

## **A Spirituality of Aging in Religious Congregations**

**Contemporary men and women have few role models for aging. We need voices/models that speak to the soul. Jane Pretat**

By Janet Malone, CND

### **Introduction**

Do you have a belt around your waist? Are you being led where you prefer not to go? Each of us is very familiar with the scripture passage from John 21:15-19, that might be a metaphor for aging, specifically aging in religious life. Intellectually, we know that aging is normal; we see it all around us and the cycle of the seasons shows us this natural rhythm. So why do so many of us chafe at the belt of aging? Why do so many of us deny our personal life pilgrimage to death and Mystery and even more so, this life cycle in our congregations? There are so many terms for the journey that each of us is on, our pilgrimage from life to death. How often do we hear that there are two experiences we have alone, the arrival into, and departure from this life. For both, it is a sense of learning to say both hello and goodbye. Indeed, we have heard often in our congregations when we moved around for our ministries, that unless we know how to say and ritualize our goodbyes, we never really learn to say hello. Why? Unless, we can live into the loss of the known, and often times, the secure, we have not released that space in our hearts where we can put out into the deep of the unknown and untried in both relationships and our way of life. The belt around our waist.

It is very difficult to embrace any aspect of our personal and congregational lives that we have been taught to deny, or at least ignore. From this perspective, we as religious, have not been prophetic about this particular aspect of our life-death journey because everything we see, read and hear is about eternal youth. Look at the billion dollar cosmetic industry that hoodwinks us into believing we are still young with dyes, nips, tucks, extreme diets and exercise. From a holistic perspective, we know that it is important to take care of our physical, psychological and spiritual health at any age so we know that a balance in diet and exercise is critical. Aging is not about going to seed, or going to pot. We know that life expectancy has increased so a spirituality of aging is all about aging in healthy and holistic ways. Yet, we are reminded that talking about aging is sort of frowned upon. "We can't really let go in public or celebrate an aging process we've learned to abhor. Yet we know instinctually that change is in our bodies, in our daily activities, and in our dreams (Pretat, 1994, 17).

Herein, we look at different aspects of a spirituality of aging in both ourselves and in our congregations. We admit to the hellos and goodbyes, the births and the deaths, the holding on, the letting go. We have a challenge before us because everything in our culture and in the culture of religious life denies, for the most part, the reality of aging, diminishment and dying. To begin, what do we do with the numbers?

## **Aging: A Question of Numbers, Stages, Theories**

In 1982, the United Nations organized the First World Assembly on Aging in Vienna. At that time, the elderly made up 8% of the world population with a projection of 10% in 2000. In 1999, we celebrated the International Year of the Elderly with a focus on their human capital contribution to the economy and social life, mainly through volunteering. Then, in 2002, the Second World Assembly on Aging was held in Madrid. At that gathering it was noted, "In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, old age was but a footnote. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is to become the main theme" (Stockman, 2007, 124).

How often do we hear that aging is a normal process moving from birth to death? Because ageism with its dismissal of older people and the concomitant push to hide our age is so prevalent in our society, we are afraid of aging. This is the main issue. Remember, the first gray hair, the first wrinkle, the staying at 39 forever? Today, aging has many appellations including, the second half of life (50 years ff), the Golden Age, and the Third Age, the boundary between 45-75 years (First Age: young years, Second Age: work years, Fourth Age: frailty, dependency).

Old age also has been divided into three stages: young-old (65-74 years), old-old (75-84 years) and oldest-old (85 years ff). In addition, some have postulated theories of aging. For example, in the **Developmental Theory** of aging, we begin at birth, then childhood, school years, teenage years, work/professional years, adult years of vocation/life choice (single, married, religious, priest/brother), retirement/elder years, and from there to death. In this theory, we negotiate the developmental tasks of each period in our lives. The **Activity Theory**, as it connotes, is our staying active with all our familiar ways of doing as long as is possible. The **Wear and Tear Theory** postulates that our bodies wear out with stress and living. The **Disengagement Theory** focuses a slowing down and a disengagement from most of our former outer life in order to "... gain more time for introspection ..., thus giving (ourselves) permission to proceed with inner tasks" (Pretat 1994, 63). For the most part, our daily lives are driven, determined and manic so that anything other than this madness is considered depression!

## **Elders Increasing**

In a culture focused on being young and looking young, there are no real guidelines for how to age in wisdom, age and grace. It would seem that there are variations on the denial theme in religious life. Kubler-Ross' stages of dying come to mind: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Not linear, these stages are present in their various manifestations in too many of our congregations because of our fear that our congregations will die. This denial is antithetical to the reality that all religious groups follow the life cycle pattern as outlined by Cada et al (1985), of birth/beginnings, expansion, stabilization/institutionalization, breakdown/diminishment, with the final stage focused on refounding or restorationism or minimal survival/dying. Why then are we concerned about aging in religious congregations if we truly believe that consecrated life will always be but that models change as we read the signs of the times?

Our culture extols youth, looking young and vibrant. Many of us shy away from stating that we are aging or that our congregations are diminishing, even dying. Years ago in our congregations, we seemed to have a better sense of aging when we were multi-generational groupings. Some of us were called "the young nuns" and others, the

“old nuns”. Now, with few vocations and the ones who do join us (a number, just for a time), are older and have had other lifestyles. Today, the average age in many congregations, both apostolic and monastic, is 75+ years, moving quickly to 80 years. Granted in the developed nations, with better diet, exercise, medical expertise and health care, life expectancy has increased and many are living much longer, some into their late 90s and indeed, their 100s. It has been reported that centenarians are expected to increase in the next decade, with more women in this age group than men. In part, we read, “New census data shows... a higher proportion of seniors than ever before— a development that has crept up on society with far-reaching implications for health, finance, policy and everyday family relationships” (The Guardian, May 15, 2012, A7).

### **Which Season?**

Sometimes, when we are at a point of not knowing where we are going, the use of metaphor and analogy can help us in such in between times. It seems this is the case for many of us and our congregations regarding a spirituality of aging. One such metaphor is The Medicine Wheel of our native peoples. Based on the directions and the seasons, it can help us come to grips with where we are both personally and communally in our life journey. We begin in the east, the birth and springtime of life where the world is our oyster. Everything is new and full of possibility; we explore our own potential physically, psychologically, spiritually in these years. In the south, the summer of life, we are at the height of our adult years, in so many ways, in the bloom of our lives. Then we move to the west and harvest time of fall, a time in which we reap what we have sown. We are past our prime now and are moving in all ways from a chronos directed time to more of a kairos time of retirement, more time for contemplation, more of our inner, soul work. Then we move on to the winter and dying time of our lives in the north. We are readying for the last part of our journey home. To adapt T.S. Eliot’s words, we have moved from the **attachment** of the spring and summer of lives to the **detachment** of the fall season and then in the winter of our lives to a sense of **holy indifference**, that final letting go in the trusting of Julian of Norwich, “All shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well”.

### **Erikson’s Stages of Maturation**

Another way to look at our aging is to revisit Erikson’s stages of growth and maturation. In their classic bestseller, *Christian Life Patterns* (1979), husband and wife, Evelyn and James Whitehead detail Erikson’s last three stages of maturation: intimacy, generativity and integrity within a Christian perspective of aging. They invite us to explore our aging not just within the proverbial chronos time of regularity and control but the transformative kairos time of Mystery in which we are invited into the unknown: letting go, letting be, letting come. They note, “It is not easy to be old.... It is an affront to one’s self image, a deterrent to one’s plans, and a general inconvenience to society” (179).

To look at these stages within a spirituality of aging in religious congregations breathes new life into them. Now, in this second half of life, we view intimacy personally and communally as a mutuality of cooperation, community and group solidarity. With a more supple sense of who we are, we are more empathic with others and are more willing to be influenced by them in concrete ways in our lives. In these twilight years, we are mellowed, ripened in the seasons of life. Generativity in these years is all about fostering new life in ways we were too busy to even conceive years back. With our drivenness for

success (Saviour complex?) more balanced, we are able to foster community in which we live more of the servant leadership Jesus modelled in the washing of his disciples' feet. Integrity at this age and stage is all about a living into how each individual life has unfolded and how each congregation has come to this moment. It is all about how we forgive and allow opportunities for forgiveness, and reconciliation when it is possible.

## **Purpose of Aging**

There is a purpose to aging for all groups in society. It is that time of making better sense of our lives now that we are out of the fray. We resonate with the saying, "We live life forwards but understand it backwards". It is that time in our lives where we have the leisure to reflect on the good and the enough in our lives. In consecrated life, what are the goals for these years, both personally and congregationally? Throughout these reflections, the invitation is to ponder the purpose of aging and what a spirituality of aging would look like for me and the congregation of which I am a member. Undoubtedly, each of us in the second half of life has noted changes in ourselves, physically, mentally, psychologically and spiritually. Perhaps, we can reiterate the line of the song, "The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be..., many long years ago."

Physically, we have our aches and pains, we may be less agile and some of us may have chronic diseases. Mentally, we notice our forgetting, particularly names (anomia which really begins in our early 40s!) which we know as well as our own, but can't retrieve when we want them. Others of us may have the beginnings of dementia, the most common of which is Alzheimer's. Psychologically/Socially, we live into the loss of certain relationships, particularly through retirement and death. Spiritually, we may experience a certain ennui, a certain acedia because this is the season we are called to be more than do, to be more contemplative. However, if in our active ministries, we "got our prayers in" and never really learned about the desert of contemplation and mysticism, we may experience a sense of "Is this all there is?" One of the main telltale signs in congregations is our selective memory of the good old days when we thought we were in control. In fact, it has been suggested that "religious tend to live in the past and not the present" (Stockman 2007, 11).

Each of us knows deep down that there will always be some form of consecrated life because of its ideals of giving all for God. Today, more than ever before, if we are going to be countercultural, we are called upon to be prophetic. In what ways? We need to move beyond the stages of dying (denial, bargaining, anger, depression) the aging, diminishment and dying happening to us both personally and collectively and accept this reality. Then, we will have freed up our energy to work proactively toward developing a spirituality of aging in our congregations. What would it look like?

## **A Spirituality**

First, spirituality (Latin: *spirare*) is about the breath, the spirit, the deepest meaning of our lives. We are called to look at spirituality as integral to us as our breath, both of which we were born with. Spirituality is a life gift, one that can be explored, nurtured and deepened over our entire lives. In contrast to religion, which is about the externals, the rites, the dogmas of our lives, spirituality is about that inner journey of finding ultimate meaning in an integration of the fragmented strands of our lives. Spirituality is about going deeper, going inward, letting go, letting be, letting come the great Mystery of God.

“Spirituality concerns an ancient primal search for meaning and (is) an inherent energy” (Malone, 2007, 40). The fruits of spirituality are numerous, including love, patience, joy, kindness, self-control and faithfulness. These fruits develop and mature over a lifetime of moving inward. Having set our parameters for aging, and spirituality, let’s look at some qualities of a spirituality of aging.

## **A Spirituality of Aging**

### **Doing and Being**

***We aren’t seekers at all; we are the sought. Barbara Fiand***

Our vocation as religious is that lifelong commitment of ourselves to God. At the time of our profession, we committed ourselves to God, first and foremost. That is our mission, a mission which never changes, no matter our age and stage. The charism in which we live this mission is the particular gift that each congregation offers to the people of God, be it within an apostolic, monastic or missionary ministry. In our aging years, when we are no longer involved in ministry 24/7, we are called to the ministry of being in which we learn anew what it means to be.

Because we were taught that we are what we do, some major identity questions arise as we become old. Who am I when I pass from doing to being? Who am I when I am nothing other than who I am? Who am I when I am no longer what I used to do? In the beginning of this transformation, I move into the desert experience akin to Jesus’ temptations where he dealt with the kenosis, the emptying out of the false self of power, possessions, prestige.

What makes this kenosis very difficult is the lack of understanding in many of our congregations that this time of aging in our lives is blessed time and not a time for feeling guilty if we are not working all the time. In effect, this kenosis is about finding a much better balance in our doing and being with allowance for more contemplative time of silence, stillness and solitude. This is a real challenge for most of us so we ask our leaders for a “ministry”. This so-called ministry (make-work projects?) keeps us out there and delays the inevitable facing of our demons in here.

One main goal at this time is learning to live with oneself and with a mundane daily routine without frittering it away on escapes. Escapes dull our pain, our boredom, and oft times, we overuse/abuse travel, shopping, TV, gambling, novels, smoking, drinking as ways to escape the present. However, we read, “A person with an inner sense of their own identity and goal in life has a high tolerance of daily routine, an inner strength to face the desert” (Cummings, 1978, 40).

There is a Zen saying that the zazen (zen master) sits for the universe. One of the biggest contributions we religious can make to a spirituality of aging is our ability to be, to be quiet, to be still, just to be and in this being to be gradually stripped of our need for possessiveness, control, and power. This is in no way a quietism but rather a rich sense of the journey inward where God awaits us. But first, we have to quiet all our fretting about wasting our time, not being useful. Learning how to sit in silence, solitude and stillness takes learning because for many of us we quickly “said” our prayers (got them “in”) and now, we are called to contemplatively “be” our prayer. Not easy for many of us.

Not much has been written about the ministry of being. As noted above, this is not an either/or. Rather it is more of a both/and but now with a shift in emphasis. Now, we focus our prayer, contemplation time as a time of receptivity rather than activity. Barbara Fiand has written about this much needed exploration in her book, *In the Stillness You Will Know*. The ministry of being is a depth call that moves us to both personal and cosmic transformation and wholeness. "We can change humanity, society and the world simply by our sitting and changing ourselves" (2002, 82).

### **Letting Go, Letting Be, Letting Come**

Jean Paul Sartre reportedly said that our early years are "pour soi", (for self) a time of focus on externals, accumulating, rising, climbing. Our aging years are "en soi" (in, within self), a time of divesting, letting go, letting come in a rhythm of inner work. The answers must come from within....

In exploring a spirituality of aging, we are challenged to "act our age" and recognize our crossover time from accumulating to divesting. Once we cross over, we start our en soi time, a time in which we realistically come to grips with where we have been and where we are going. It is a time of letting go the past, letting go living in the past both personally and communally (notice our conversations when we get together). It is a stripping down to the essentials of who each of us is before God in the wholeness of creation. We are reminded, "Letting go of our past is one of the most difficult challenges in life" (Kalellis, 2005, 139).

What we are called to let come are our fears and regrets in order to look at them from deep within. A great deal of forgiveness of self, others and God can happen at this very special time. Why? We are taking off our masks when we move inward; we don't have to impress anyone and our God is all loving and knowing. In this time of naming our fears (the worst fear is fear itself), we are inviting ourselves to enter into the forgiveness and mercy, necessary for releasing our resentments and our wanting revenge to even the score. Forgiveness is about the choice of staying bitter or getting better because forgiveness is all about self-healing and letting go our making bile about something that happened in our past. Reconciliation might happen and it might not because it requires the goodwill and mutuality of the other; it is a mutual forgiveness. When we forgive, we self-heal. Once we have let come the hurt, the embarrassment, we let it go in order to move on.

Letting come is all about the freedom from the inside out when we have let go, as much as is possible in any given now, our fears and regrets, recognizing in gratitude all we have been given. This is the being time of ensuring we are disciplined to take the time, love and energy to nourish our inner being, our heart sense. This journey of letting go, letting come, letting be is not magic. Yes, we are committed to being in this season of our lives. However, "things may not have changed much on the surface of our lives but things change considerably in the depths of our lives... in our new beginnings..." our aging years. (Dorff, 1988, 101).

## **Driveness and Meaning**

Another aspect of a spirituality of aging is meaning. We have heard it said that we can live any now if we have meaning in our lives. In our younger years in religious life, we were very caught up in our ministries. The meaning we sought was primarily prestige and success, not just personally but in the name of our congregations. True, we were all about the peace, justice and compassion of the new reign of God but we were driven for the position and success involved in our ministries. Our younger years, whether in apostolic or monastic life, were in some ways, our heyday years. We never seemed to have enough time; we were always busy and our prayer life was “squeezed in” midst all our busyness. We had a good sense of who we were because in those days, we were what we did. Now is the season, in that fall and winter of our lives where we are challenged to come home to self, our true self. And what a challenge that can be! Because we have suppressed what we really believed and thought, the only self in these golden years is our false self of ego and hubris. A good check-in for ourselves is how often we catch ourselves telling any person willing to listen, about all the good things we did in the past. A sure sign for each of us that we don’t know our true self is this constant living in the past of our selective memories.

And now? In a spirituality of aging, we are challenged to find meaning in who we are without all these extras. No, it is not a matter of folding up one’s tent, pulling out the last pegs of our former selves and wait to die. Nor is it a matter of not having some small ministry but it must be different. No longer looking for self-worth, success and status, what we do, how we minister now comes from a truly realized sense of who we are, a self-worth that has been honed and shaped in the desert of letting go, letting be, letting come. Now should be the season of I choose to, rather than I have to....

The leaders/administrators among us have to ask ourselves whether we are any kind of model in a spirituality of aging when we are demanding aging religious to carry full-time jobs or as members, we are not content to live into a ministry of being. We have to look at keeping aging members in such full-time positions. Is this not the time to transfer these positions to qualified lay staff? And if we are not able to pay such staff, then perhaps we have to look at holding on to such positions. It is all about nurturing a new meaning in our lives about who we are and where we’re going. Can we live into the secure meaning of “I am only what people see when they look at me now.... I am only what I have prepared myself to be beyond what I did” (Chittister, 2008, 11).

## **Regrets and Forgiveness**

Each of us is too well aware that we have regrets in our lives, and perhaps we don’t want to have to deal with their underlying issues. If we keep ourselves busy, then we don’t have to really sit down and be. We don’t have to think. In a spirituality of aging, as noted above, these years are all about integration and indeed, transformation. The task before us is allowing these regrets to surface so that we can look at them with the experience and wisdom of our years. It is said that regret has two faces: regret about life choices and regret about life failures.

In a spirituality of aging in religious life, we need to look at our life choice, of a call-response to religious life. Do we have regrets about this life choice, the mystery of the call-response in which we were asked to make God our first and principal life

choice? Do we find ourselves musing about why we came and more importantly, why we stay in religious life? It is not so uncommon for our lay brothers and sisters to regret their life choices, their life partners but like us, they hang in, they stay. Why? For many of them, it's economics, fear, stability for the children. But if I have regrets about why I stayed in religious life, am I ready to look at that truthfully now and to focus any self-forgiveness critical to letting go, letting come, letting be in these last years?

The second face of regret is about life failures. No one is immune to the ups and downs of life and which one of us has not said if we knew then what we know now, we could have avoided certain of our mistakes and failures? However, that is what the experience of life teaches us: to learn from our mistakes and move on. This is the crux of both wisdom and deep inner peace: dealing with our failures, letting them go and moving on. Otherwise, we can turn ourselves into worrying and scrupulous people. One has to wonder whether it is true what some of us may have noted that people in consecrated life would appear to have more regrets and fears about their life failures and how they will be "judged" before God. A spirituality of aging invites us to transform our regrets to forgiveness and move on.

### **Fear and Gratitude**

A grateful heart is an open heart. A grateful heart is a loving heart. A grateful heart is a forgiving heart. "Gratitude keeps alive what has meaning for us and fosters our capacity to apologize and forgive" (Arrien, 2007, 78). An important transition in our aging is to transform our fears of loss to new beginnings, to a metanoic stance of gratitude. It is just so freeing when I can accept who I am now without all my masks. Learning to be grateful is grace, gift and process. Well aware, that for most of our lives, we didn't feel we were enough, we didn't do enough, we became dissatisfied and our fears and regrets multiplied. It was a natural next step to feel ungrateful. Why? Our fears took over and we became critical with the imperfection of life, given we were ingrained with always straining for more in our "life of perfection".

Now is the time to move from such dissatisfaction to a life stance of gratitude in which grace and gift are the cornerstones. We can begin by learning anew how to feel and express our thanks, our appreciation for even the smallest aspects of our lives. Gratitude involves satisfaction with life, with oneself, with one's congregation and with the world. I am enough. I am good enough. I have enough. "Ingratitude lies at the root of our difficulty in loving God beyond guilt and in loving others freely" (Leddy, 2002, 61).

Because many of us live the adage of "returning the favour", we find it difficult to give without counting the cost. Each of us has met grateful people who exude the "enoughness" of this here and now, people who give and do generously with no implied sense of having the favour returned. I only have to think of my own mother as a model of this generosity and gratefulness. When we learn to be grateful and gracious, we come to a new understanding of the divine nature of God's unconditional love for us.

### **Loneliness and Solitude**

St. Augustine reminds us, that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. What does this mean? To be lonely is to be alone but not contented with this state. There is a

sense of restlessness, isolation, and even rejection or abandonment. To be lonely means I don't have a place of so-called security, a place where I can be myself, a place where I am accepted for who I am in my essence without all the masks.

Everyone of us is lonely to a greater or lesser degree. Loneliness is not all bad. In fact, loneliness tells me something about me, tells me that I am my best self in relationship. Loneliness reminds me that no one of us is an island; we need others in our lives. Ultimately, as a person of faith, loneliness reminds me of my burning desire to be united with God. Loneliness is about our desire for depth, for union. "Pray that your loneliness may spur you towards finding something (Someone) to live for, that's great enough to die for" (Dag Hammarskjold as quoted in Rolheiser, 2004, 129).

Recognizing loneliness as part of our lives, it seems in this desert stripping of loneliness to solitude, we realize its necessity in a spirituality of aging. Loving others without the security of attachment, without possessiveness, necessitates our coming home to the searing loneliness that is part of consecrated life. No, our life doesn't have a "patent" on loneliness but our life is the vocation in which we vow that God, that Mystery in our lives will be our sole "attachment".

We know that our lifestyle is ripe for both intense loneliness and ancillary selfishness. We compensate for our loneliness in many different ways, the most obvious of which is how we become overly attached to our family of origin. This can look differently for each of us, depending on such factors, as physical proximity, age and stage of life. The bottom line is no one of us likes to experience loneliness and our models of community living (common life or apartment living) have not addressed this issue directly. The sad result is a great deal of "vocational" loneliness in our lives. One way that it is handled is for us to live near our families and to spend important occasions with them. We might ask ourselves whether it has become a norm that such occasions in our congregations are scheduled around family commitments.

In a spirituality of aging, we are challenged to embrace our loneliness in ways in which we can withstand the silence and stillness so that over time, we transform it into solitude. It becomes a matter of being comfortable with our own company rather than covering it over in our different escapes, including the newest addictions of IT technology: surfing the net, being on Facebook, tweeting, texting, talking on mobile/cell phones, skyping. As we age, we recognize our restlessness; we recognize that the psychological and emotional aspects of aging are in some ways more difficult than its physical aspects. Part of being a pilgrim on our journey "home", is embracing our solitude as time for more in-depth contemplation, reflection, lectio divina. The bottom line is there are no short cuts to solitude; we have to go through the letting go of our attachments to people and things. A commitment to solitude requires a great deal of patience and starting anew each day. We know we are coming home to solitude when "...we feel less compulsive and driven, less restless and frenzied, less greedy and possessive... Perhaps we feel really free" (Rolheiser, 2004, 168).

## **Leisure and Contemplation**

Is it your sense that we are afraid of free time, of leisure in religious life? Was our badge of pride that religious never retire; they burn out rather than rust out? Perhaps we are well aware of religious in their mid-80s who are still working full time and are proud to let

others know about it. Perhaps we are also aware that others, retired with a pension, may feel entitled to “put their feet up”. Does either example focus aging for us religious as gift for more balance between doing and being, outer work and inner work? Aging is not an end-of-life sentence but rather a golden opportunity to come home to our true selves, dispensing with the ersatz of hubris and ego.

Such kenosis and metanois require time, leisure time. When we speak of leisure, we may associate it with laziness, dissipation, wasting our precious time (remember, “time is money”).

We may have learned to mistrust anything that we haven’t worked for. In fact, this is the season of our lives for nurturing our contemplative, mystical yearnings. Was it Jung who referred to this time in our lives as our contemplative season? Learning to be requires time and leisure, being contemplative requires time and leisure. According to Scott Peck, if we wish to be more contemplative, we need much more solitude; we need to learn how to withdraw from life’s busyness. (1995, 90)

What is leisure? Perhaps not what we think... We may think of leisure as rest, a restorative for our fatigue from work or even a well-earned compensation or vacation. Leisure does not exist as an antidote to work. Rather, leisure, in its true sense, is about becoming whole as a human being, becoming integrated. “Leisure is a mental and spiritual attitude..., a condition of the soul..., an attitude of non-activity, inward calm, and silence. Leisure means not being busy but letting things happen. Leisure is a form of silence, the soul’s capacity to steep oneself in the whole of creation.... Leisure is a contemplative attitude, not active intervening but openness to everything... Leisure is letting oneself go.... Leisure is only possible when a person is at one with self.” (Pieper, 1963, 40, 41).

In other words, if we want to be true mystics, full of awe and wonder in living the gracious gift of this. Now, we have to take time and cultivate leisure. Being a contemplative, being a mystic requires our moving from the chronos clock time to a more open-ended kairos time of mystery, letting go. Contemplative life is closely linked to the notion of leisure. “To achieve leisure is one of the fundamental powers of the human soul.” (Pieper, 1963, 449).

In this contemplative leisure, we give ourselves “permission” to let go of our book prayers (getting them in), to move away from discursive, kataphatic prayer to more apophatic transconceptual prayer of being, being in the silence, being in Mystery. We don’t watch the clock; we turn our vision inward to the faith-blindness of God within. In so doing, we cultivate that mystical eye of wonder and awe of God in all beings, in all creation.

The question then becomes how can we not take more leisure time? There is a justice aspect to leisure as we have been exploring it. Leisure goes hand in hand with contemplation, mysticism, transcendence. Leisure must be embraced because it stands for that poetic wonder beyond the utilitarian of our lives. And what better way to start than ensuring we honour a day of sabbath each week, a time when we pray and play, rest and remember. We commit ourselves, in the spirit of the Jewish shabbat to this special kairos time in which all unnecessary work (each of us knows what those aspects are in our lives) is put aside. I ask myself on each sabbath whether what I am doing on this day of rest could be done on any other day, could wait. Often, we treat our sabbath

like a regular work day because we can't stand the quiet and stillness. "Remember, keep holy the sabbath day".

## **Mystery and Wisdom**

In the end, a spirituality of aging is all about the wisdom to "know the difference" as noted in the serenity prayer. Over many years, each of us has accumulated lots of information (facts and trivia) and some of that may have been transformed to knowledge (facts and trivia honed in the "school of hard knocks") but wisdom? Wisdom is a gift, a grace; we can't acquire it as such but if we are blessed, it somehow roots in us. We recognize its gift through the heart landscapes of others who quietly say to us on one or other occasion, "You are so wise." This wisdom time is not about holding on to the past but taking from its information and knowledge the prophetic wisdom as elders passing on a gift to future generations.

Wisdom is so tied into mystery, the mystical of our lives, that time in our lives where we have become free of the confines of social rigors, personal needs and public roles. It is that graced time when we come home to the mystery that old age frees us from ourselves in which we are open to life evolving rather than our trying to control it. "In our life we have learned to deny the right of the unexpected, the mysterious... (Chittister, 2008, 76). In our spirituality of aging, when we create that sacred space of leisure, that Now of openness, we somehow experience the thin moment, the thin space of mystery, the mystical in the warm breath of Mystery. And somehow, in a flash of wisdom, we know the difference. "Our goal now is to be what we have discovered about life" (Chittister, 2008, 125).

## **Crossing Over and Death**

### **Personal Death**

For so many years, our own personal death has been an intellectual assent. Now, as we continue to age, we realize that we have lived many more years than we have remaining, even with the stats for increased life expectancy. Even with our faith in the belief of death as a transformation to new life, we still don't know about it. We hear things about going down a long tunnel toward the light, toward God, but in our gut, we still don't know. Despite the marriage of science and religion and even John Paul II's papal statement back in the late 1990s, that within the parameters of the new story of creation, heaven and hell are not physical places but states of being, still we don't know. We don't know because no one has come back to "reassure" us. No doubt many of you have read Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Do you remember the line that Morrie stated on one of Mitch's visits? Moving steadily toward death, Morrie told Mitch... "The truth is... once you learn how to die, you learn how to live" (1997, 82). Something worth pondering.

How important then it is for us in consecrated life to be a model of waiting in hope for what is to come when we die. After our years of a life dedicated to God alone, are we able to accentuate, in a spirituality of aging, the normalness of death in the life cycle?

Of course, to be peaceful about our own death doesn't start on our deathbed. It is a grace and a daily letting go, letting be, letting come.

I remember in the days of formal retreats of the month in my congregation and in our annual retreats, we were encouraged to "pray for a happy death". Over the years, I have reframed that admonition to praying for an acceptance of my own death, a death that can be peaceful from the inside out as my body; mind and spirit prepare to take leave of this way of being for the transformation in eternal life. In accepting my own life as I have been gifted, its culmination is acceptance of my own death. To help prepare, I have taken time in the life of leisure and contemplation as explored herein, to determine and put in writing how I want to be celebrated in death. Have you put in writing your wishes for a mourning ritual, departure liturgy, favourite songs, chants, prayers, poems from which your congregation, family and friends can choose? This is all part of a spirituality of aging. Making these wishes known and available for when that time comes, is our affirmation that yes, I was born, and yes, I will die. "The recognition of death, my own death, can liberate my concern for life.... The final acceptance of my own life is the acceptance of my death as its finite boundary" (Whiteheads, 1979, 193).

### **Congregational Death**

Likewise, a spirituality of aging demands of us to look at the life-death cycle in our religious congregations. As many realize, speaking of our congregations dying is basically anathema. We know the life cycle of any group, we recognize its stages as noted earlier, but some of us conclude, perhaps in our denial and fear, that life seasons and cycles are for other religious groups, not ours.

Tied into this very prickly question of congregational dying is the topic of vocations. Yes, we know that consecrated life is a gift, a call-response that is wedded to the signs of the times. Yes, we know that such a life will always exist but do we know, can we accept that such a call may not be within the present models of religious life most of us are now living? We know the statistics about our diminishment in numbers, the increase of our average age to 75+ years, yet we hold on to putting personnel and financial resources into attracting women and men to our ranks, to this model we are living. We know the numbers and retention rate of those who may come. Do we have the wisdom to know the difference between holding on with gritted teeth and letting go in faith, hope and trust? Is this our last hold out on control in our declining years? Some congregations have had the wisdom to let go, let be, let the Spirit come, awaiting in hope for the models of consecrated life, reflecting these signs of these times.

We seem to think that accepting the reality of the life-death cycle of our congregations is the final straw, the ultimate admission of defeat. We seem to think that such acceptance means admission that somehow we have not been faithful that somehow we have failed, that all we have been and done was for naught. In a spirituality of aging, this could be our greatest challenge: letting go, letting be, letting come. No one of us wants to see our congregations die but we are not the first and this normal cycle of seasons started before us and will continue long after us. Again, the serenity prayer is very evocative of our congregational desire for wisdom: God grant me the serenity to change the things I can, accept the things I cannot change and the wisdom to know the difference.

## Conclusion

A spirituality of aging in consecrated life has been the focus of these reflections. Having looked at the statistics of aging today, including aging in our congregations, I have highlighted only some of the myriad possibilities of the qualities such spirituality might entail. My invitation to each of you, as you read these reflections, is to take the leisure-contemplation to write your own personal and congregational spirituality of aging. Remember as you ponder and write, “the belt around your waist”.

## Resources

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