

**“Aging as a Spiritual Journey”**  
**Rev. Frieda Gillespie**  
**October 7, 2007**

A 104 year-old woman was being interviewed by a reporter. "And what do you think is the best thing about being 104?" the reporter asked. "No peer pressure." she responded. So there is good news about being older, on the other hand my father used to say, "Growing old is not for wimps!" The challenges of aging are many and the real challenges are complicated by the abhorrence we have of growing old. We resist thinking or planning for our old age because it is too frightening to imagine the changes to our own bodies and minds that we're going to have to face. As a society we've come to understand the negative effects of derogatory or patronizing language that promotes racism or sexism. We haven't really begun to examine how much we are ageist. We deal more often than not with our fears of aging and death by avoiding or trivializing older people. Just as women or people of color internalize stereotypes that society labels them with, so do we internalize our stereotypes of aging and as old people can unwittingly take on the lives we are expected to have rather than the ones we could have.

So before we can begin to think realistically about our elder years, we need to acknowledge the projections of society and our own fears into our thinking and feeling. But of course there are very real challenges:

Eugene Bianchi in his book, *Aging as a Spiritual Journey*, says, "For many persons old age is a time for experiencing losses and diminishments that deeply affect basic self-image. This is especially true of a 'throw-away' culture, in which we discard whatever is old as no longer stylish or useful. The losses may be mainly external but are internalized so as to diminish self-image." Bianchi points out that it is at this time of diminished ability to change, that we are called upon to make the most severe changes in job, housing and status.

For both women and men, there is considerable loss of relationship in each of these major changes. And it seems to be the fate of many elderly to become more reclusive and not necessarily by choice. When there is major illness or loss of function, relationships change from mutual friendships or giving to relationships where the elderly person is receiving help from the majority of people they encounter in a day. This shift in status is deeply painful and it is no wonder that many elders resist becoming dependent in this way. It is not so much the receiving of help that is difficult as the loss of all of the other ways of being that is unacceptable. It is particularly damaging when these changes are not planned for but happen suddenly against all hope.

I don't believe that we who visit or care for elders help them by encouraging them to keep secret the pain of these losses in their life by taking refuge in the past or pretending superficial pastimes are fulfilling. We may think we are protecting them by skirting the issues, but we are really avoiding the realities that are waiting for us in the future. They need to talk about the losses and find their way through them to continue to create a meaningful life.

Bianchi says that many elders have come to terms with their own death. I have found that to be true too in speaking with many elderly people. Far harder, it seems is to come to terms with an unwelcome diminished life. This is the spiritual struggle of aging, spiritual because it is about

meaning, creating meaning in one's life. It may seem like meaning comes from other people and events to us, but all along we are assigning meaning to each of these people and events in our lives. We can assign meaning to our elderly lives as well.

In his poem, "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats penned the lines:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress...

Soul is the deepest feelings within us. It is the movement downward and inward into ourselves and reflects our most real yearnings. It is through our connection with these deeper feelings that we begin to see our lives and the world anew. Before he became the Buddha, it was seeing the realities of old age that gave the prince, Gautama his deepest insights of the transitory nature of life and the futility of craving permanence.

In this youth oriented culture, the loss of abilities and powers seems most frightening because we know that this is not a state that is valued and cherished by those younger than us but one that they really wish to deny and avoid. If we deny and avoid the changes that start long before we are elderly, we will find ourselves alienated from ourselves and those around us. Because our expectations are limited to the stereotypes we've believed all our lives, we can miss many opportunities even before we become elderly. I suspect some of you who are in your elder years, exercise regularly and you have that kind of vital energy in you.

Over the last 10 years, I've done very little vigorous exercise. I've walked and hiked and been active, but have had problems with my lower back and haven't exercised really intensely until about a year ago. Jennifer and I decided to join a gym together. I started doing strenuous workouts a few times a week; something I had decided wasn't possible for me anymore. Right away I started enjoying greater flexibility, strength and stamina. I don't even mind being the one overweight middle aged woman among the trim and super-fit young men and women that exercise all around me, because I know that I am enjoying my workout as much or more than they are. At least at those times, I'm not buying in to the stereotypes.

If we can examine and let go of notions of elderhood that are nonsense, perhaps we can face the real challenges more directly. It is nonsense to think that because our bodies will slow down or ache in places that we can't exercise or be active. It is nonsense to think that we forfeit our sexuality as elders. It is nonsense to think we cannot make new friends or adjust to the severe changes even though it will take us longer than it would have in our youth. It is nonsense to think we cannot survive and make meaning of the grief that is prevalent in our lives as we grow older.

Most of us when we think of making plans for our old age, think about who will take care of us. And this is a very important aspect of planning. Many people do not plan for this and hope against all reason that they can remain independent up until the day they die in their own home and bed. That is possible for some, but few who hope for this ending to life prepare for the possibility that they will need long term care before they die. By resisting planning for this, they limit their choices

when they finally do need the care. By assuming they cannot be happy with any other option than staying home, they will resist all of their families efforts to move them. Ultimately, the family has to choose for them and by then, it surely feels like a prison sentence. This leaves the ones who had to make the hard decisions guilt-ridden and heart-broken. This is incredibly sad and needn't happen to us or our loved ones.

My mother lived in terrible pain from rheumatoid arthritis the last 6 or 7 years of her life. My Dad was determined to keep her at home and he cared for her himself for all but the last nine months of her life. In spite of his children's worries about his health he was sure my mother wouldn't like anyone who would come in to take care of her. The day came when my Dad couldn't do all of the care because of his own exhaustion and I arranged for an agency to visit him. He signed up for nighttime care which rather quickly became twenty-four hour care. It was the best thing for both of them. My mother got to stay at home and she developed a strong attachment to her main nighttime and daytime caregivers. They were able to talk with her and offer her companionship in a way my father couldn't. They were able to be completely honest about her condition with her. And they didn't take personally any of her abuse. These were important relationships. If they could have been open to this idea earlier, my father's health would have been so much better the last year of his life, perhaps he would have lived longer than a year after my mother's death. We will never know. And although it was clearly what he wanted to do, he never recovered from all of those years of vigilance and devoted care-giving.

There is another aspect of planning for our elderhood that is not overlooked as much as it is misunderstood and that is the planning for our spiritual well-being. Ironically it is our desire to hold onto what has given us meaning in life that most keeps us from making realistic predictions about what we'll need as we become old. For we must all at some point let go of most of what we've identified as meaningful: our work, parenting, some if not all of our hobbies. We enter into a new phase of life and must find new understanding or die spiritually. These are uncharted waters for us. These waters though are rich with possibility.

Yeats wrote the lines:

Through all the lying days of my youth  
I waved my leaves and flowers in the sun.  
Perhaps now I may wither—  
Into the truth.

So much pretense and pride falls away with aging. We can no longer dazzle in the old ways. We find our soul's joy in the understanding that can come to us when all else is stripped away. The poet Rilke wrote:

From what experience have you suffered most?  
Is drinking bitter?  
Become wine!

Indeed there are privileges and possibilities in old age that can be new to us; such as telling the truth boldly, letting go of convention and daring to satisfy yourself, defying stereotypes. Sounds like something we might want to start right away if we haven't already!

My partner, Jennifer sent me a photo of her Aunt Irene and her aunt's boyfriend, Joe. She met him at the Assisted Living facility where she lived, when Irene was 90. She died at 96. As far as the family knows, this was Irene's only romantic relationship. I wonder if she regretted having love come to her at such an advanced age, or if she celebrated the fact of its arrival at a time in her life when there were no real responsibilities to distract the couple from their romance. The picture on the altar is of Irene and Joe.

There is work that we can continue to do long into our aging years. It might be different that what our profession or chosen work was or if we are so blessed perhaps the same. We may continue to discover talents that we didn't know we had or joys in doing things we hadn't considered doing before. We may enjoy the company of young people and seek out ways to interact. I met an elderly woman in the hospital where I was a chaplain and she and her brother regularly invited college students from the neighborhood over for dinner. They were excellent cooks and they loved hearing about the studies and interests of these young people. It was a way to keep their minds active.

There is also the opportunity to reflect deeply on how we've lived and what we've learned. There is much to be said for passing our stories on to younger people. They need them to know their connection to the past. There is also a great piece of work to be done by each of us to acknowledge what our lives have meant to us. We can never know the extent to which we've influenced others or helped them along their journey, but we can look at what living has been for us.

Years ago while taking a course for lay people in counseling I had the privilege of meeting the great psychologist, Dr. Carl Rogers when he came to speak to a few of us. Rogers was all about authenticity. It was his method of counseling and his way of being in the world. He was in his 80's at the time I saw him and died perhaps a year later. He told us about his wife's last days and how at her bedside in the hospital he didn't endeavor to soothe and make light of what was happening, but confronted her about their relationship, the things that were unresolved between them, the ways in which he and she had hurt each other. They fought but finally came to a place of mutual understanding that deepened their last hours together beyond expectation. The imminence of death can be a powerful incentive to communicate that which we have kept secret in our hearts—the things that we need to reveal. I knew of a man who long before he died, sent out wonderful letters to each of the children and grandchildren with all of his favorite memories of them and his lighthearted but sage advice. He did this while he still could, knowing that he'd be leaving them and that it mattered to him that he share these thoughts.

They say that we die the way we live and I expect that's true. If we haven't been flexible and seeking in our lives, we will probably have difficulty starting in our old age. Now is always the time to envision our lives. And we can give some thought to our future life as well. If I am going to be taken care of at some point, how, where and who will do it? How will I prepare myself to live out my days if I cannot do the things I love to do now? Will I not wish to live in that case or can I envision reaching for meaning beyond those particular ways of expression? And when will the time be for me to say 'That's all. I'm ready to go now. My life is complete.'?

Growing old is not for wimps, it takes great courage to value ourselves above what we can do, it takes deep sensitivity to know our place in the fabric of life beyond our existential achievements, it takes honesty to do the work of reviewing our life and acknowledging what it's been, and most of all it takes a sense of wonder and trust to think there is something good and worthwhile still to be discovered and said even as our bodies are breaking down.

Two weeks before he died, D. H. Lawrence wrote this poem:

And if, in the changing phases of a man's life  
I fall in sickness and in misery  
my wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead  
and strength is gone, and my life  
is only the leavings of a life:

and still, among it all, snatches of lovely  
oblivion, and snatches of renewal  
odd, wintry flowers upon the withered stem,  
yet new, strange flowers  
such as my life has not brought forth before,  
new blossoms of me—

then I must know that still  
I am in the hands of the unknown God,  
he is breaking me down to his own oblivion  
to send me forth on a new morning, a new man.

May it be so for all of us.