brings positively is necessary for the thriving of the church.

Second, God's great gifts of freedom, gratitude, and joy rarely drop in our laps without our cooperation or practice. Congregations can nurture this.

Third, let's reject the foolish notion that after 65 the spiritual life is meant to be static. The life God gives us is never static. Churches should help us work toward these gifts of God in hope with our whole hearts and teach the importance of being ready to receive them without turning them away.

Fourth, younger members of our congregations need to learn how to expect the gifts that will come to others as well as to themselves in this whole adventure of living our common life in God.

To return to my childhood and those young adult impossible-to-imagine ideas I had about my own aging, how truly different it has turned out to be. Instead, it has really been like this poem, which I call "Lady in Red":

*There is a hydrangea by our front porch,
All in bloom, a lace hydrangea.
Its blossoms are blue,
The outside petals pale and delicate,
The lacy centers quivering with buds
And little hairs, fuzzy parts in a much deeper,
But altogether wonderful color.*

*Pretty as it is,
The bush leaves me bemused:
It is like nothing I expected
When I bought it five years ago.
It was called "Lady in Red"
And red, even if it was dusty looking, is what it was –
Not pink, or purple, or blue or even white at all.
I was delighted by its color.*

*It was in the ground one year
Before, I suppose, it had repented
Of whatever made it red.*

*The next time it bloomed,
It was in a white so virginal
It could have been in a bride's bouquet.
I could hardly believe it,
But what I believed was irrelevant to
What had happened.
The red was gone,
And it was gone for good.
For the next three years, for whatever reason,
My Lady in Red
Wore nothing but white.*

*Then, when its new flowers appeared this June,
They were no longer white,
But blue as a little boy's baby blanket,
Bluer than the sky on a bright morning,
Even bluer than my long-ago bewildered heart.*

*Nothing stays the same,
And it oughtn't to, either,
If its basic stuff remains.
I ought to know;
I'm such a hydrangea myself
But with my colors in a different order:
First, a dirty white,
Then long years of crushing blue,
(Not beautiful at all on the bush I was)
At last, in my later years, I find myself turned red,
A long-awaited, unrestrained and happy red,
Still who I am,
But full now of unrepentant joy,
Full of red delight.*

Roberta Bondi is professor emerita of church history at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. Her many books include *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Fortress, 1987), *In Ordinary Time: Healing the Wounds of the Heart* (Abingdon, 1996), and *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Abingdon, 1995).

Notes

- 1 Syncletica, 1, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, translated by Benedicta Ward, S.L.G. (Oxford/Mowbray, 1981), pp. 230-1.
- 2 Theodore of Eleutheropolis, 3, p. 80.
- 3 Abba Macarius the Great, 36, p. 136.



Robert Joseph Taylor is a professor of social work at the University of Michigan. He is also associated with the Michigan Center for Urban African American Aging Research, which is based on the campuses of the University of Michigan and Wayne State University. He has published extensively on the informal social support networks of adult and elderly African Americans. He has also researched the role of religion in the lives of older black and white Americans. He has edited or co-edited two books, Family Life in Black America (1997) and Aging in Black America (1993). He is the lead author of the book, Religion in the Lives of African Americans: Social, Psychological, and Health Perspectives (2004) with Linda Chatters and Jeff Levin.

REFLECTIONS: *Are Americans rethinking their attitudes toward aging?*

ROBERT TAYLOR: The evidence is mixed. For decades Medicare was considered a sacred program that had support from all sides, but now we're seeing attacks on it. This suggests that the "contract" between generations might be changing. That contract has worked very well up to now. Looking at the condition of elderly Americans since 1955, we've seen dramatic increases in their quality of life and quality of health. That has happened because of increased access to care, and Medicare made that possible.

There are other benefits. Grandchildren are now more likely to know their grandparents, who are living longer, and grandparents are more likely to be involved in the grandchildren's lives. Grandparents are providing childcare and other help to single moms in the family who might not otherwise afford it. American society now is producing fewer children but more interaction between grandparents and the families.

REFLECTIONS: *Does the recent criticism of Medicare/Medicaid stem mostly from fiscal worries or from philosophical opposition to it?*

TAYLOR: I think it's mostly ideological. Until this past year, we weren't hearing phrases like "makers and takers" and other divisive slogans. A more common sentiment was, "If we all just give a little, we'll all benefit." Yes, there are holes in the Medicare system; the key is deciding how to control costs. But it's still possible to insure people. I don't think the sense of obligation to older people has eroded. There's still basic trust in the contract.

REFLECTIONS: *Your research includes the role of social support networks in African American life. What are some of your findings?*

TAYLOR: Social support networks include family, friends, congregations, sometimes co-workers. These provide emotional support, companionship,

emergency help, assisted-living support, transportation, yard work, money. Where black communities differ from white communities is in the role of the family. African Americans are more likely to rely on help exclusively from extended family.

Another difference is: older black Americans are more likely to remain members of a church and go to church more frequently. We know that religious involvement is beneficial in protecting against depression, in two ways. Staying in touch with others in the congregation – talking to other people – helps prevent a person from becoming isolated and depressed. And when times are bad, other church members pitch in and help a person out materially or emotionally.

REFLECTIONS: *Have African American religious loyalties been altered through these recent decades of cultural turbulence?*

TAYLOR: Older African Americans tend to be more religious than younger persons. This has been a consistent finding since 1970 – high rates of worship attendance, membership, activity at church. There's usually a drop-off in active participation after about age 72, but interest does not decline. Older people still read religious materials, tune in to religious programming. Prayer remains important. None of this is surprising. Churches in the black community have always been a vital part of the culture. Historically it's the only institution blacks totally controlled in this country.

REFLECTIONS: *Are new models of retirement evolving?*

TAYLOR: Let's keep in mind that retirement is a middle-class idea. I think we take that for granted. Poor people have a different experience. You don't retire unless you've had a career. If you're a parking lot attendant or a day laborer, what moves you out of the work force is typically illness, not retirement. In such jobs, employers are not likely to pay for Social Security or other benefits. To paraphrase the late gerontologist Jackie Jackson: though many people retire out of the labor force, other people die out of the labor force.

REFLECTIONS: *The expanding demographic of aging baby boomers is upon us. Is society ready?*

TAYLOR: In some ways society is not ready, but it is evolving in positive ways. People are living healthier lives, exercising more, smoking less. I think ageism is in retreat. There aren't as many elderly-bashing jokes. They are not stigmatized as much as we saw in previous decades. Aging has become more productive. People are being intentional and active in retirement, taking new jobs or working in non-profits. Despite our sometimes nasty political discourse, I'm optimistic about our future.



Flunking Retirement

By David Bartlett

Not many years ago, Richard Wood, former dean of Yale Divinity School, called to tell me that he was “flunking retirement” and not for the first time. This was at least the second job Dick had taken after his official retirement, and he was not particularly apologetic. Not for the first time, I find myself following his example, but not without some second thoughts.

I retired from the Yale faculty in 2005 and from the Columbia Theological Seminary faculty in 2012, but then moved immediately to a more or less halftime position at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. I like the job; I like the people; I like my colleagues; and I like going to work.

I am well aware, sometimes painfully aware, that many friends my age and younger have been visited by illnesses or limitations that make an ac-

Do I really need to turn out one more sermon or article or attend one more session meeting? Give me a break. Give myself a break.

tive retirement or semi-retirement very difficult. I am well aware that I have passed my allotted three score years and 10 and many of my dearest friends never did.

Those who try to find reasons for my relative health and longevity sometimes appeal to God's providential plan or suggest that I have been especially blessed. If this is blessing, it is a fickle kind of blessing that neglected many for whom I have fervently prayed.

I do not pretend to explain my present situation and am driven to the weakest of theological categories: I have been lucky.

Nonetheless, glad as I am to be flunking retirement, I have some second thoughts.

I have spent most of my adult life trying to understand the shape of the Christian life from a biblical

perspective. Of course I have never used the Bible as a kind of sanctified Dr. Phil with answers for every nagging personal question. The Bible has served as the essential guide to what questions count, and the essential clue to how those questions relate to the life of God.

But on the question of retirement the Bible speaks not a direct word. This is probably because retirement, like neuroscience and Facebook, is a relatively modern phenomenon. On the whole, our biblical ancestors, like many of our more immediate foreparents, worked until they died.

So when Jesus told us to consider the lilies that neither toil nor spin, that was not intended as a particular injunction for people over 65, and when he told us to take no thought for tomorrow he was not directly pondering pensions.

Yet though the Bible says nothing directly about neuroscience it says a good deal about embodied persons – embodied souls. And though the Bible says nothing about Facebook it reflects often and helpfully on friendship, affection, the limits and possibilities of genuine *agape*.

And God Rested

What I puzzle about when it comes to retirement is a pervasive scriptural motif – Sabbath. The injunction to take one day out of seven has at least two theological groundings.

First is the imitation of God who graciously can delight in not doing as well as in doing. The Priestly account of creation in Genesis reaches its gracious climax when God stops doing, even stops speaking, and just is.

Exodus 20 makes the connection of Sabbath-keeping to the *imitatio Dei* explicit:

“Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy. ... For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.” (Exod 20:8,11)

The second grounding for Sabbath is compassion for workers whose well-being is increased by the quieter rhythms of the seventh day. Now we are called not to remember creation but to remember bondage and exodus.

“Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy as the LORD your God has commanded you. ... On it you shall not do any work, neither you nor your

A Sabbath retirement should include watching more baseball games or reading a book with no intention of ever quoting it in a sermon or citing it in a footnote.

son and daughter, nor your male or female servant. ... Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” (Deut 5:12,13,15)

Life's Seven Days

I am now by any reckoning in the seventh day of my life's week. I await the eighth day, God's day of New Creation, with a combination of regret, resignation, and faith.

But is my unwillingness to imitate God by making my life's seventh day radically less busy than the other six finally a kind of idolatry? Have I so identified with my job that I find it difficult to identify with my creator?

And when it comes to compassion for those who labor and are heavy laden, what might compassion for myself look like? (Do I really need to turn out one more sermon or article or attend one more session meeting? Give me a break. Give myself a break.)

To say nothing of compassion for the spouse who most days believes our lives would be enriched if we had more time together.

To say nothing of the gladness that I give to myself and I hope to others when I let work give way to one of God's richest gifts – friendship. And leisure is not laziness.

John Sexton's fine book, *Baseball as a Road to God* (Penguin 2013), only illustrates and specifies a more general claim. Sexton draws on Mircea Eliade to describe a baseball game as sacred time and

sacred space. Had he relied more on the Old Testament he would know that for the spectator at least a baseball game can be Sabbath. The joy of baseball for spectators is that you sit around and do nothing, often with other people who are also doing nothing. Baseball as Sabbath is the opposite of the fantasy league, where the players plot, scheme, and compete – that is, they work.

A Sabbath retirement should include watching more baseball games, or attending more concerts, or reading a book with no intention of ever quoting it in a sermon or citing it in a footnote. Or rejoicing in a worship service where one has no role in leadership.

I ponder all this quite seriously and somewhat guiltily. I would have taken more leisure to ponder, but I promised to write this article and now I have to get it done.

Soon I hope to do – or not do – better.

Before his retirement, David L. Bartlett '67 B.D., '69 M.Phil., '72 Ph.D. was Lantz Professor of Christian Communication at YDS. Ordained in the American Baptist Churches, USA, he was a parish minister and taught at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA., before joining YDS in 1990. He taught at Columbia Theological Seminary from 2005-2012 and is now theologian-in-residence at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. His books include What's Good about This News? Preaching from the Gospels and Galatians (Lyman Beecher Lectures, Westminster John Knox, 2003) and Fact and Faith: Coming to Grips with Miracles in the New Testament (Wipf & Stock, 2007). He is a consulting editor for both the Feasting on the Word and the Feasting on the Gospel commentary series published by Westminster John Knox.

“AS OUR SOULS MOVE”: A PRAYER ON AGING

By Samuel N. Slie

Most loving and perpetually understanding and forgiving God,
we lift our prayers of thanksgiving to you for renewal and
sustenance in our aging. Bless us to receive and grow in self-
respecting modesty, tough forgiving love, generosity, and
without assuming self-righteousness. Bless all humanity to
know Jesus Christ and the Church so that we may weather life's
successes and failures on our way to salvation.

May we experience each stage of aging as nobler and finer than
those before it: childhood, adolescence, teenage, young
adulthood, middle age, and the senior years, of giving and
receiving wisdom and new learning from others. We pray for
one another in our times of transitions (which are not always
easy and not always short), especially when we relinquish the
dynamics of earthly life so that our souls may be liberated.
Here, O God, we gather inspiration from our Reformation
brother Martin Luther who tells us, “My soul is silence, waiting
all humble for God.”

Bless us, O God, to age with dignity and grace. We ourselves
and others often say, “It isn't easy to grow old.” When spirit,
mind, and body show the effects of decades of aging,
grant us the wisdom and grace to share and relinquish
the social, family, economic, legal, and other initiatives to those
who care about us and who can be trusted to bear those
responsibilities with us and for us. Help us to accept who we
are as our souls move from creation through earthly life to
eternity. Gracious God who hears every prayer of every heart,
hear us. May love, forgiveness, and the salvation promised in
Christ Jesus receive us. AMEN

Born in 1925, the Rev. Samuel N. Slie '52 B.D. '63 S.T.M. is known to generations of students at Yale and across New England as a chaplain and educator. He was a lecturer at YDS from 1965-76 and from 1980-83 and served for 11 years as associate University Pastor with William Sloane Coffin, Jr. He also served on the regional staff of the New England Student Christian Movement. He is also associate pastor emeritus of the Church of Christ at Yale. A resident of greater New Haven, he continues to pastor students and his beloved congregations, especially through YDS, the Black Church at Yale, and Dwight Hall at Yale.

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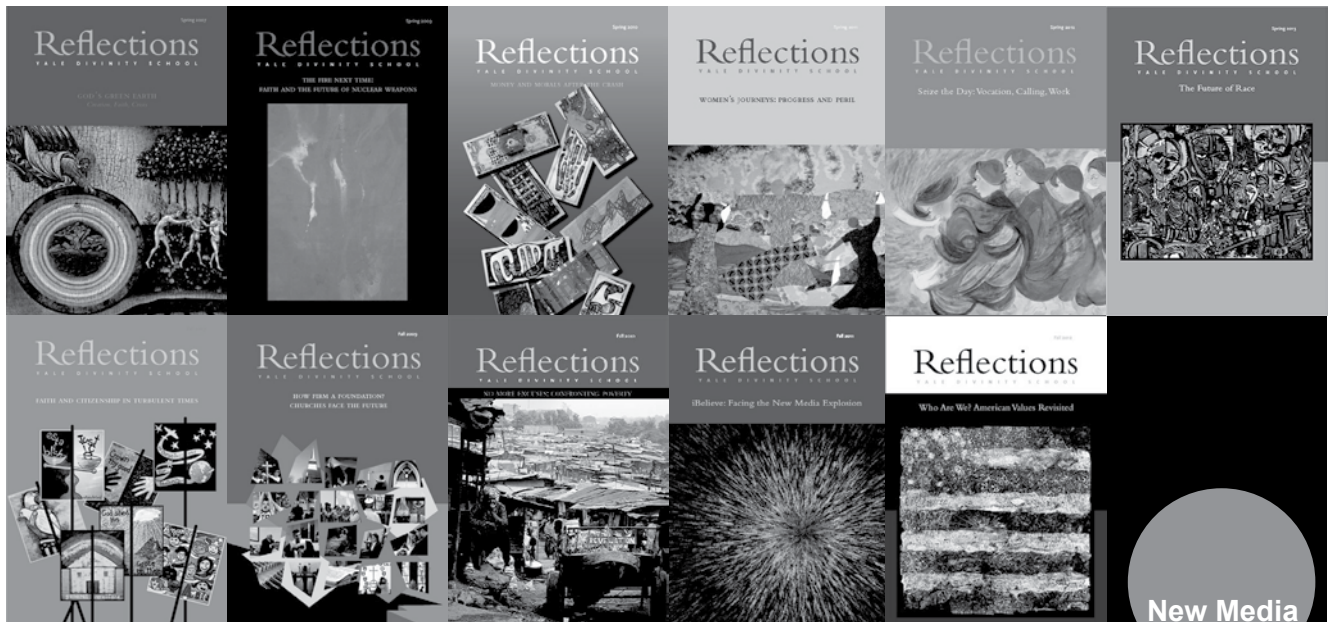
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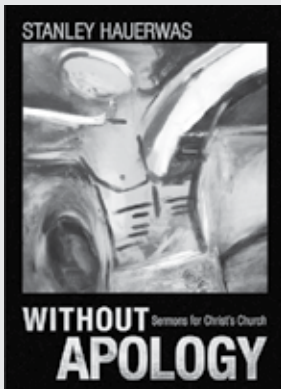
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From the Editor: Ancient Glittering Eyes

By Ray Waddle



California artist Colleen Deery, 57, has friends of all ages. She goes to lunch regularly with a group of women in their 70s and 80s. This happy habit was recently greeted with consternation by some of her younger friends. Dinner out with old people? Why would anyone do that?

Their disdainful reaction startled Deery. It struck her as another proof of contemporary prejudice against aging, and it moved her to action. She created the image, called “Beauty of Age,” which adorns the cover of this fall *Reflections*.

“I decided I wanted to paint someone older, something that captured age, wisdom, and beauty,” says Deery, who has worked at her art – painting, sculpture, gemstones – for 30 years.

“I’m passionate about life around me. We are given this time, this one time that’s so special. And older people share in it. I hope readers looking at “Beauty of Age” see the wrinkles. I hope they see there’s somebody there. Maybe in the eyes they’ll see loneliness or wisdom, but they’ll see that a real person is there.”

The goodness of life is a guiding ideal for Deery. It’s a gift and a teaching she received from her own daughter, who died at age 12 after a short life of severe physical disability. Despite her difficulties, she always looked to the good in people.

“She couldn’t walk or talk but she was my greatest mentor,” Deery says. “Because of her, I can see the good in anyone. People assumed she was a burden, but I thought she was perfect, not a burden. That’s how people see older people – as a burden. The body gets old or it breaks down and a person is no longer ‘useful.’ I visited a friend in a nursing home the other day, and it’s upsetting to see so many people there are forgotten and unvisited. I wish I could take them home. I look to the good, as my little girl taught me.”

Deery admires tribal cultures where people raise each other from start to finish. The young people learn from the old, and society isn’t separated by age or demographic.

“Here, youngsters are isolated in school by age,” she remarks. “They aren’t exposed to other kinds of people.”

As a phrase, “beauty of age” is not something you hear every day, not in this society. Perhaps it could become a rallying cry of existential reform. Deery’s advice: for starters, stop watching the fantasy world of TV so much.

“On TV you have to be beautiful, young, and thin. Stop watching pretend life. Start living life.”

Resistance to aging runs deep in a culture that is impatient with the past, preaches the necessity of marketing oneself as youthful and cutting-edge, and assumes that old means useless in the raging, throw-away economy.

But the power of artists and thinkers is to prompt the rest of us to stop and look, listen, feel, re-examine. In the case of aging, defy the tyranny of the new and turn to unsung intuitions that witness to the intensities of later life. As Florida Scott-Maxwell declared in her remarkable memoir *The Measure of My Days*, written in her 80s, “We who are old know that age is more than a disability. It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our capacity at times, but something to be carried high. If it is a long defeat it is also a victory, meaningful for the initiates of time, if not for those who have come less far.”

More than most previous issues, this fall *Reflections* relies on the distinctly personal insights of the contributing writers as individuals, family members, or believers as they sort out the dramas of an aging society in the 21st century. The baby boomer experience of aging – much debated, defined, or dreaded on a historic scale – reveals a diversity of strategies and much uncertainty. It becomes, nevertheless, a journey we make together.

We hope this *Reflections* issue suggests the range of spiritual and practical questions to ponder. The sooner we face our conflicted thoughts about aging, the better. The test is whether all of us can finally see the beauty of age.

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POETRY

Sheila Banani lives in Santa Monica, CA. She has written poetry for various magazines and anthologies. "Life's Rainbow" appeared in the anthology *When I Am an Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple* in 1987.

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The Rev. Charles Harper '61 S.T.M. is a poet and retired United Church of Christ minister living in Plymouth, MA. More of Harper's work can be seen at www.harperpoetry.com.

"Marion's Daffodils" from *Making a Life* (Powder Horn Press, 2010). Reprinted by permission of the author.

Elizabeth Carothers Herron, emeritus professor of arts and humanities at Sonoma State University in California, is the author of a collection of fiction, *While the Distance Widens* (Floating Island, 1992), and four poetry chapbooks. Her essays on art and ecology have appeared in *Orion* and other magazines. She works as a volunteer on wildlands projects for Landpaths and is a commissioned law enforcement chaplain. See www.elizabethherron.net.

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Ruth Harriet Jacobs (1924-2013) was a gerontologist, sociologist, educator, poet, journalist, and author of nine books. For 20 years she was a researcher at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. Her books include *Be An Outrageous Older Woman* and *Older Women: Surviving and Thriving: A Manual For Group Leaders*. She died in September 2013 as *Reflections* was going to press. The website www.ruthharrietjacobs.com was created as a memorial.

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May Sarton (1912-1995) was a prolific poet, novelist, and memoirist. Her books include *Collected Poems: 1930-1993* (Norton, 1992), *At Seventy: A Journal* (Norton, 1984), and *Encore: A Journal of the Eightieth Year* (Norton, 1993).

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