



Engaging Aging

Aging with a Peaceful Spirit

By Sister Dorothy Heiderscheid, OSF

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“The old have acquired the wisdom that comes from having journeyed through life. Like the old man Simeon, the old prophetess Anna in the Temple. And that wisdom enabled them to recognize Jesus.

Pope Francis

March 15, 2013

Pope Francis, in March of 2013, laughed and gently pointed out to the assembled Cardinals that they were not getting any younger. He stated, “Half of us are advanced in age. Old age is... the seat of life’s wisdom... Let us pass on this wisdom to the young: like good wine that improves with age... Let us never yield to pessimism, to that bitterness that the devil offers us every day.”

How well we age has roots in how we have lived. It takes little effort to be pessimistic and to become bitter. To age with grace and dignity, however, requires reflection and self-awareness along the way. This article will speak to the key markers in development that empower our later years. Doctor Robert Hill, a counseling psychologist, has identified positive aging as the way we can act on available internal resources to optimize the aging experiences.

Think of our lives as a series of three experiences: arriving, negotiating and implementing. “Arriving” describes the events and concepts that have carried us to this age in our lives. “Negotiating” identifies the skills necessary for crossing the waters or rafting the rapids of life’s stages. “Implementing” is practicing these strategies for the long term. Each experience offers unique opportunities.

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Arriving

The “arriving” experience contains the familiar developmental stages. They are guided by a repetitive cycle of trust, achievement, and wholeness. The small child grows from an external orientation of learning about the world to an internal self-orientation. Self-reflection takes the lived experiences and applies them to an understanding of self. This ability increases as we grow older. In the same vein, we grow in understanding from general categories to specific categories. We understand how our behavior impacts self and others. The concept of social and emotional experiences we possess in our youth broadens to more inclusive concepts in adulthood.

During “arriving”, our lives are not static. Our development contains a wide variety of influences. Genetic makeup is one such factor.



How often have you recognized the traits and qualities of your parents in your siblings? Or perhaps you’ve noticed them in yourself? You may be familiar with the comment, “I looked in the mirror this morning and saw my mother (or father) looking back at me. Where did I go and when did she/he move in?” These are physical traits as well as behavioral traits. In addition, we are impacted by the mentors we meet along the way. Who comes to mind when you think of an influential teacher? What are the traits of a leader who inspired you? These experiences imprint upon us psychosocial messages that influence our concepts of compassion, caring, service, dedication, empowerment, etc. Think of someone in your life who provided a strong influence. What did this person contribute to your experience of “arriving”?

You may recognize these influences from Erickson’s stages of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity and love. At this age in life we focus on his final stages of generativity and integrity; care and wisdom. These are not stagnant steps but fluid phases that span our life time. Because they are fluid, reliving these skills can be expected during times of transitions. Changes that may force us into transition include loss of the following: health and physical vitality; fulltime or compensated ministry; our favorite mission; the motherhouse; and family members, friends and contemporaries. Each loss calls us to trust in our resilience and our ability to recall or initiate new strategies. During the stages of generativity and integrity we are invited to lean into the feelings of competence and security that we possess within ourselves. When our sense of security escapes us, we may resort to fear, anxiety, anger, or maladaptive

From left, Sister Deana Walker, OSU, visits Sister Wilma Wittman, OSU, at Francis Place in Eureka, Missouri. Photo first appeared in Retirement Fund for Religious News, Spring, 2015.

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copied skills we learned during our “arriving” period.

Another part of “arriving” includes our development and understanding of external social rules and compliance with group standards. Living in community provides an opportunity for agreement on norms that will enhance our shared life. These include common social rules and group standards. We can approach these norms from two directions. The first is to focus on rules as absolutes and insist that everyone follow them religiously or rigidly. The second is to understand the intent of the rule and see it as a guideline rather than a line not to be crossed. In other words, we reflect first on how it impacts the lives of others and then make our decision.

What does this have to do with aging gracefully? If we make choices that suppress our wishes and then fail to articulate our needs or desires to the group, this generally results in our feeling used or disregarded in group decisions. Conflict may be avoided but resentment can develop. It is important for us to remember that ongoing learning and development are continuously part of our lives. Our individuality and the individuality of others become an internal understanding and affect how we interact in a positive or pessimistic manner.

As we reach maturity, we long for the serenity and confidence that come from knowing we have achieved our potential through following our chosen path. If realized, we exhibit a lust for life, a passion for people and a peaceful spirit. As an example, think of someone in your life whom you have admired and may even have said you hoped you’d be like when you grew up. These men and women probably transitioned through the challenges and the joys of life, integrating wisdom in a way that strengthened them with confidence and self-assurance. As you



Pictured above, from left, Sister Anne Wambach, Prioress of the Erie Benedictines, and Sister Joachim Frey, OSB. Courageous change is no stranger to Sister Joachim who is transferring her vows to the Erie community after her monastery in St. Mary’s, PA closed due to the complex challenges of aging members. (Photograph used with permission of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, PA)

examine your own journey, what markers assure you that you have lived your life making the best choices for yourself? Can you look at challenges as opportunities to grow in wisdom rather than roadblocks?

Reflecting on these emotional developmental phases gives us the opportunity to identify some barriers to cultivating healthy aging and flexibility. Being rigid, seeing things as extremes rather than looking for a possible middle ground, makes transitions stressful. Having a negative view of life prevents seeing joy or adventure. Being critical of others’ choices, comments or decisions reinforces a pessimistic view. Anxiety about decision making, fear of failure or being critical of a different way of doing things depletes our energy and reduces our capacity for enjoyment. Self-absorption limits our ability to see the beauty around us and the gifts and talents of others. It creates a flat photo rather than a three dimensional picture. We miss the

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spectrum of life when all that is important in life is self and what we want or desire. Persistent regret draws us into a gloomy or depressive state and prevents others from experiencing the joy of our company. We miss the good we accomplished. In addition, regrets hold us hostage and rob us of serenity.

Negotiating: Forging the streams and shooting the rapids

This is a great metaphor for transitions. Transitions affirm for us our strength and our resilience for change, the one constant we can count on in our lives. It is healthy to experience conflict, to adapt and adjust to different experiences, attitudes, and places. Think of the skills you learned when you accepted a new ministry or a new mission. What adjustments were required regarding space, leadership styles, personality differences, and cultural nuances? I recall a time when my community living group relocated our housing twice in one year. It brings to mind two experiences. The first was driving home to the wrong house more often than I care to admit. The second was reaching into the utensil drawer in the kitchen without thinking only to be surprised it was the drawer with sharp knives. We become accustomed to things and changes disrupt that stability. A wide range of emotions ensue from these episodes. Our bodies also learn to adjust to change. If you live in a four season climate, you learn to adapt and adjust to the temperature changes and become cold and heat resistant. Physical adjustments are challenging for us. As you reflect on your life transitions, what can you identify as successes? Which transitions did you find challenging? Which ones made it difficult to maintain your emotional equilibrium?

Implementing

“Implementing” challenges us to put into practice the skills for living that we have spent a life-

time perfecting. What are some ways to assist us in possessing a healthy and joy-filled outlook in our later years? Let’s begin with brain health and lifestyle, and then talk about our emotional health in the context of confidence, courage, resilience, and forgiveness.

We know the brain to have neural plasticity, meaning it is highly dynamic, constantly reorganizing and very malleable. The brain needs exposure to environments that are enriching, complex and novel in order to increase cellular connections. This exposure is best when it occurs across the life span of brain development. Healthy brain lifestyle includes: continued interaction with others; joining groups and social organizations in your community; developing hobbies; and maintaining and building networks with friends and family. In other words, do not isolate or segregate, especially as you get older. If retiring for you means to separate to your private space and stop *doing*, then it is best not to retire. In religious life we tease that we do not retire, just change our job description. There is great wisdom in this practice.

Aerobic exercise, dancing, gardening, and becoming ambidextrous (using both sides of your body) reduces the risk of dementias, helps the heart, feeds the brain, and promotes enhanced cognitive functions such as better memory. Performing more complex activities on a daily basis, like walking in a different direction, learning a new word daily, learning another language (i.e. signing or a musical instrument), trying different foods, and solving problems, (e.g. puzzles or sudoko), boosts resilience. Enhancing the immune system improves the quality of life.

Some things to participate in routinely include: daily prayer; meditation; mindfulness; regular attendance at formal worship; and saying “no” when appropriate.

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Keeping a comfortable pace in daily activities in place of the urge to be busy and rush about contributes to enjoyment of life. At the end of the day reflect on events and experiences. Then, name three “gratitudes” from the day. Journal these. On the days when you need encouragement to recognize the goodness of life, you can review your entries.

Holding a positive outlook on life, valuing self, realizing capabilities, and practicing good health promotes confidence. This allows us to believe that the community has the resources necessary to meet everyone’s needs. We value self through maintaining leisure activities outside of ministry that enrich the mind, stimulate the spirit,

and provide rest for the body. Finding personal meaning in your life by pursuing your dreams, goals and quests, brings a sense of accomplishment and self-worth. We practice good self-care by maintaining a healthy balance in all areas of our lives.

It takes courage and openness to change and proactively make modifications throughout our lives. In addition, perceiving change as an opportunity for growth, achievement, and fulfillment rather than as a threat makes us strong. By devising new ways of doing things, using creativity to adapt and find new avenues for personal growth, we develop the potential to adjust later on in life. Taking personal responsibility to

From left, Sisters Kate Katoski, OSF, Leanne Welsch, PBVM, and Kate Hendle, BVM, participate in the Dubuque area working collaboratives that focus on the experiences associated with approaching retirement.



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be a part of positive change enhances the total group. Continuous learning in the field of promoting personal effectiveness, and consistently enhancing self will give us that healthy view of daily self-worth.

Practicing forgiveness is essential to maintain and deepen relationships in our lives. So many of us find forgiveness difficult and we resist “going there”. Here are some tips to promote forgiveness.

- Understand the defensiveness you use to resist forgiveness (I’m not wrong or it’s their fault).
- Manage and express your anger in an appropriate manner.
- Safely express your feelings that are associated with being wronged.
- Reframe the situation. This takes time and can be a rich learning experience.
- Commit to forgiving, regardless of who was right and who was wrong.
- View the business of life as imperfect.
- Experience empathy towards the other.
- Recognize your own experience of positive emotions as a result of forgiving.

Can you identify an experience of hurt or wrong doing that has lingered in your life? Can you take this opportunity to restore your internal equilibrium by forgiving? Forgiving is not as much for the other as for self. After all, who suffers most from refusing to forgive?

Life’s challenges fuel our growth and propel us into action. Maturity is learning to develop a capacity to confront lost goals and possible lost self. Humility calls us to acknowledge our vulnerability, inadequacy and apparent smallness.

True humility is the exalted view of the capacity of others versus a negative view of self. The surprise comes only when life fails to meet our expectations and development occurs. Pope Francis said it best of all: “Life is a journey. When we stop, things don’t go right.”

Resources

BOOKS and ARTICLES

Gorlick, A. (2010). Stanford study shows getting older leads to emotional stability, happiness. *Stanford News*. Available online at <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2010/october/older-happy-study-102710.html>

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From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

In her reflections on the invitations of aging, Sr. Dorothy shares with us the reminder that change is constant. Rather than see those differences as a threat, she speaks of the possibilities for grace and growth inherent in every change.



It's a beautiful thought, but one that's hard to swallow when the change signals a loss. And so it is for me, this publication, and the staff of the National Religious Retirement Office as we say goodbye to Sr. Janice Bader. She is resigning her position as NRRO's executive director to assume the presidency of her congregation, the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood of O'Fallon, MO.

In January of 2006, Janice and I met to brainstorm the beginnings of *Engaging Aging*. At the time, the newsletter didn't even have a name, but Janice was sure of one thing. She wanted to create a forum that connected professionals and elders alike in pursuit of an enhanced quality of life for aging religious.

Over the years, the evolution of *Engaging Aging* has been a testament to Janice's leadership. Guided by the belief that abundance is possible even in the face of scarcity, she encouraged us to delve deeply into the challenging realities that face communities. Faith, hope, and unwavering confidence in the spirit of men and women religious were human variables she always inserted into the complex economic algorithms she dealt with daily.

Janice, with gratitude for your vision, respect for your genius, and delight in your friendship, I say, God's speed, and may all be well!

Calendar

Late June

- Direct Care Assistance checks mailed

August 2 - 5

- CMSM Assembly, Columbus, OH

August 9 - 12

- LCWR Assembly, Atlanta, GA

August 16

- NRRO Webinar at 1 PM ET. Topic to be determined

September 12 - 13

- NRRO Tending the Vineyard Workshop, St. Louis, MO

September 20 -22

- NRRO Planning and Implementation Workshop, Tampa, FL

September 23 - 25

- CMSWR Assembly, St. Louis, MO

October 9 - 12

- NCDL Conference, National Harbor, MD

October 11 - 14

- RCRI Conference, Anaheim, CA

Reminder: Stay Connected

- Please send changes in address, phone, e-mail, or congregational leadership to the NRRO, c/o Karen Canas (kcanas@uscbb.org), so that we may keep our records and mailing lists updated.
- If you are not currently receiving "Engaging Aging" and would like to do so, please send your name and address to NRRO, c/o Karen Canas (kcanas@uscbb.org) or call Karen at 202-541-3215

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