



# Engaging Aging

## There's Gold in Them There Hills

By Sister Jean Flannelly, SC, M.T.S., Ph.D.

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*"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."*

*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ*

It had become an autumn tradition after my father died; once the leaves signaled the arrival of their annual spectacular color show, I would drive my mother to meet her brother and sister-in-law. The four of us would share a meal before they set out for a week of leaf watching in the mountains of New Hampshire. It was not unusual, shortly after we placed our dinner orders and surrendered the menus to our waiter, that the conversation turned to doctor visits and the sharing of tips to jump start the memory with its inevitable "brain spasms." I remember my uncle opining that the person who had dubbed these the "golden years" had never lived through them.

My uncle's attitude and the quip, "Getting old isn't for sissies" focused on only some aspects of getting old, but did not look at the richness hidden or obscured by the many limitations accompanying the aging process. Before we prospect for the gold, we would do well to revisit our understanding of the human person and what is happening in this phase of the life cycle.

### Dimensions of Human Experience

It's possible to think of the human person as experiencing reality on at least four different dimensions. The four I've chosen to address in this article are entitled (a) situated; (b) vital; (c) functional; and (d) spirit. Each dimension contributes to a sense of who we are.

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Referring to the circle in the figure below, I label the outer layer the situated dimension because where we are located or situated in time and space become the filters through which we experience life. So, for example, I am a woman, a psychologist, a spiritual director, a vowed religious who lives in Dutchess County in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Each of these qualifiers, and the many more that remain unnamed, contribute to how I experience life and make sense of it. It's on this situated dimension that culture, with its assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes, contributes to my world of meaning.

Moving inward, I've labeled the next circle the vital level. This is our bodily self, communicating spontaneous data from our senses. These messages are straightforward, but how we understand them is a matter of interpretation by our psyche which may be correct/incorrect or accurate/misleading. I believe the pharmaceutical industry, with its ubiquitous advertisements

targeted to the aging population, has heightened our sensitivity to this dimension. The information could skew our interpretations toward illness and health concerns. While it is important to attend to the distress signals from our bodies which have served us so well over 60, 70, and 80 plus years, we must also be alert to undue influences that can come from the advertising industry.

The next dimension I've identified as the functional; we could just as well have named it the ego level, but I am hesitant because the ego, in the popular imagination, is viewed negatively. Without the ego we would not be rational, responsible human persons. Ego problems come when we lose sight of the deepest dynamic in our personhood. It's at the functional level that we employ memory, concentration, judgment, reality testing, impulse control, defenses, etc. to orient ourselves in our relationships and in the environment. In addition to these operations, the functional dimension is geared toward

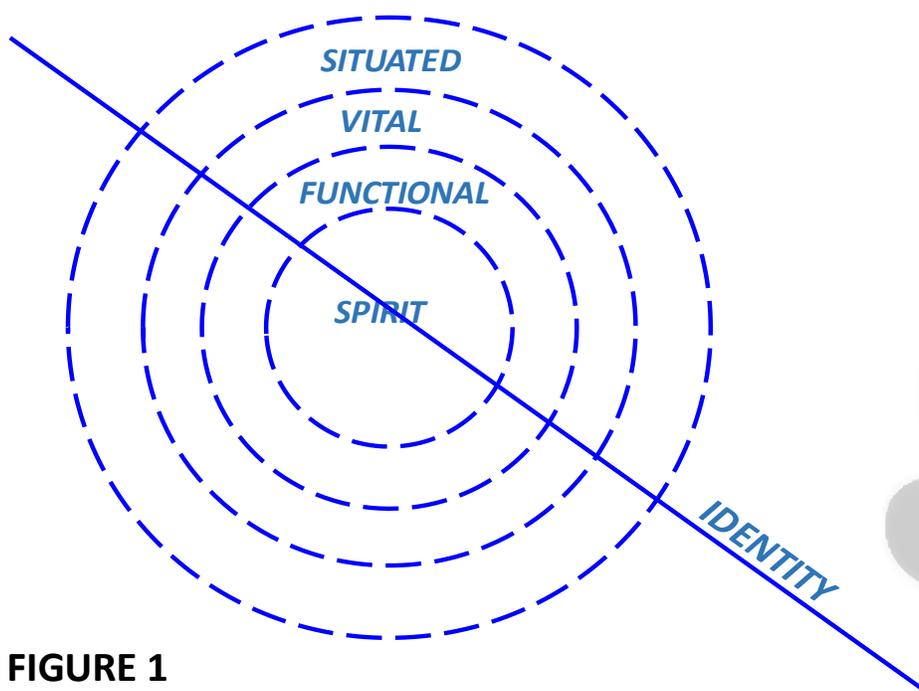


FIGURE 1

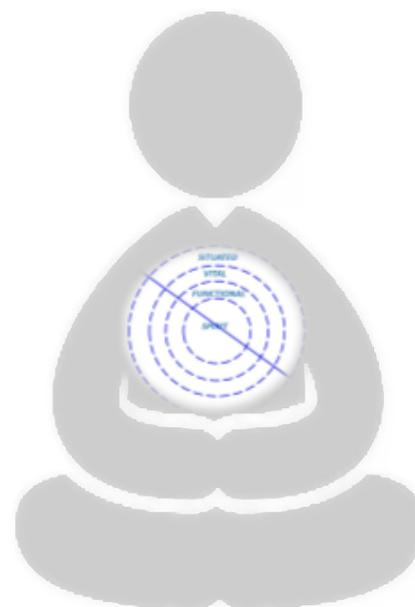


FIGURE 2

## There's Gold in Them There Hills, continued

achievement and mastery, the realms in which we typically approach issues and questions as problems to be solved.

The innermost circle is that dimension of our personality which constitutes us as humans. Teilhard de Chardin expressed it well when he observed "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." Our very center is the spirit level which, in our fast paced, technology-oriented world, receives scant attention. It's here that we are open to mystery and can reside comfortably in paradox, knowing that life is not an either/or, but a both/and reality. The spirit level is not to be equated with religion or any particular religious tradition. These provide concepts and language which can facilitate our recognition and exploration of mystery, but are partial and limited in assisting our encounter with a reality able to be known, and at the same time, beyond our comprehension. On the spirit dimension, we approach others and life differently than the functional or ego dimension; we regard life, its questions and relationships as mysteries to be lived rather than as problems to be solved. The spirit dimension allows the questions and relationships to unfold in their own unique manner, not imposing answers or meaning. Another difference to consider is that the functional level takes part in life through acts of willing and achieving, whereas the spirit's engagement is shaped by the awareness of being embraced by mystery, effecting a receptive stance, a willingness to be led.

The last component in Figure 1, the diagonal line running through the four dimensions, is our identity, the process that pulls together and integrates experience. My identity is a complex reality that is both cognitive and affective, operating both consciously and unconsciously.

As you consider both figures on page 2, you will notice that the circles of the charts are broken lines rather than solid ones. This is intentional in order to communicate the permeability of all four boundaries. Our experience is on all four levels and is intermingled. While it's possible to repress awareness or be inattentive to information from any of the levels, it is not desirable. The messages from cultural, bodily, functional, and spirit dimensions to which we attend shape our consciousness and, thus, have a significant impact on our sense of who we are.

My uncle's summation and the quip about getting older view aging through a cultural lens which is biased toward recognizing what is happening on the vital and functional dimensions. Our culture, our society values youth with its agility, good health, sharpness of thinking and productivity. As mentioned earlier, the gold is in the spirit level, but before we dig for it, we need to look at four different features of aging.

The following four features impact how we enter the aging process: (a) transitioning from full-time ministry; (b) experiencing limitedness; (c) intensifying awareness of one's own dying and death; and (d) questioning my life's significance.

### **Aging and Ministry Transitions**

As we move out of full-time ministry, we discover how much our time, commitments and our sense of purpose have been structured by our ministry. We were involved in God's work and helping to bring about the reign of God. How exciting! How ennobling! What better way to spend our time and energies! With a shift to a less organized and less demanding schedule, we are given many more choices, especially where we will spend our time and how we will use our energy. The values we wish to live determine how and what we choose. In religious life, and in our particular religious congregation,

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we hold many values in common, but we differ in how we value them. Therefore, the living out of these values will differ.

If we are to live authentically and healthily, we ought to embrace the time and impetus this transition affords in order to explore the values that we espouse and those we actually live by. Doing so echoes an earlier phase in the life cycle when we dealt with what the psychologist Erikson named, the identity crisis. In the adolescent identity crises, idealism is a significant factor in our choices and commitments. In the elder adulthood identity crisis, idealism is still present, but is tempered by more realistic self-knowledge.

Crisis, for Erikson and as I am using it, is a two-edged sword: an opportunity and a danger. Asking the fundamental questions such as “Who

am I?” “What are my values and my beliefs?” and “Who do I wish to be?” is most often accompanied by what we consider negative states: feelings of loneliness, anxiety and insecurity, which intuitively we avoid. But staying with the questions is a necessary condition in order for us to come in touch with our unique identity which becomes the North Star for future choices.

The dangers arise from refusing to ask the questions and allowing self-knowledge to limit idealistic yearnings. In the former situation, we never come to our unique identity and thus live someone else's life, whereas, over reliance on self-knowledge can quash the invitations embedded in the idealism. The poem by Rumi, in the graphic below, suggests a path for walking the journey.

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.*

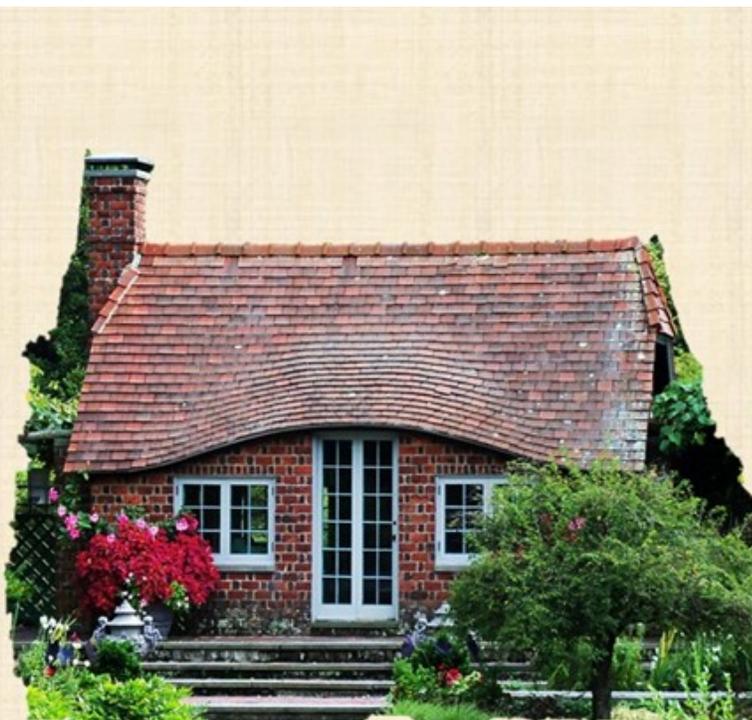
*A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
As an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

*RUMÍ*



## There's Gold in Them There Hills, continued

### Experiencing Limitedness

Aging at this phase of the life cycle, unlike earlier phases, brings with it an increasing number of limitations; our situated worlds typically become smaller with transitioning from full-time active ministry and losing significant relationships through relocation and death. Our bodies exhibit, in various forms, the wear and tear of 70, 80, 90 plus years of faithful service: hearing and vision loss, loss of bone density, etc. Similarly, our psyches experience diminishments: memory loss, flexibility in perception, etc. These losses can, but need not be, seen in a negative light. Our initial reaction is most often unfavorable because we are no longer capable of doing what we could do before. A path out of negativity is to refuse to be intimidated by them and seek ways to prevent them and/or compensate for the losses. In a paraphrase of Teilhard de Chardin's advice in his book, *The Divine Milieu*, we ought to resist them as much as possible, always choosing life, until it becomes clear that there is nothing more we can do, and then surrender to our being hollowed out to receive God more fully in the pruning.

### Intensifying Awareness of my Dying and Death

Entering later adulthood invariably brings front and center the reality of my own dying and death. It's a countercultural move to face them seriously, but it need not be morbid. Examination of our beliefs and attitudes toward them empowers us to live our remaining years fully and fruitfully. When polled, most people check that they would want to die in their sleep or after a very short illness. Nobody checks that he or she looks forward to a protracted illness. Dying today is made more complex and difficult because of advances in medical technology, but it can also be more pain-free because of those same advances. The advent of health care

proxies enables us to look at our dying and instruct our trusted stand-in as to our desires when we are unable to make them known. As believers we trust that in our dying we are not alone.

How we look at death is another area to be scrutinized. I was helped in this when I heard a colleague, a theologian, assert that many Christians do not take into consideration God's view of death when they look at it. Perhaps we have bought into the idea that death is a punishment for sin and, therefore, a negative reality, but in God's view, death is the gateway to our new and fulfilled life. Hearing this, I remembered a student in the "Death and Pastoral Care of the Dying" course I was teaching offer the analogy that life now is similar to life in the womb. Nestled in the security of our mother's womb, comforted by her steady heartbeat and nourished by her body, we have no reason to leave that safe, secure environment; we know nothing of the wonders and joys of being alive outside the womb. But then nature ends this idyllic existence and the traumatic birthing process begins. Passage down the birth canal is painful. Alive outside the womb, we begin to taste the full joy of being alive. Just as we, as a fetus, could not imagine this, so we now cannot imagine what the joy and fullness of life after death will be like. Perhaps our psyches need to catch up with our faith?

### Review of Life

Accompanying the search for purposeful and life-giving ways to use our more limited time and energy is the impulse to review our lives, reflecting on our success and failures. The late Rev. John English, SJ, developed an exercise for a life review to deepen awareness of God's presence in our life journey. Originally intended as a solo exercise, it can be adapted

**There’s Gold in Them There Hills, continued**

to a group setting. The support of others praying their life history is palpable even if there is no explicit sharing. The exercise begins with the pray-er asking for the gift of a deepfelt appreciation of how my Creator God has been present in my history and is followed by recalling the persons, relationships and events of their lives. A timeline, such as the one depicted below, can jog the memory, supplying the material for prayer. After asking for the Spirit’s guidance, the pray-er sits with Christ and slowly and reverently looks at how God has been a faithful companion throughout the events, persons, and relationships in life.

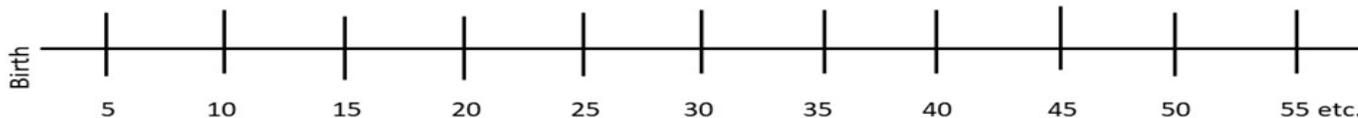
On page 7, you will see a copy of a white on white etching that was created for me by the late Reverend Harold Buckley for my silver jubilee. I think it captures something of the experience of walking with Christ as we do a life review. In the background of the art piece, the road and some of the landscape are visible. Christ, with his supportive, comforting arm around the shoulder of the journeyer, is in middle ground. The future, in the foreground to which Christ is pointing, is shrouded in darkness. It is clear that there is no need to be afraid because Christ is walking with us.

**Prospecting for Gold**

Psychology speaks of the self and gives us some helpful distinctions, among them, the public self, how others perceive us; the ideal self, who we aspire to be; and the real self, who we truly are. Thomas Merton takes us deeper and distinguishes between the false self, who we wish to be or imagine our self to be, and the true self, who we are in God’s eyes.

The giftedness of aging is most apparent on the spirit level where we recognize that we are surrounded and permeated by mystery. Dwelling in mystery and opening ourselves to be led, we discover that we have a deeper, truer identity than the one we most often claim and work out of. This recognition pushes or impels us to disengage from the more superficial one and simultaneously nurture the deeper one. Anchored in mystery and convinced of our deeper identity, we know a new freedom to look more candidly at the illusions surrounding our lives. Done from a contemplative space, we examine with a critical eye the cultural beliefs we have absorbed almost osmotically and the roles we have played. As we do this, our freedom grows and finds expression in a variety of ways, some of

**Praying Our Memories Timeline**



I begin by remembering. This remembering is an awareness of person and the exterior events in my life and my interior reactions to them. The following headings may help to begin the process of remembering:

- |                            |                        |                 |
|----------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| parents/guardians          | incidents of childhood | Church          |
| grandparents               | school                 | Baptism         |
| relatives                  | struggles              | First Communion |
| male/female companionships | talents                | Confirmation    |
| friends                    | five senses            | Marriage        |
| health                     | positions I have held  | helping others  |

## There's Gold in Them There Hills, continued



Etching created by Reverend Harold Buckley for Sister Jean Flannelly's silver jubilee.

which are more active apostolically while others nurture the contemplative dimension of our vocation.

### Nurturing a Contemplative Stance

Neither Grandma Moses nor Ansel Adams are the role models I am proposing when I suggest we might get involved in painting or photography. Painting, photography, journaling, and writing poetry are all practices that can deepen our contemplative stance. Each, in its own way, forces us to slow down and pay attention to what is in front of us. Is not contemplation a long loving look at the real? I believe that finding our unique way of being a contemplative, and then living from that space, is a gift of immeasurable value that we can offer our world.

How we chose to deal with our aging, both personal and institutional, reminds me of a story told by a theology professor at the orientation for the Master of Divinity students. He shared that the study of theology can be likened to the ways we can be at the shore of a vast ocean. The first and the simplest is to remain on shore and gaze at the ever-changing water, taken up and enthralled by the beauty and majesty of it all. A second possibility is to get into the boat and sail out on the water, seeing new vistas

and enjoying the experience of sailing. Once the storms come, which they inevitably do, the sailor heads back to shore and remains there. A third path is similar to the second, except when the storms come, the person sails out further because the safest place in a storm is out far and in deep waters.

In the first instance, there is appreciation and even admiration of the subject matter, but one does not allow the content to affect him or her. In the second, there is a measure of personal involvement, but when storms challenge cherished beliefs, one retreats to safety and no longer deals with the challenges. In the third situation, one rides out the storm by engaging the questions with their issues and challenges and finds a new kind of safety in the deeper resolution.

As we age, we have these same three options. We can remain on shore and fail to mine the riches. We can engage our identity crisis, but once the negative emotions surface, we can retreat to shore. Or finally, we can embrace our identity crisis and be led into the discovery of our true self, the self known by God.

Bon Voyage!

## Resources

- Francl-Donnay, Michelle (2020). *Not by Bread Alone: Daily Reflections for Lent 2020*. Liturgical Press, MN. Michelle is a Professor of Chemistry at Bryn Mawr College and an adjunct scholar of the Vatican Observatory.
- Pallottine Sisters offer an online guide for praying with your personal history. <http://www.pallottinesisters.org/prayerlife/Remembering%20God%27s%20Presence%20In%20My%20History.pdf>

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