



Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 10, 2011 A

GRACEFUL AGING

GETTING COMFORTABLE IN LIFE'S LATTER STAGES

The following article by Sr. Leonette Juengst, a Notre Dame Sister, appeared in the April edition of the Liguorian Magazine. Consider sharing it with all who you think would benefit from reading it.

Suddenly the year is 2011, the body is sixty-eight, the mind is beginning to have moments of forgetfulness, but the soul is still yearning for God. This awareness is common to many searching for meaning in life when life seems to be gradually coming to its conclusion. ***But wait—so much more living needs to be done!***

Those who are spiritually alive see something new breaking into their lives, even as other parts diminish. “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice in it and be glad” (Psalm 118:24). Yes, this is the day, not yesterday. Today is a day of possibilities, a day to embrace life and the healing it holds. It is about an attitude of acceptance: seeing God in the midst of life as it unfolds. The God above, below, around, beneath...the God who “knit me in my mother’s womb” and continues to form me in each stage of life.

The call to live life according to the gifts God has given is a lifelong challenge. Spirituality is about the fullness of life promised by Jesus and given to us by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads us to ponder the depths of our hearts and, through our experiences, realize our call to holiness in the midst of our aging. Our spirituality isn’t just about going to church, synagogue, temple, or mosque. Tied to our life of faith, our spirituality has to do with how we find meaning in what happens to us throughout our lives.

To find meaning and flourish through all of life’s challenges, we have needs that ought to be met. Whether we consider ourselves a spiritual or religious person, our basic needs are the same: the need for meaning and purpose; the need to give and receive love; and the need for forgiveness, creativity, and hope. Meeting these spiritual needs helps us see the spiritual journey in the context of our humanness. God has created us with emotions and feelings that can present surprising

challenges even as we face physical illness and diminishment.

The **need for meaning and purpose** in life is crucial for an aging person. Why get out of bed in the morning? Does anybody really care if we show up? Finding meaning in what we do each and every day helps us find purpose in our lives and a reason to get up each morning. It nourishes the spirit. Many activities can help nourish the spirit, if only we are willing to try them. Volunteering gives one a sense of purpose. Spending time assisting someone else on any given day indicates life does have meaning no matter how small or great the commitment may be. The gifts each person has are to be shared in the service of God’s people.

The **need to both give and receive love** keeps the world as well as each individual in balance. To turn inward on ourselves can be devastating. Focusing on our aches and pains simply causes more aches and pains. If depression strikes when experiencing loss—both of loved ones and of our own mobility and health—it may be helpful to pick up the phone and call a family member, a friend, or a fellow parishioner. Jesus walked on this earth to demonstrate how all people are to love one another. Nurturing friendships, delighting in family, and cherishing being loved will enable sadness and suffering to dissipate—and will nourish the spirit.

The **need for forgiveness, creativity, and hope** is an essential part of learning to accept ourselves, even in our diminishment, and to love ourselves and others. We live in a society in which retaliation is the norm. Revenge rather than forgiveness becomes the action of choice. But anger and bitterness only lead to more depression. Knowing how to forgive frees people to accept and love others and themselves. Freed of past hurts, each person can live in peace now and have a great sense of hope for the future. To nourish the spirit, let go and let God!

These spiritual needs are essential to the human experience. Even if only one of these needs is lacking, spiritual distress arises. A helpful practice at the beginning of the week is to assess what you can do to help meet these spiritual needs. Make a list of the things you are going to do to help find meaning and purpose in daily life, of the people you are going to love, and of the people you are going to forgive or of whom you are going to ask forgiveness.

Faith: Stages of growth through the later years

Life is often on an even keel until old ways of thinking and believing are challenged by new experiences. We can really believe that God loves us until we suffer a stroke or a heart attack. Where is God in our losses, in our diminishment? Our spirituality affects how we feel and even act when confronted with conflicts or barriers, and influences whether a disability is seen as an insurmountable mountain or a new challenge.

James Fowler, who has written much on stages of faith formation, has found that as people age, they go through different expressions of faith. There is no cookie-cutter approach to understanding the life of the spirit, but these principles can help in understanding the growth and development of faith through the later years. While some people are quite comfortable in one stage, others feel challenged to move into another stage of growth as they are. Many people will find qualities of themselves in each of the stages, while others will see themselves mostly in one stage.

“I know what I believe, don’t bother me with new ideas.”

People in this stage understand what they believe and seek to live by their beliefs. Doing God’s will is their guiding principle. They feel no need for doubt or worry because they are in the hands of the One who will care for them. Even when faced with challenges, these individuals exhibit little internal struggle. A person in this stage might find comfort in the familiar prayer of the rosary.

“I am open to exploring other attitudes toward faith and new ways of thinking.”

Another approach involves a willingness to explore other ways of thinking, new approaches to belief, and new options for living a life of faith in prayer and action.

Old beliefs provide comfort and consistency, enabling people to trust that God loves and cares for them and is in charge. At the same time, those in this stage allow themselves to ask, “Why is this happening to me?” Finding someone to listen to them and walk beside them in their struggle is important, but looking for answers is not as essential to them as having someone help them make sense of their experiences. A person in this stage might find comfort in 2 Corinthians 6:1-10.

“I am continually seeking new approaches to faith.”

Another stage of faith development involves reflection and a continual state of learning and seeking. Individuals in this stage know what they believe, yet they also admit others’ beliefs are valid and can be helpful in their struggles. This stage is characterized by the understanding that God doesn’t give us a challenge

without also giving us the strength and grace to cope with it. As people in this stage deal with the illnesses that come with aging, they tend to look at the resulting possibilities. They see life as a journey and learn to wait patiently for God to guide them; they are open and receptive to the voice of God. A person in this stage might find comfort in listening to reflective music while praying the Scriptures.

“I am comfortable with my beliefs and am mostly concerned with the needs of others.”

The final expression of faith is found in those who are comfortable with their own beliefs as well as the beliefs of others and who focus on the needs of the broader community. For these people, a sense of unity and inner peace results from being other-centered. It is imperative, however, for people in this stage not to lose sight of their own physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. Because they tend to be full of energy, others are often attracted to them. This can be draining as well as rewarding. A person in this stage, because he or she desires to be of service to others, might find Matthew 25:31-46 a source of comfort and prayer.

Steps to aging gracefully

Struggle, woundedness, naming, blessing are stages of the spiritual journey that many people experience. No clear-cut margins define the beginning and end of each stage. Feelings of depression and hopelessness rise and fall throughout. But being open to receiving love and help from others brings the healing and peace each person needs.

During the aging process, it is helpful to name our struggles, our woundedness, but also the blessings that can come in embracing our diminishment.

Admitting our struggles and how they have altered our life is the first crucial step in dealing with pain and diminishment. Next, confronting the internal struggle of conflicting ideas leads to the realization that life is not as simple and straightforward as once thought. Old patterns of thinking give way to new realities.

If woundedness is not acknowledged, paralysis sets in, and frustration, depression, anger, and guilt become the norm. Anger, resentment, and frustration are all natural feelings in coming to terms with the aging process. It is only by embracing our woundedness that we are able to move on to the next stage of naming our feelings. Otherwise, we become trapped in struggling and feel powerless in the face our woundedness.

In naming, people come to new understandings and perspectives that expand and enhance life. We are able to identify what we are struggling with and what is causing us pain and can therefore ask others for help. Reaching out for assistance in this stage is crucial to

becoming emotionally and spiritually whole. Talking through the hurts, disappointments, and sadness can be very beneficial, as it validates a person's feelings and struggles. A counselor, spiritual director, or close friend can often serve as a spiritual guide. Peace and acceptance are possible after naming one's feelings and sharing them with others.

Aging brings many struggles, but with those struggles come many opportunities for blessing. We can supply accurate details to events that happened forty years ago but can hardly remember if we ate breakfast, much less what food we ate. Our joints hurt from morning till night, curtailing our participating in the activities of loved ones. And yet our spirit feels alive and desires to continue to make a difference.

However, blessing can be experienced even when immobility, forgetfulness, and fewer coping skills severely limit our apparent usefulness. Now is the time we can most readily identify with the paschal mystery—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. How we live this stage when challenges abound will leave lasting impressions on those we encounter. Fidelity, gentle tenacity, vulnerability, and even a sense of humor will mark the legacy we leave. We continue to bless and be blessed, especially when former strengths begin to wane.

Those who are completing this journey are able to say, "What a blessing!" They look into the mirror and see a person alive with new insights, new understandings, and fresh perspectives. Life is still worth living. Christ's light still glows in their heart. They view themselves, others, and the world around them differently. Newfound courage gives them the ability to tell their story with faith and good cheer. Once we experience these steps of woundedness, struggle, naming, and blessing, we are ready to face challenges with the knowledge of a process that brings us to wholeness. We are able to age gracefully.

Those who trust Jesus' words, "I have come so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10) at each stage of life will grow into life's final chapters with grace and peace. The resulting calm will remain constant even when storms and challenges assail them. Life has taught them that we never journey alone.

Reflection questions

- What speaks to you most in the article?
- What is the greatest challenge in the aging process?
- What helps us to be more comfortable with the later stages of life?

Have a blessed week,

