



Engaging Aging

The Lifetime Journey to God and One's True Self: Spiritual Accompaniment for Aging Religious

Sister Barbara Quinn, RSCJ, D.Min.

"In the later years, the threads of a long and rich life deserve the time and resources that can help us weave together the depth and richness of a committed religious life."

From the moment our little noses breathe earth's air we begin our lifelong journey into our true self and into God. That period of pure innocence is gradually – sometimes abruptly – shaped, transformed, strengthened, and tried in our quest to discover who we really are over a lifetime. This journey is, at times, glorious and strenuous, beautiful and terrifying, peaceful and tumultuous. Regardless, it is for each of us to take to the road of our lives.

And so, we set out on our way to deeper life and, yes, our way to death. We gather the memories of a lifetime filled with graces, gifts given and received, mistakes, regrets, hurts, and hard-earned wisdom. We collect the strands of life that have yet to be woven into the fabric of this long journey, even the mysteries that defy our understanding. Our lives have been shaped by the vows we took so many years ago. Gathering the graces and the sin, relationships and ministries, family, friends and community, sickness and health... all these are gifts to be given to the Giver of all good gifts. Our vowed life offers a kind of prism through which to see the whole. And now the time has come to continue to harvest the gifts of these years.

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Herein lies the gift of spiritual direction or, as I prefer to say, the gift of spiritual accompaniment. Most likely, each of us has developed a robust spiritual life after years of personal, communal, and liturgical prayer. That said, if I alone am the sole guide, I will only be as wise as the one who guides! It is a great gift to find someone who is deeply rooted in God, a person of prayer who has the essential training to accompany another with wisdom and freedom, and one who is knowledgeable about the spiritual life.

Spiritual Guides

A good spiritual guide listens well, is kind, respectful, and trusts that God has been working in the person in ways perhaps as yet unrecognized. The guide asks questions, rarely telling a person what to do, although there are times when a firm recommendation might be called for. A good guide helps a person understand what might be happening as the person grows into a new stage of relationship with God and self. Meetings with a spiritual guide prompt us to pay attention to how the Spirit is moving within and beyond us through our questions, fears, struggles and graces that may arise.

Many sisters, priests, and brothers have benefited from spiritual accompaniment for a long time. Still, there are some who may not have had the opportunity or the inclination to avail themselves of this resource. In the later years of life, however, the threads of a long and rich life deserve the time and resources that can help one weave together the depth and richness of a committed religious life. Surely, each of us desires to meet God with a sense of peace in the gift of who we are, grateful for God's abiding love and fidelity.

Opportunities for Direction

Those in community leadership can encourage and support their senior members to draw on the resources of trained spiritual directors. Retirement centers, especially, have wonderful opportunities to assist in this regard by assuring that annual retreats are scheduled. Even better, arranging for several spiritual directors to be available during the retreat offers community members the freedom of choice. This might increase the possibility of developing a relationship with a spiritual director if they do not already have one. Planning days of reflection when some, if not all, of the directors can be present can



From left, Barb Quinn, RSCJ, and Martha Robbins, RSCJ Associate, pause for conversation during the RSCJ Assembly held in St. Louis, MO, during July 2025. The United States—Canada Province Assembly had the theme “Transforming Our Journey Through Courage, Confidence, and Hope.” This was the last United States—Canada Province Assembly before joining with the Provinces of Antilles and Mexico to form the new ANAM Province.

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provide continuity, again, strengthening the opportunity to nurture spiritual direction relationships. In the end, what is at stake is the hope that our senior members will come to the end of life in peace, with gratitude for gifts given, for dark moments healed, and for the utter belief that they are precious in God's eyes and dearly loved.

Contours of Aging and the Gift of Spiritual Wisdom

Members of religious communities are, by and large, devoted workers, generous ministers, and fonts of hard-earned wisdom. Gratitude for the generosity and goodness of members of religious communities is abundant. However, as energy wanes and ministry decreases, one's identity undergoes a major shift. As Connie Zweig, Ph.D., comments in her book, *The Inner Work of Age*, aging folks shift from "role to soul." Care for others does not stop, but the capacity to serve actively begins to lessen. Now, one's essential work becomes exploration into the God who has been with us and in us from the beginning. Could there be a more sacred journey? Affairs in the evening of our lives are now "soul size."

As our prayer and memories lead us down the roads of our lives, we will hopefully remember some glorious moments that we had forgotten or that, at the time, seemed inconsequential and routine. Likewise, some of the darker corners and painful memories of our lives may emerge, unsettling us and bringing to the surface unfinished business. They might also illumine the hard-won wisdom that we learned as we struggled to find meaning and peace.

Spiritual accompaniment can help us notice and mine those memories, celebrating the graces and joys as well as searching for God's presence amidst the more difficult moments and memories.

A wonderful book, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross*, by Irish Carmelite Iain Matthews, offers wise insight into these periods of struggle. Matthews posits that the times we struggle, search, and suffer are moments that open a space for God. These are times that God can enter and



lead us to God's own self and to our own true selves in partnership with God. This is the work of discernment: the exercise of discovering the Spirit's presence in the midst of our lives and recognizing when our own selves have gotten in the way of the Spirit's work.

This work of discernment is foundational to spiritual growth. The gift of spiritual accompaniment serves as a midwife for drawing out our realization about the workings of God's Spirit in our lives. Our awareness is animated or deceived in light of our image of God and our ability to "read" the language of God's Spirit.

Our Images of God

Gerard Hughes, SJ, suggests three images of God in his book, *The God of Surprises*. The first is the image of a deist God, a distant God, who acts on us unilaterally and capriciously with no regard for our

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free cooperation. Concomitantly, this God has nothing to do with us after finishing the work. There is no discernment with a God like this. There is no partnership, no freedom.

A second image of God is of a great puppeteer in the sky. Remember the marionettes some of us had as children? We would manipulate or “jerk” the strings attached to the cross hatch and make the marionette dance or sit or move toward another marionette. God in this image arbitrarily “jerks us around” with no choice on our part. There is no discernment here either in this image of God because the person has no partnership and no freedom.

A third image of God is the father or mother of an adult daughter or son. Isn't it a deep joy when a parent and son or daughter become friends? Each one will always hold their respective identities of mother or father and son or daughter, but now there is mutuality, shared concern, and a wonderful partnership in which the parent and adult daughter or son help each other. This is the image of God upon which discernment grows. Far from manipulating us, from capriciously “jerking us around,” God desires our friendship and partnership to work for the values of the Reign of God in this world, in families, and in our religious communities. God and we are invited to work together in navigating our way through this final stage of life. This reality is rather astounding. It is the treasure of a lifetime!

The image of God as a parent of an adult daughter or son leads us to recognize and learn the “language of God's Spirit,” the One who guides us in our partnership with God. God's Spirit works in us as whole people, that is, through our head, heart, and action. The language of discernment is built into us if we learn to recognize and follow it. If we are in harmony with God's Spirit and our true self, we will experience truth and clarity in our thinking versus the falsehood and confusion of dissonance. When our hearts and affect are in harmony with God's Spirit and our true self, we will experience peace and joy versus the turmoil and sadness of discord. As we act



Above, Maria Herrera, RSCJ, takes a quiet moment during the RSCJ United States—Canada Province Assembly.

on our discernment, we will experience courage and energy if we are in harmony with God and our true self versus fear and paralysis of disharmony.

Experiences of Prayer

What about prayer? Not surprisingly, having more time for prayer in this new chapter of life can open tender questions about prayer itself. Religious life is rooted in prayer. It is the bedrock of our lives. But what if someone who has more time for quiet and prayer now wonders whether they are praying well or praying at all? How painful such a notion would be. Author Ruth Burrows, a Carmelite from England, is a voice of wisdom on many dimensions and depths of prayer. In one of her earliest books, *Guidelines for Mystical Prayer*, she addresses the question of what constitutes deep prayer by examining the prayer experiences of two of her sisters in community. One, she describes, has a “lights on” prayer experience. This sister has a felt experience of prayer that is filled with consolation or, in some instances, deep sadness or concern for others. The other, she describes, has a “lights off” prayer experience. It is as dry as a bone. There is little sensible feeling. The strongest thing about this prayer is that it is faithful. No matter the felt sense of God, she is devoted to her relationship with God in good times and in more challenging times. Ruth Burrows' conclusion is that prayer is not “measured” by sensible experience. The litmus test of prayer is whether it

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leads to trust in God. Burrows attests to the fact that each of these sisters has a deep trust in God. Each values the Giver more than the gifts the Giver might give. Certainly, most of us hope for some felt sense of God, but in the long term, that is not the measure of our prayer's quality nor of our relationship with God.

Harmony or Dissonance

Again, retirement's slower pace and more spacious sense of time allow us to hear our interior musing more keenly and, perhaps, with an element of surprise. In talking with a spiritual guide, we might find ourselves railing against some of what is going on within our country, the Church, or our families. As we talk, we realize that we may be angry at God for letting such things go on, for not fixing them, or for being seemingly silent. At the same time, in our conversation with others, we may naturally speak about God as one who loves and cares for us, who will not let us go! Hmmm....we catch ourselves speaking of God in a quite different way than how we personally feel! A recognition of the dissonance between our expressed image of God and our operative image of God can come to light as we talk candidly with our spiritual director. Who is God for me? Is God indiffer-

ent to our lives? Is God a kind of "puppeteer God" who relates to us capriciously, fixing life and relationships at will or not? Is God like a parent of adult daughters and sons who works with us now as partners in bringing about life, healing, hope, and love?

Changing Sources of Identity

One of the quite familiar challenges for the aging person in general is the relinquishment of one's job. In the American culture particularly, our public achievements play a major role in defining our identity and worth. Another wonderfully wise book, *Transitions*, by William Bridges, offers great insight and wisdom about these betwixt and between stages of life. Based on the work of anthropologist Victor Turner, Bridges mines the notion of the liminal time, the time between one thing and another. He suggests that this "in between time" is filled with wisdom if we can be patient and trust that we will discover a deeper wisdom than we have ever known before.

In religious life, our experience of transitioning from active ministries that have shaped and steered our days for a long time to the new stage of retirement can be challenging. Faced with less responsibility,



Left, Nance O'Neil, RSCJ, reflects during the RSCJ United States - Canada Province Assembly. Nance was the first Provincial of the United States Province, and founder of the RSCJ mission in Indonesia.

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we may experience questions such as “what am I contributing?” or “am I needed at all?” or “how do I measure my worth now?” In this liminal time, we are moving from role to soul. “Soul wisdom” is needed in our world as never before! The quiet, the space, the waiting and listening are conditions for discovering new and deeper life.

Sacred Work Ahead

It is a marvel to believe that God is this close to us; that God has been teaching us and loving us all along the way. And now the days are shortening. Now, perhaps our most sacred work faces us. Now, our call is to prepare our souls to let go into the heart of God. The unknown can be frightening, but a life given to God all along is the most precious gift we have to give.

I want to close with a touching and consoling reflection that one of the women in my community wrote in 1996 during her final year of life. Margaret Williams, RSCJ, was also the author of *Saint Madeleine Sophie: Her Life and Letters*. She wrote:



“Old age for me at least, has proved to be Mount Tabor. It has taken ninety years for us, the Lord and I, to climb this far; but now we are sitting down at last, by ourselves, very near the top. The view is glorious, a whole lifetime of the Lord’s goodness, seen in perspective. We have come to this high place to pray together; the world is sorely in need of prayer.

And now He is showing me something of what He really is; He has become transfigured before me. He is wearing His earthly garments, but they are shining with unearthly whiteness. His face is radiant; His eyes are fixed on me as though I mattered. He is speaking to His Father who, unseen in a bright cloud, calls Him ‘beloved Son.’ Is the bright cloud the Holy Spirit? Life has become Trinitarian.

Two friends have suddenly joined us: Madeleine Sophie and Philippine. That shows that heaven is not far away. He tells me not to be afraid and touches me. It is good to be here, but He will not let me pitch tent. We must wait under the stars for a time, until He tells us to stand up and set off for the last short climb to the door of Home. It has begun to open.”

*Left, Margaret Williams, RSCJ, (1902—1996) was a Professor of English and authored several books, including *The Society of the Sacred Heart: History of a Spirit*.*

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From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

We're delighted to share with you our final issue of *Engaging Aging* for 2025. Our writer, Barb Quinn, RSCJ, has done a wonderful job of exploring the "contours of aging and gift of spiritual wisdom," emphasizing the importance of seeking a spiritual guide who can companion one in life's journey.



The timing of this invitation to pause for reflection, to seriously consider our spiritual lives, seems especially valuable now as Advent is upon us. Barb's article sent me in search of an old Christmas card that was made by the Carmelites in Reno, NV. I shared its message with you in 2014, but it seems worth repeating now.

"If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things...
If we consider ourselves so unimportant
that we fill every moment of our lives with action,
when will we have the time
to make the long slow journey
across the desert as did the Magi?
Or sit and watch the stars, as did the shepherds?
Or brood over the coming of the child
as did Mary?
For each one of us,
there is a desert to travel,
a star to discover,
and a being within ourselves to bring to life."

*Please join the staff of the
National Religious Retirement Office
as we continue to give thanks this Christmas
for the generosity of our many
friends and benefactors.
We pray that the birth of the Christ Child will
bring peace and joy to your life and to our
world throughout the coming year.*

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