



Engaging Aging

To Be or Not to Be — at 80

By Sister Marcia Allen, CSJ

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“The gospel of Jesus Christ is for me the only secure and sure rule of life.”

Bette Moslander, CSJ

In this much anticipated and now famous year, 2020, I turned 80 years of age. Eighty! I anticipated it with some trepidation, to be sure, but mostly with a sort of Christmas Eve expectation. I secretly hoped that the very number would yield up its symbolic meaning in real time. I and we would all receive the blessing of perfect vision. All doubts dispelled; all anxiety quelled; all desires coalesced in a perfect vision of wellbeing. It would be done. *Fiat*, God! Just do it. You have one chance and this is it. There will never be another 2020!

As it turns out, that will certainly be true. We will have our perfect vision. COVID-19, protests in the streets, the world run amok. Masks and social distance and isolation from loved ones. Fear and anxiety reign. And turning 80. My brother informed me that I am now officially old. No getting around it. The worm has turned. However, I was physically fit. Hale and hearty. Still living full tilt. Old Age – ha!

For the sake of perspective I'd like to tell a story. David Foster Wallace, in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, says that the story's purpose is to enable human redemption. A story “requires us first to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny.” So, here's the story.

This year – 2020. I prepared for it. I anticipated it with a month's vigil. My 80th birthday was going to be a stunning entry into my old age. I was going to make the best of it. I prayed for wisdom, for vision, for courage and the

Sister Marcia Allen, CSJ, is a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, Kansas. She holds a Doctor of Ministry degree in Spirituality and has served in elected leadership in her congregation from 1979—1995 and 2008—2016. Additionally, Sr. Marcia served as President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious from 2014—2017. After more than 30 years of Chapter facilitation and giving retreats throughout the world, she is now a staff member at Manna House of Prayer in Concordia, KS. Most recently she co-authored *With Fire and Passion: The Mysticism of Bette Moslander*, a compilation of key thought from Moslander's written and spoken work.



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ability to discern my next steps in life; my life direction. I also began to plan a party that would be a soul-stopper. Its celebration would last a decade! I would give gifts instead of receive them. Well, COVID-19 put a stop to those plans. I sat for a while in numb silence as I saw the virus closing in on my plans. Finally, I abandoned the whole thing and enjoyed a very quiet evening with the five people with whom I live here at Manna House of Prayer.

Shortly thereafter, I awoke one morning to find my old nemesis coming toward me. Eleven years ago I had serious respiratory issues due to a fall and the aspiration of street mold. My lack of ongoing attentiveness invited old respiratory issues to take up their home in my lungs once again. It was as Thomas Merton famously said: “I must learn to leave myself in order to find myself.” Stunning words. Actually, the familiar was yanked from me. My whole identity as active and engaged was stripped away in one fell swoop. I could not breathe. I could not walk, talk or think. I could not breathe. Not. Breathe.

This occurred simultaneously with George Floyd gasping his cry: “I can’t breathe!” That was my own cry, my own panic, my own despair. My friends rushed me to the emergency room at the local hospital. Breath came back and for a few days I sat in shock, tentatively taking one breath after another. One short breath. One puff. Then another. Finally, the reality sank in: I can’t breathe. George Floyd had died from lack of breath. Was I following? Another trip to the emergency room. This time I received a regimen of medications and protocols that would stop an ordinary clock. In my case it got the old ticker going again. And again, tentatively. Every breath was a new event. Every short breath. Every gasp. Every little puff. An event to be celebrated and never again taken for granted.

I can’t breathe. A prophetic utterance. That single sentence overturned the whole country in one way or another. Enlightenment and action. Nothing will ever be the same again because of those three words. Thank you, George Floyd. Those three words are prophetic for me too.

Manna House of Prayer, Concordia, KS, (below) where Sr. Marcia currently lives and ministers



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I know that this event could have happened decades ago. It does happen to people who are far younger than I; however, it happened to me in this year of 2020, this year of perfect vision.

The stunning realization that I will never breathe freely or deeply again without serious assistance; the awareness of my limitations crashed down around me. In a sense I felt cheated. Betrayed. Bewildered. My mortality sat looking me in the eye.

What you need to know is that I am not brave. Especially, when I'm threatened. I cowered in my very private interior space for a week or two. Too weak to do anything else, I was waited on hand and foot. Friends took me to the doctor or hospital. They talked about me. They talked around me. I just sat there and let it all pass over me.

As time went on I began to realize that this condition, chronic and ever-present until my life ends and quite possibly causing my life to end, was not just something to tolerate. Rather, it was inviting me into a path for which I had prayed prior to my 80th birthday. It was the gift. The cake and the ice cream too. And here was a gift with which I could share lavishly with those who would come to my "party" from day to day for however the days lasted. This was like a new seed, subtly growing within. I realized that I was no longer panicky. I was no longer desperate. I could somehow see that I could live, finally, in the present moment. The Buddha taught that there really is no present. It is an illusion even though we are every millisecond of our lives in the present. There is only the past and the future. The former, we know because it is our history, our back story. The latter is what we think we know or at least hope we know. But it's the present that is important, as fleeting as it is.



Crucifix in chapel of Manna House of Prayer, Concordia, KS, created by artist Brother Mel Meyer, 1982

I realized that the very only thing I possessed was the one moment and there was no assurance of the next one. This created in me a vacuum of quiet and solitude. As the I-can't-breathe moments accumulated, I realized my total solitude. As close as my friends and community were to me, they were absent in this new reality. They could not share it no matter how much they cared or commiserated. I found that I sought my solitary times. I wanted and welcomed the aloneness because, as a matter of fact, I was the only one who could be present in my reality. I had been in lonely spots before, of course, but this was different. Previous experi-

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Manna House logo by Sr. Carmella Thibault, CSJ

ences were temporary. This was final. This was my way of life for the rest of my life.

The mystery for me was that I welcomed it. There was a peace and calm that pervaded my spirit. I had lived a full and rich life. I could write a book about the very rich life that had gifted me for eight decades. In fact, *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc du Berry* became the story of the very rich hours of Marcia Allen, like pages limned in golden joy and bright colors of contentment. I reveled in it. I was overwhelmingly grateful for it. What I was experiencing now paled in the light of the profoundly providential life I had lived until now. So, in essence I could say that even this was just one more manifestation of that gift.

Several weeks passed as I absorbed this reality. Then the green shoot within sprouted a bit more. As the images of George Floyd continued to flood the nightly news, I grew in companionship with him. His horrifying suffocation right be-

fore our eyes. Slowly I began to realize that what we watched in those 8 ½ minutes was the crucifixion of George Floyd. There he was, nailed to the pavement with a knee until the breath was crushed out of him. I became mindful of another crucifixion. Jesus was crucified to the cross of the world. Nailed to shame and fear until the breath was crushed from him. My own father before me in the days before the miracle rescue inhalers and nebulizers were available. Crucified to suffocation until he expired from the effort to gasp one more breath. Humanity, nailed with consumerism, greed, injustice, violence, robbed of spirit. And still another breathless one – our very Earth. The mountains and hills stripped of minerals; the rivers and streams polluted; the ozone suffocated with smog; the humus expiring from herbicides and insecticides. Crucified to the world with consumerism, greed, war and progress. All this suffocation.

My work, my path, my birthday gift took shape before me. I was a sufferer like these others. I shared their fate. What were they saying? What was required? What were the consequences of my passivity? What was my path? What was my role? I might not have control over what happened to bring this on, but I could take charge of the way I responded. This was an awakening. I could participate. I could engage. I could come out of my cocoon and be present to the present. I resolved – I can remember the day and the hour – to collaborate with my condition, with my life. No more passivity. Rather, I would begin to understand and live the regimen of medication and treatments. This new thing was a path. It was my spiritual path. And it came with specific practices. This became my mantra: my spiritual path and practices. This created a need for awareness. I had to intend toward what I was doing. This was a new and unfamiliar path but not necessarily an unwelcome one as it turned

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out. The practices required four periods each day: 7:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m. 7:00 p.m. The first and the last were 45 minutes in length. The second and third were 20 minutes in length.

There it was – my very own Liturgy of the Hours. I had four prescribed “hours” of solitary time in which I could simply breathe. The ritual for preparing for each: mixing, pouring, putting the apparatus together, then sitting in the chortling silence of the practice. Letting my mind go still; concentrating only on breathing. Inspire – hold; expire – hold; then repeat. Intend – focus, my Latin mantra to the tune of the humming and chuttling nebulizer and Vest to assist productive coughing. Respiration – the holy process of allowing life to flow in and out. My psalm, my scripture, my invocations and my hymn: Breathe. Inhale, Exhale. This function of the autonomic nervous system has now become totally purposeful. I live it. I intend it. I practice it. This disciplined practice is rooted now deep in my inner self. I cannot adequately describe the path but I am now collaborating through the practice.

This path, this spiritual path, this path of my salvation does not seem to serve the same purpose as a path along a stream or through a woods. I have a feeling that it is a way – perhaps it is THE WAY. It’s the one that Jesus said that he was. But that’s a question for which I’m not quite prepared at the minute. I am still working with the spiritual practices that belong to the path. My Liturgy of the Hours.

Sister Marcia Allen (right) visiting with her mother, Gladys M. Allen (left), on the eve of her 107th birthday.

As I sit these four periods amounting to 120 minutes throughout the day, I begin to feel a change – another one. The green sprig seems relentless – or at least creative and determined. Now, other considerations emerge and unfold. What is this for? My life always has been obviously for something. There has been meaning to it. I have given myself to ideals, to people and projects for eight decades. Now what? What is this for? If it is my spiritual path and practice, then what is its meaning aside from the fact that it keeps me breathing – attached by a thread to this life? If I can more or less assume that I will live through the night and through tomorrow and through many tomorrows then what is this mystery for?

Once a retreat director challenged me to admit that I was suffering. I was much too proud to agree to that. But this time might be different. What about suffering? Suffering is a common thread throughout the human condition; for the finite Earth itself. It is the ultimate finitude with which we are blessed. We suffer. Like George



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Floyd, crucified into the final expiration. I can't breathe. But I can suffer. Now that brings me up short. What is the meaning of that?

George Floyd died at the age of 46. Jesus died at age 33. My father died of an aneurysm caused by gasping for breath at 88. My mother is in perfect health at 107 this month. I'm 80, I remind myself. Which genes shall I wager on?



Amid my attempted high-mindedness I bargain a bit. Here's a proposition: God, if I really practice the path; if I hold to my resolution to collaborate; how about some sort of a compromise? What about halfway between these two numbers? What would You think of something around $93 \frac{1}{2}$ as an end-date? I think I could have my affairs in order by then. Eighty-eight just seems too near, that is, in the scheme of things....so I'm wondering...?

But back to suffering and the meaning of it all. As I consider the purpose of life – the relatedness of all of us here in creation; as the whole scope of God's magnanimity flows from eon to eon then what difference does something less than a speck in the multiverses and eons make? Because as God said of Julian of Norwich's little *notte* [O.E.]: This is everything that is made. And I am part of that simple little nothing that is everything in the tenderness of the faithful God. As Julian later wrote: God made it. God loves it. God keeps it. And therefore, so do I. I keep this speck that I am. I love it and I keep it for as long as it lasts – which, by the way, is forever. Once made, then forever made. Not a bad future to look forward to. And in the meantimethere is this path – and this practice. Terry Tempest Williams says that we become our practice. Now I add this to my ruminations. If, the nebulizer practice aimed at breathing. And breathing aims at prayer. And prayer aims at being with. Then what does being with become...? Or what/who do I become?

Moving into old age – or simply moving on and the days and months and maybe the years continue to unfold, age doesn't matter, except of course, for the community's projections. But in the long view, age is relative and in many ways insignificant. What matters is that all of this suffering – the universal truth about finitude – is not for its own self only. Stasis in suffering is in the end a form of nihilism. I am alive! Yes. And in addition. No more holding forth with long-winded diatribes, much more unsteady walking and handling, much less arrogance (I can only hope!), much more waiting with equanimity. Finally, I am cut to my true size.

So there you have it – the story of my entry into old age – my life defined more clearly than ever before. A path into Dante's dark wood – where

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suffering finitude evolves into the inner light of wisdom...purified into the promise.

Along the way, are helps that point, restore, cause me to pause and recover my good sense, make me laugh and uncover my wisdom. Rudolph Werlitzer's *Hard Travel to Sacred Places*, where I see that only by cutting my old life to the bone will I discover the really Real; Helen Luke's journey through the classics, *Old Age*, where ancient Western wisdom resides in the wanderer, the seeker; *The Way of Tenderness*, Kevin O'Shea's alluring recital of God's abiding tenderness; *Into the Far Country*, Scott Kirkland's revelation of the Middle Way, derived from Karl Barth's theology and the deep wisdom of Gillian Rose; and Dorothy Sayers' *Mind of God*; Terry Tempest William's *Erosion*; Dante's *Divine Comedy*; all these precious companions. And then there is the Gospel – the good news delivered first hand in the throes of crisis: the humble Centurion, the condemned prostitute; the pesky Syro-Phoenician mother, the bright and thirsty Samaritan woman, the frantic Jairus, the bent over woman – all these broken finite beings waiting for the Mercy, the Tenderness, the Enlivening Breath of God, Jesus who saw what he looked at. And then there is Us.

We of age who have the time and wisdom to see and to feel – this/our crucified Earth and World – and breathe for them, breathe with them. There! There is my vocation, my NOW path. I and the crucified Jesus and all those others crucified in the welter of human existence where finally the fire of finitude is reconciled with the rose of divinity. We breathe together – one breath at a time – a miracle of the Mercy, Unalloyed Redemption. This, I believe, is the gift of age. I live open and hoping to receive it – graciously.



From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

You have to go some to surprise me these days. I find myself expecting little of life. Perhaps it's a defense mechanism, for to do otherwise is to set myself up for disappointment in the face of the changes heaped upon us by COVID-19 and global turmoil. Still, this article by Sr. Marcia Allen just about knocked me flat.

I've known Sr. Marcia for just under 25 years and am delighted to count her among my closest friends. Her passion for religious life and her experiences with vast cross-sections of congregations around the globe have given her a perspective few can match. Yet, when asked by us at NRRO to write an article on aging, she takes us into remarkably intimate places of personal vulnerability and courage. On a very public stage, she gifts us with her willingness to stand in the white-hot light of self-examination and search for meaning, for purpose in the face of physical decline. She brings us to the cross!

If we move forward in life using the underlying principle that the quality of any organization is a function of its awareness, then journeys of self-exploration, such as those described by Sr. Marcia, are essential to our personal and congregational well-being. It would seem that we need now, in the midst of a world turned on its head, to take that perilous leap into the realm of questions. When we realize that there is an empowering freedom in not having to know the answers, we enable each other to take the stance of a learner, not fearful in the face of challenge, but excited in the unknown potential yet to be discovered. Regardless of our age or ministry, we gain the ability to stand, shoulder to shoulder, on a journey into the future that holds both light and shadow. What questions are you willing to ask?

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3211 4th Street, NE
Washington, DC 20017-1194

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Fax: (202) 541-3053

Email: retirement@usccb.org

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Staff

Executive Director

Sister Stephanie Still, PBVM
sstill@usccb.org

Education and Outreach Manager

Sister Georgette Lehmuth, OSF
glehmath@usccb.org

Grants Specialist

Monica Glover
mglover@usccb.org

Program Associate

Karen Canas
kcanas@usccb.org

Affiliated Independent Consultants

Sister Anna Marie Tag, RSM
NRROConsult-AMTag@usccb.org

Ms. Dayna Larson-Hurst
NRROConsult-DLHurst@usccb.org