

# Aging, Spirituality, and Religion

## I Aging as Pilgrimage: Spiritual Potentials of Late Life

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I choose the word "pilgrimage" instead of "journey" in the title of this chapter, although the latter is much more in use in today's literature. I do so to indicate that the life path is not only spiritual but at least to some degree an intentional path to a destination variously conceived of as a holy place, a promised land, a liberation, enlightenment, a state of being in union or wholeness, or eternal life.

As I began working on this chapter I attended a conference for spiritual directors, where Richard Rohr presented a provocative model for the life pilgrimage, serendipitously suitable to frame what I shall say. He says that the first half of life is devoted to building up the ego—learning to think, work, achieve, and (especially in modern Western culture) learning to look good.

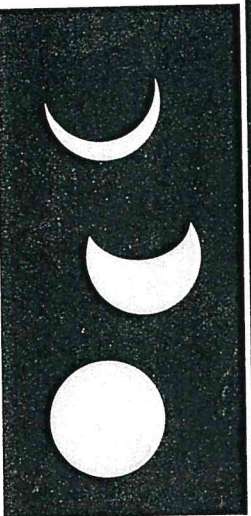
We spend many years building a "self." There is often a desperate quality to this process; we are trying to *become* "someone," and deep down inside we may wonder if we are really anything at all. The fear of exposure as "nothing" pushes us to greater and greater efforts to create what Jung calls a persona—a face that we present to the world. It is not a false face exactly, but it certainly does not include the things of which we are ashamed, those things that are "unfinished" in us, those things of which we are not even conscious (Jung calls them shadow), nor those things of which we do not think others will approve. The persona is the part of us that we assume will be successful in getting us what we want in life.

Based in part in the work of Thomas Merton (see Finley 1978), Rohr calls this the "false self" and sees it as an obstacle to authenticity, love, and spiritual wholeness. It contrasts with the "true self" which is genuinely humble, loving, and in right relationship with the Divine, with others, and with the world in which one lives.<sup>1</sup>

The journey from the false self to the true self is one way to describe the goal of the spiritual pilgrimage of late life, and becoming the true self is one way to describe the fulfillment of late-life potential. This journey is not easy. It requires a strange and paradoxical balance of effort and letting go. It involves the abandonment of early life-goals in favor of those that offer more. Bertman (1999, 12) describes this as follows:

Pursuing grand designs can be an exercise in futility; they lead us on, only to vanish before our eyes. To abandon grandiose goals, however, does not mean to live a goal-less

A H a n d b o o k



Volume 2

edited by

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life. Being fully present in each moment of time and being spiritually responsive to the presence of others and to the world around us, its need and its beauty can also be a goal and, if [those who have described it to me] are to be believed, a most worthy one.

Finally, a caveat to the reader. Although some study this topic exclusively from a scholarly perspective, unless one has wrestled with these issues for oneself, it is somewhat like learning about the sexual potential of life solely from reading Masters and Johnson. I therefore make this presentation to some degree in a personal way and encourage the reader to respond likewise.

### THE JOURNEY BEGINS AT CONCEPTION

We begin the process of aging at conception, and from the beginning the entire spiritual pilgrimage is an experience not only of gain but also of loss. In order to be born we must leave the comfort and security of the womb. In order to go to school, we must lose the comfort and security of our all-day, safe haven with our mother at home. In order to marry, we must lose the comfort and security of our status as a self-determining single being. No matter what we look at as growth, as achievement, as accomplishment, as new life, it always has a shadow side of loss. Every new birth is also a death. This is made patently visible in many cultures in that rites of passage include such symbols of death and rebirth as baptism (dying under the water and being reborn), receiving a new name, and gaining new status and rights.

We see both loss and gain most vividly and powerfully from midlife on, and especially in late life, which for many comes with a multitude of losses so far-reaching that they can be utterly overwhelming. We may lose health, friends, spouses, employment, status, residence, and many other things that we have come to think of as making up the basic core of who we are. An extensive and exquisite discussion of this "two-sidedness" of aging can be found in Kathleen Fischer's (1985) classic work on the spirituality of aging, *Winter Grace*.

If we are open to the lesson, we may discover that the basic core of who we are is *not* dependent on any of these things: material possessions, status, relationships, even our own bodies and our minds.<sup>2</sup> Our core identity is dependent not on these "accidentals" but on something deeper, which might in various cultures and religious/spiritual traditions be known as being children of the kin-dom (a gender-free term used in *The Inclusive New Testament* [Priests for Equality, 1996]), upon our living into our "Buddha nature," upon our becoming true wisdom persons. We discover this more and more if we allow ourselves to move through those losses, through the grieving of them, to be open to transformation into that true self, toward which a Higher Power is calling us.

Much has been written about the midlife crisis (e.g., Levinson 1978; Viorst 1986). One way of conceiving this crisis is as the transition point between the development of the false self and the birth of the true self. It is a time of con-

frontation with the likelihood that the dreams of greatness that we may have had as young persons will probably not be fulfilled, at least in the form we had anticipated. We have insufficient time, not enough resources, not enough of anything. In fact we, ourselves, are "not enough." We must confront and accept our finitude and ultimately our mortality. If we refuse to do this we may find ourselves going down many dead-end roads, all of which end with our becoming diminished beings full of bitterness and despair.

Erikson's (1963) classic description of ego integrity and despair is well documented in the literature and confirms Rohr's framing of the options (see also Erikson et al. 1986). Erikson has informed the thinking of many about psychosocial development and bridges the perspectives of psychologists and those who view the journey primarily as spiritual. Erikson sees the outcome of a successful negotiation of the passage to late life as resulting in wisdom, which he defines (1986) as "a detached and yet active concern with life in the face of death."

The Chinese word for crisis is formed of two symbols, one of which means "opportunity," the other "danger." This is certainly true of the midlife crisis. The danger is attempting to go on with business as usual, knowing on some level of consciousness that it is impossible to do so, and living therefore always in terror of the shadow of what is in denial. The opportunity is to allow this transformation.

### EVOLUTION OF THE TRUE SELF IS NOT INEVITABLE

Rohr (2001) observes that the life trajectory of those who choose not to acknowledge and embrace the losses of aging results in a journey to bitterness. Others have noted this as well. Margot Hover (2000, 26) finds that some people hold on to devastating life experiences and may become damaged "beyond the point where a comforting spirituality appears possible."

When I gave my first lecture on the topic of aging and spirituality some fifteen years ago I spoke among other things of the importance of forgiveness. Afterwards I was confronted by a very angry woman who shrieked at me, "If you had gone through what I have gone through you could *never* ask me to forgive!" I found myself without a helpful response and answered as gently as I could manage, "You may be right." Her choice was to hold on to her rage, and she had a right to do so, regardless of the cost. But the cost she was willing to pay consciously or not, stunned me. Years later, another woman, stuck in fresh grief over the death of a daughter some twelve years before, responded to my question, "Would you like me to help you get past your grief over Anne?" with a cryptic and final, "Not on your life!"

The evolutionary process varies, perhaps infinitely, from person to person. Sometimes people move through midlife without evidence of a real crisis. In Western culture many persons live protected lives of such affluence and health that they do not have to consciously face the sort of letting go that really tests us and leads us to make a radical commitment to the pilgrimage. If it has not come earlier,

however, late life gives such a test for all of us. For even if we are blessed to have money, power, and health, we *will* have major losses: people we love will die, get sick, change, move away, and in other ways abandon us. Opportunities will diminish. We will have to face major letting go.

Furthermore, we will be living in a world which undervalues us simply by virtue of our age. In our society, prejudice against old age is deeper, more unconscious, and more virulent than that toward any other human diversity: race, gender, nationality, religion, even sexual preference. This virulent ageism certainly adds to the stresses of late life, and to the pressures to distort normal aging by resorting to age-denying practices (such as plastic surgery), all of which work against the successful negotiation of the transition to the true self.

I do not know what makes it possible for some to move on and to accept what life does offer while others seem committed to just grieving what is not. But before detailing the beauty that is possible to the former, it seems necessary to note that the latter also occurs.

### THE GIFTS OF AGING

Even in Western culture there are some seditious pockets of folks who, at least to some degree, appreciate the gifts of aging. Among them are Jungians. One of my friends is an Episcopal priest, psychotherapist, and spiritual director who is in her sixties. When she was thirty-five her nest emptied. She felt spent, used up, useless, because her children did not need her anymore.

Just at this time she was given an opportunity to go to the Jung Institute to study psychology. As she began her studies, she met what was to become one of her primary mentors, a woman well into her eighth decade. This woman told her, "I'm not sure you are old enough to be here. It isn't until you're past forty-five that most people are ready to become whole and to explore the spiritual part of themselves. You're still a baby!" My friend was at first astonished. But this encounter led to a powerful sense of renewal; she went on to take a whole new perspective on life.

There are others who are also able somehow to resist the culture—people who have come to see the gifts of the spiritual journey that come with long travel. For if in life we are indeed on a spiritual pilgrimage, and if that pilgrimage is designed to take us to a holy destination (however it is framed), then the older we get the closer we ought to be to that place. And we come to see that primarily by looking back.

A metaphor that describes this is hiking in the mountains. When you are on your way up, you do not know what to expect. As you follow the trail, you may find yourself climbing a long hard way up, only to be forced to turn and walk almost as far (or farther) back down again. You may wonder why the trail maker did not just go straight on up. You may walk around almost in a circle and find that the waterfall you walked away from turns up again a little below you on the trail. You may

think you are almost there only to find that what you thought was the top is actually a false peak, and there is more climbing yet ahead.

But when you get to the top, you can stop and look around you, and see where you have come. You know then that the trail had to skirt a deep gorge, go over or around a ridge, and take all the twists and turns it did, if you were to arrive safely where you are. The view from the peak of years can be like that—we can find the meaning in the twists and turns, ups and downs, by looking back, and come to rejoice in the trail we have taken rather than seeing it as a curse. As we see others behind us, we can encourage them: "Keep going; you're on the right trail."

Erikson (1963, 268) says it in other words:

Ego integrity . . . is the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. . . . Although aware of the relativity of all the various life styles which have given meaning to human striving, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style against all physical and economic threats. For he knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history; and that for him all human integrity stands or falls with the one style of integrity of which he partakes.

### LIFE REVIEW AND THE MUTUALITY OF THE WISDOM GIFT

One method for looking back is life review. The lovely thing about life review is that it is useful not only for the one seeking perspective but for those coming along behind. Erikson et al. (1986) point out that the successful negotiation of the adult journey results in generativity and caring—a capacity for passing along the accumulated gifts. Two of the seminal works on life review are Butler (1963) and Kaminsky (1984).<sup>3</sup>

My own gifts from older adults, both those in my own family and those I have worked with professionally, have largely been from their sharing wisdom gained from such a perspective of many years. The members of the Yoruba tribe in Nigeria call older adults "The Wisdom People," and this has become my favorite term for the elders who have done their work.

A metaphor for human community is that we are all members of one growing thing, the elders being roots, the descendants (literal or figurative) being fruits—neither making sense without the perspective of both. Thus intergenerational exchange provides the answer to a wonderful koan: "When one hand washes the other, who knows which one is getting clean?" Let us look at some perspectives on this two-way gift of and from older adults.

Emma Lou Benignus is an Episcopal laywoman who has worked in the area of older adult spirituality for many years. I have been blessed to work with her in some educational ventures and loved hearing her talk about a workshop she ran for affluent elders in one of the southwestern towns of retirees. One man there spoke of

working in his retirement in a hospice setting, having chosen his hours to run from midnight until 8 A.M., because those were the hours when people most needed to talk and when listeners were least likely to be there. With obvious delight in his voice and demeanor, he proclaimed, "I can turn night into day, for God's sake!"

Emma Lou believes that the reason God has engineered the spectacular increase in life expectancy in the last one hundred years is because the world is so desperately in need of wisdom that God created more elders. This is a drastically different look at the explosion of older adults in the developing world than one usually sees!

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a Hasidic rabbi who teaches from a truly interfaith perspective, has done work on the transformation of late life, described in his book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (Schachter-Shalomi and Miller 1995). He proposes that elders do their spiritual work consciously in order both to find their own fulfillment and simultaneously to be a resource for the world. He calls this process "conscious aging."

Sages are needed not simply for their own sake but for the next generations. James Gambone (1999) has done work on intergenerational dialogue using all five living generations. He believes this can lead to meaningful intergenerational cooperation, and is convinced this holds the key to solving many of our nation's social problems. He sees such dialogue as having promise for bridging cultural gaps as well, for, no matter what other issues divide cultural and ethnic groups, all elders are in agreement that they want hope and a future for their grandchildren.

Although they often do not focus on the spiritual aspects of their work, there are literally hundreds of intergenerational programs springing up throughout the country, ranging from foster grandparents to university centers on intergenerational relationships to intergenerational theater projects. Generations United is a promising effort at coalition among more than one hundred national organizations working for youth and older adults. These ventures provide a variety of vehicles for understanding and engaging in intergenerational contact and cooperation that give outlet to the desire elders may have to offer their gifts and to the need juniors have for meaningful connection with their "roots." (For additional information, contact Generations Together, An Intergenerational Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh; The Center for Intergenerational Learning at Temple University; or Generations United.)

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STORY

In my professional brochure I include the following:

I believe that the greatest gift we can offer to each other is the telling of and listening to our stories. This empowers us to appropriate and live out our own stories, unifies us in diversity, and leads to reconciliation. . . . This theme of story unifies all I do: including

work with older adults and young adults (both of whom have developmental as well as spiritual needs to recover and share their stories); . . . spiritual direction (an intimate vehicle for exploring and living into one's story); and lay pastoral care training. . . .

As this indicates, I see story as being of tremendous importance. There are many others interested in the spiritual journey who share this perspective. Jean Shinoda Bolen (1994, 272-73) says:

*To bring about a paradigm shift in the culture that will change assumptions and attitudes, a critical number of us have to tell the stories of our personal revelations and transformations. . . . The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.*

The absence of models for aging with grace and wisdom is both cause and effect of the ageism in our society. The effect of this on those approaching late life can be devastating. Katie Funk Wiebe, attempting to remedy this lack, wrote her lovely spiritual autobiography *Border Crossing: A Spiritual Journey* (1995). She describes her motive as follows:

What makes the journey into old age terrifying to me is that I hear no one beyond the middle years inviting me urgently and loudly to cross the border quickly because of its splendid advantages. A little child learning to walk has admiring fans in parents, siblings, and friends, cheering every faltering step. That cheering section was missing as I began to cross into the land of the aging. And this is the reason for this book. . . . (21)

Wiebe explicitly describes how she sees the importance of story. After a visit to the Soviet Union, the place of her family of origin, she reports: "I returned with countless stories people told me about their lives. I came back with a renewed sense of the importance of story, especially for the older adult. Stories bind the generations together. Stories bring light to dense abstractions. Stories show the pattern of living. Stories assert boldly 'I am a human being'" (132). Her message can be summarized in the following way: "I wrote these things because I am convinced many older Christians . . . have lived through numerous changes, successes, and defeats in their religious life. But they hung on. . . . True faith does not become mired in obstacles. It moves through the darkness of perplexity to that stage when life becomes daily grace" (91).

## WHAT DOES THE TRUE SELF LOOK LIKE?

Rohr's (2001) description of the wisdom person (which he calls the Holy Fool) is identical for men and women, even if their journeys to that place are via different routes. "The Holy Fool 'can live with paradox and mystery, with compassion and

forgiveness . . . does not need to punish or shame others . . . can lead, partner or follow when necessary . . . has it all . . . [has gone] beyond judgments, reason and control to wisdom." What does this mean?

1. "Can live with paradox and mystery": The wisdom person realizes not only that there are grays but that there are blacks and whites that must be allowed to remain in (often painful) coexistence until truth (enlightenment) emerges. They are, like Rilke, living more in the questions than in the answers. This allows them patience with those who are caught in one side or the other of paradox, and permits a loving shrug in the face of accusation.
2. "Can live with compassion and forgiveness, does not need to punish or shame others": The wisdom person has learned (usually from painful experience) the truth that refusing to forgive is like taking poison and expecting it to kill the other person! Having lived through one's own sin, repentance and forgiveness allows one to let others into the forgiveness process as well.
3. "Can lead, partner, or follow when necessary": Some of us suffer from the need to be in charge, others from fearing a leadership role, while others prefer to cede. The wisdom person is able to assess the need that the situation and other participants have, and is inwardly free to take whatever role is needed. Ego demands are much less strident and irresistible than in earlier life.

A friend once defined humility as follows. Most of the time the camera is up close and personal; we are very much aware of the impact of everything upon us. In fact it is *all* about us! Humility on the other hand is like zooming the camera lens back, back, back to see the universe and our place in it from God's perspective. This does not mean that we ignore ourselves, our gifts, our needs—only that we hold them in proper perspective with the needs, gifts, and selves of all others. Sometimes we best "fit" by leading, sometimes by following, sometimes by partnering. From the perspective of humility, we are able to tell which is which. From the freedom from personal agendas of the wisdom position, we are liberated to do what is best. "Has it all . . . [has gone] beyond judgments, reason and control to wisdom". It is no longer necessary to follow the rules; the wisdom person has internalized the spirit of the law and acts in accord with it. It is no longer necessary to try to control; the wisdom person trusts the control of the Higher Power and is content to pay attention and follow in the Way in the dance of life.

Those of us in the Abrahamic faiths (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) hear all our lives that our purpose is to live to the glory of God. In like manner, Buddhists are called to show forth the "Buddha nature" and Hindus to reach the stage of wisdom where they can be models to others.<sup>5</sup>

However it is framed, the spiritual journey is geared to lead not only to our own growth but also to the benefit of those in community with us, especially the gener-

ations that come behind us. Sometimes this sounds simply like pretty words designed to paper over the losses and pain of aging. At other times it evokes a longing in us, to which we may or may not attend. And sometimes it becomes a ravenous desire that overwhelms everything and impels us to make a deeper commitment to the pilgrimage. This is true no matter our age. Yet the very old ones, who have done their work, show it forth in a special way. Tornstam (1994) calls this "gerotranscendence," a concept developed in another chapter of this handbook.

Turning away from the multitude of negative images of aging that assault us in the media and throughout our culture, one can aspire to become a wisdom person. So let us examine what leads to the development of someone with fulfilled spiritual potential—in other words, to the development of a true wisdom person.

In the Christian gospel there are many expressions of truth and many stories that illustrate them. Each of them bears within it seeds that might be called in today's vernacular "good news and bad news." Sometimes we hear of a kin-dom or realm (or dwelling, if you will) to which followers of the truth are invited. Whatever you call it, this is good news (the literal meaning of the word "gospel"). But this kin-dom is not of this world—it is not going to get us our fifteen minutes of fame—and so perhaps this is not such good news after all. Or think of it in terms of a pearl of great price, another of the images used in Christian Scripture (Mat. 13:45-46). A pearl, valuable beyond anything else—good news! But with a great price. Is *that* good news? We must admit that a pearl of great price is also bad news, for to grasp it we must let go of everything else within our purview. Eastern religions speak of *maya*, illusion, referring to the things that seem important in the first half of life, the things we must let go of. Paul of Tarsus had spent many years building up a persona, and in his time of enlightenment lists all his former achievements and said that he now considered them rubbish (Phil. 3:8).

A young seeker came to a Buddhist teacher asking for enlightenment. The teacher took him outside to a horse trough and plunged his face into the water, holding on to the hair on the back of his head with a powerful grip. After a moment or two of practicing "acceptance," the young seeker began to struggle, finally breaking away just before losing consciousness, and with a loud gasp took in a huge lungful of air. The teacher gently commented, "When you want enlightenment as much as you just wanted air, you will find it."

The destination of the wisdom person is often quite countercultural. The moment of recognition when previously sought goals no longer have value is called enlightenment in the East, conversion in the West, and is described in Twelve-Step programs as discovering that what one has been engaging in is "sinking thinking." This change in perspective is the demarcation of the beginning of the conscious spiritual pilgrimage.

Once this change in perspective is made, one enters the chosen path and learns to use life experience to ever more deeply surrender the superficial for the truly valuable. While it is framed in many languages and has many different tools for the journey, when one sticks to the end one becomes both blessed and blessing.<sup>6</sup>

## SOME EXAMPLES OF WISDOM PEOPLE

One might look to the Bible as one source of wisdom models. It does not much address issues of aging explicitly, but many of its stories are about older adults and are worth additional reflection. Abraham was elderly before he began his journey to the promised land, and had his child- heir in very late life; Sarah, the child's mother, was also elderly, and named the child Isaac ("laughter") because of her reaction to being told she would give birth. Moses was elderly before beginning his liberation of the Hebrew people. Perhaps these and other biblical stories of those who are full of years were offered to illustrate the need for having some years under one's belt before beginning the true pilgrimage of meaning in life.<sup>7</sup>

There are four examples of people I know personally who have made that pilgrimage and have given me models for aging with grace and wisdom. First is a ninety-year-old black woman whom I interviewed for my dissertation. She lived on the second floor of an unappealing, foul-smelling, dilapidated shack. Furthermore, I knew in advance that she was in very poor physical condition. I reluctantly walked up the steps, not wanting to be there. I left three hours later, feeling sure that I had visited in the kin-dom of God. This woman, with failing hearing and eyesight, had arthritis (so bad that she rarely got out), with little money and lots of pain, who had outlived both of her husbands and *all nine of her children*, was a woman living in the center of hope.

She said something that I will carry with me as long as I have my mind: "God keeps takin' stuff away from me, and every time he does I mourns a while, and then he fills me with more of himself!" The only way I could describe her was to say that she was marinated in God! Is there anything worth more for which to hope? She is perhaps my best example of how, in spite of loss (and, I am forced to admit, at least sometimes because of it), one can live in the kin-dom.

Another example was a ninety-nine-year-old woman, weighing perhaps eighty-five pounds, sitting in a wheelchair on a stage at the Kanuga Conference Center in western North Carolina during a conference on older adult ministry. She seemed to be in her own little world, and because her hearing was very poor, in a real way she was. (After hearing her speak, I later wondered if *that* world was not really the kin-dom.)

She came alive when someone handed her the microphone. She whipped out a small stack of three-by-five cards, and began to share with us her carefully chosen description of the spiritual pilgrimage of late life. Her basic message was "seize the day." She lived fully, enjoyed her life, still did volunteer work, and went to church. She said that the secret of her joy (and she *was* joyful beyond my powers of description) was to "find the yeses in God's noes."

Another very old woman from Tennessee granted me the favor of an interview. She too radiated that inner joy that I have come to see as a hallmark of residence in the kin-dom. I asked her to tell me what wisdom she had learned in her own aging. She said something I will never forget: "When I was young, I spent a lot of time

kicking against the goad. I have learned to accept almost anything almost instantly." I felt cold fear, and admitted, "Oh, dear, I can't even pray for that yet!" "Don't worry, Lynn," she lightly replied, "you're not yet ninety-six years old!"

Finally, let me tell you what happened when I was talking about all of this with a very wise and very old former New York City social worker, also a black woman. I told her about these people, and as she listened she nodded wisely, instantly comprehending. Her words seemed to be saying, "Oh, you are talking about the kin-dom!" She not only *knew* about it, but she had arrived there, and *lived* there.

I am discovering that there are many more people like these than I had ever dreamed might exist. If we do not see them it is because we do not look for them. Even if we should see them, we do not often listen long enough to hear them talk about the kin-dom. Ram Dass said once at a speaking engagement that the reason the world does not have more bodhisattvas, people who exist only to be of service, and who are free of their own "stuff," is that no one wants them!

Miller (1999) interviewed a number of older adults to discover what were the common elements of spiritual maturity. Some of their responses illustrate well the mind-set of the wisdom person. Here is just one example (Miller 1999, 44): "I am not afraid any more . . . because I have been loved enough by God; he has really given me a lot of gifts. There is hope for us all, if we can just quit worrying about ourselves and just let the Lord love us and try to give love back as well. . . . The day that I found out I was lovable was the day that my life was changed!"

There are distinctive characteristics that may be found in the wisdom people we meet. One is a shift not only in self-image, but in the image of God as well. A view of God as angry, judgmental, and rigid is incompatible with a view of one's self loved as is. We will discover wisdom people living in the here and now, not much in the future (and only in the past for the purposes of meaning-making and story-sharing). There is also evidence of their ability to live in the tension between self-authentication and community. On one hand, we do not need outside approval to know we are acceptable, for we find our acceptability elsewhere. On the other hand, we rejoice in sharing our vision of the pilgrimage with others on the same journey.

Thomas Kelley (1941) speaks of the community of those who seek to live in awareness of the holy. Upon meeting, they recognize each other, and find each other's company precious. Simone Weil (1973) says that there is nothing among human things with more power to concentrate the gaze ever more steadily upon God than friendship for the friends of God.

Wisdom people recognize that truth is often so large that it embraces apparent opposites. Rohr (2001) sees this capacity for living in the tension between two apparently contradictory truths embodied in the gesture of one's arms being wide open, holding opposites in tension, in a sort of spiritual and intellectual crucifixion. The Eastern mind views it as the balance of yin and yang, and there is a parallel wisdom in somewhat different language in the Jewish *cabala*. The Zen seeker looks for it in the paradox of the koan, the comprehension of which comes only with enlightenment.

Another characteristic of wisdom people is their ability to rest—to be—rather than always having to fit the American vision of “doing.” Jane Thibault (1993) compares very late life to monastic life that offers the opportunity to learn to just be. The motto might be, “Don’t just do something; sit there!” Basil Pennington (1998, 30), a Cistercian monk, speaks of this as follows:

For me the quiet hours in my recliner have indeed become more and more precious. I look forward to them and look forward to the time when I will have more of them. Why is this? Well, for one thing, they are filled with friends and friendship. Sometimes they do afford me the time to really just enjoy a friend, waste time with the friend, with no sense of something waiting to be done, of a certain restrictive limit to the time we can enjoy together. I sense this is a bit of a beginning of the joy of eternal life, just being with friends with nothing else to do.

It is not possible to *make* this process happen. But one cooperates with it. Thus, speaking of it, one uses the language of paradox: losing one’s life to find it (Matt. 10:39) or returning to the place from which we started, but seeing it as if for the first time (Eliot 1962, 145). One friend whose path includes twice-daily centering prayer (see Keating 1995) said to me that he believes the true self to be liberated by this prayer. It does not result from struggle to gain insight, but rather from letting go and trusting the Holy One to enter the deepest part of one, find and heal the wounds, and depart, leaving as evidence only the “peace that passes understanding” (Phil. 4:7). Another way to speak of it is as the dance of will and grace. Will is required simply to “show up”; grace is the part that comes to us as gift when we do. William Butler Yeats describes the strange countercultural truth of the wisdom person economically in four short lines in his poem “Sailing to Byzantium”:

An aged man is but a paltry thing  
A tattered coat upon a stick  
Unless soul clap its hands and sing  
And louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress. (1962, 95)

At the age of fifty-eight, I teeter on the brink of what I hope will lead to my becoming a wisdom person. Recently, when confronted with the illness of an aged mentor, I took to my journal to work out what I saw as “a good death.” This led me further to tease out a description of “a good life.” My spiritual director, listening to my ruminations, asked, “Isn’t that what the chapter you are writing is supposed to be about?” The energy of synchronicity is an element in discerning that one is on the pilgrim path. So with a tad of uncharacteristic self-consciousness, I share this with the reader:

- A good death: what is it?
1. being at peace with life, others, and God
  2. having enough warning so as not to leave unfinished business

3. having freedom from the kind of pain that prevents letting go with dignity and grace
4. living each moment with a sense of rightness, and coming to peaceful closure
5. having faith, hope, and trust in the Ancient of Days and in what is to come (Ancient of Days is one of the terms used for God in the Jewish tradition, and if humanity is indeed created in the image of God, is it not a delicious way to validate the elder-journey by using this name and remembering that it refers also to us?)
6. having given permission to those left behind to do “good grief” and then to let go and move on with life
7. having been a teacher for others, and a blessing to all who have crossed my path

And a good life?

1. loving the Ancient of Days, self, and others—in relentless benevolence
2. having discovered a right balance (or rhythm) between doing and being
3. walking humbly with the Holy One
4. loving people and using things, and doing both with gratitude
5. living sustainably with the earth and her creatures
6. praying without ceasing (Other traditions might call this “living contentedly” or “conscious living”)
7. using the gifts I have received wisely and with creativity and joy
8. full of the “fruit of the Spirit” (St. Paul enumerates this fruit in Gal. 5:22 as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control.” I choose to add hope, generosity, and thanksgiving.)
9. self-aware but not self-absorbed (This phraseology is found in the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado handbook for spiritual directors as a characteristic of a mature spiritual director. It seems to fit a wisdom person too.)

There is no guarantee that one will have either a good life or a good death, but it is my firm conviction that setting out on pilgrimage to the kingdom is an invitation to the universe to direct us to both of them. I give thanks for the models I have known and to my teachers. I aspire to be both to those who know me. It seems to me that the adventure and gift of this handbook is to provide a variety of perspectives to those who would understand, experience, and teach about pilgrimage so that the good news about the spiritual potentials of late life can be passed on. In the words of Robert Frost (1962), “You come too!”

## NOTES

1. In 1975, the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (now a constituent body of the National Council on Aging) affirmed a definition of spiritual well-being that expresses the same notion: "Spiritual Well-Being is the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness." I'll not attempt to pin it down further. For some efforts at so doing, see Thomas and Eisenhandler (1994), Seeber (1990), and Bianchi (1982).
2. See Viktor Frankl's (1963) work on logotherapy, a major tool for meaning-making. Frankl was a speaker at the 1989 Annual Program Meeting of the American Society on Aging, where he explicitly applied his theory to the vicissitudes of late life, including the losses associated with Alzheimer's disease.
3. For some interesting exercises to facilitate life review, see Morgan (1996) and Wakefield (1990). Kaufman (1986) gives some superb and detailed examples of people going through this process with her and emphasizes the importance of the integration of the parts of one's life in the process of coming to wholeness.
4. Rohr differentiates the journeys of men and women, but today's First World woman's journey much resembles that of the man, so this distinction will not be made here in detail. In some traditional cultures, women are subject to many social and physical forms of oppression and so have a more "down-up-down" journey.
5. For a beautifully written description of the stages of pilgrimage, see Moody and Carroll (1997).
6. For some spiritual yet practical tools that can help us cooperate in this process, see Schachter-Shalomi and Miller (1995).
7. For just a few of the multitude of additional nonbiblical examples of late life stories in the literature see Section 2 ("Case Studies") in Thomas and Eisenhandler (1994), Myerhoff (1978), Ramsey and Bieszner (1999) and Learn (1996).

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## 2 Spiritual Counseling of Persons with Dementia

JANE M. THIBAUT

"Of what use will I be to anyone—even to God?" (a person newly diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease).

"Where is my mother's soul, now that she no longer knows who she is?" (a daughter).

"How could God abandon someone who has been so faithful for so many years?" (a husband).

"I no longer visit my father—it is a waste of time. He doesn't remember who I am, and it hurts me to see the physical shell he has become. I'd rather keep the memory of who he was" (a son).

"Why should I give communion to demented elders? They don't understand what they are doing!" (a pastor).

Their caregivers and persons suffering from dementia have asked variations of the above questions repeatedly in my twenty-five years of clinical work with them. These questions, which sound more like mournful pleas than requests for information, represent an attempt to make some "spiritual sense" of the experience of dementia. Unfortunately, answers are hard to find. Very few theologians and philosophers have reflected on the existential meaning that the loss of memory has for individuals and for society, even though Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are grounded in acts of remembrance. There are few readily available guides for the practitioner who attempts to give useful and sensitive responses to these questions, nor is there much help for the clinician who is tempted to despair when faced with yet another person diagnosed with dementia.

During the course of my work I have often asked myself the same questions. How would I create meaning if I were diagnosed with a dementing disorder? A few years ago, my own anguish became so intense that I set out to find and/or create some meaning for myself that, if appropriate, I might share with my patients and their loved ones. The work that I do involves assessments of the cognitive, emotional, social, functional, and environmental domains, as well as counseling related to the practical and existential meaning of "loss of self." In my encounters with patients and caregivers I have witnessed both great tragedy and high comedy. On rare occasions I have been the awed observer of intense spiritual experience. Sometimes I have been given the gift of participating in this experience, as though God were working through the person with dementia to reach me. My "breakthrough