

Spirituality of Aging Part 2

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Rev Lucy Bunch

UU Society of Sacramento

I preached on this same topic last August. It seems like a fitting topic for the Sunday when a 25% of the congregation are away on a camping trip. I don't know about you, but I feel my age when I consider sleeping in a tent on the ground.

Of course, I am almost a year older than the last time I preached on this topic, and my parents, who last year were featured in my sermon, have had a year of their own adventures to help me further contemplate aging.

So here I am with Spirituality of Aging part 2. As with any sermon, once I start working on the topic it seems like relevant items flow into my awareness. For example, on my Facebook feed this morning was a list of 19 tips for healthy aging – 19! Apparently, the list is only for people young enough to remember 19 items. There's some good stuff here – I will likely put this list on my refrigerator right next to my list of the top 5 things that people say on their death bed – that list from a hospice nurse. I find the awareness of death bring things into sharper focus. Surprisingly there is nothing on the list of 19 items that suggests you should develop a healthy relationship with death. For me having the 5 death bed items on my refrigerator is part of developing that healthy relationship. Indeed, the death bed list may motivate me to pay more attention to the healthy aging list posted next to it. We'll see.

As I look at this list, I notice that most of the items would be relevant to any stage of life. Be healthy, don't be stingy, let go of the little things, be proud, keep love alive, etc. This is good advice at any age.

But 19th items are still a bit too much. I am a process person. What's more helpful for me is information about the process of aging. One of the best articles I read for the sermon was by Lynn Huber, a gerontologist and spiritual director titled: Aging as Pilgrimage: Spiritual Potentials in late life. I will put a copy of her essay on the web site if you want to read her work.

Huber theorizes that humans approach each stage of our aging process with the same three questions: who am I, what will I do, and with whom will I do it.

Let's see how this works. In childhood – our parents or guardians set the boundaries for the process of answering these questions, but as we develop independence, we can make our own choices based on the answers to these questions – for example the choice of going to college, or which college to go to, fits with all of these questions – who am I, what will I do, with whom will I do it? Indeed, who am I is an essential question of adolescence.

In early adult hood these questions continue to be critical, Career, relationship, friends – who am I, what will I do, with whom will I do it?

During the first half of our life, these questions help us to define who we are as we work at building up our egos, creating a self, trying to “become someone.”

At midlife our three questions take a turn, as we recognize that we have less of our life ahead than behind. Our culture like to make jokes about the mid-life process. You all know about the fellow who buys the sports car or the woman who gets a younger lover. We diminish the process when we define it this way – the fellow who buys the sport car is not handling his midlife crisis well – at least by outward appearance. midlife can be a time of profound spiritual potential, as we sort out where we have been and what we see going forward. Who am I, what will I do, with whom will I do it?

At midlife as we are forced to take our mortality more seriously, our ego can be quite challenged. Huber proposes that the ego that is developed in the first part of our life is a “false self.” False in the sense that it is based on outward recognition and values – our looks our jobs, our connections, our money, etc.

Huber proposes that mid-life is the transition point between the development of the false self, and the birth of the true self. I want to offer you a quote from her because it is so juicy. Midlife is a time of confrontation with the likelihood that the dreams of greatness that we many have had as young person, will probably not be fulfilled., at least not 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 or being full of bitterness and despair.”

My mid-life crisis was a big and transformational. In my late forties, a couple of work colleagues who were a few years older than me died of cancer. This was a wake-up call. Suddenly I was acutely aware that the days ahead were shorter than the days behind me. I loved my job, was respected and rewarded for the work that I did. But as I looked ahead I knew that the job was not going to sustain me for the next twenty years. It was ten years ago this month that I quit my job and applied to seminary. I had felt the call to ministry for years and finally had the courage to take the leap. Answering the questions of who am I, what will I do, and with whom will I do it, transformed my life.

Now after 5 years in ministry, I find myself asking a fourth question - a deeply spiritual question: what do I hope for? As I look ahead to the remaining years of my life – what do I hope for?

This question has also been on my mind because of a major transition in my parent’s lives. At the ages of 90 and 92, my parents have left their life of complete independence in their own home, driving their own car, cooking and cleaning for themselves – to move to a senior residence where everything is taken care of for them. Its taken two years, and one major fall

for each for them to make this decision. They have also moved south to be closer to my sister and their 2 grands children and 7 great grand kids, so its means a new city, new doctors – new everything. They down sized by half.

My parents give me an up close and personal view of late life development. I see them asking the questions in their new frame of reference- who am I, what will I do, with whom will I do it. And I hope they are asking the question – what do I hope for?

Most experts on aging that I have read agree the elder years are not a shutting down of self, but a profound time of transformation and growth. This is not to minimize the challenges of aging, but to acknowledge that it can be a time of significant personal and spiritual growth. A time when maintaining hope and a positive sense is critical to wellbeing. This idea runs counter to the impression of aging given by our culture.

What can you hope for in your elder years? What personal growth can you strive for? How will you keep hope active in your life?

One important quality is peace within yourself, acceptance of who you are and less concern about what people think,

If the spiritual challenge is the journey from the false self to the true self. Then the elder years is the time when the true self shines. Becoming who you were meant to be.

I have been carrying this aphorism with me for a long time: when you are young – you worry about what people think of you, at mid-life, you decide you don't care anymore but try to live according to your own compass; in later life, you realize that no one was thinking about you anyway because they were too worried about what you were thinking about them.

Old age – we can opt out of this game and be completely who we are. It is a time for authenticity and letting go of the demands of maintaining the false self. Who am I, is a question answered within rather than looking for outside validation.

We can hope for connection - many elders become isolated as they age. It is easy to let your world get smaller and smaller as life gets more difficult to navigate. All of you are ahead of the game because you are here, in community. What will I do, with whom will I do it? We can hope for connection.

We can hope for peace of mind - that in our elder years we can let go of resentment of others and the litany of wrongs done against us.

We can hope for our pain to be managed, or at the least, for the strength to learn to live with our limitations and not have them hold us back.

In our later years we can hope for a sense of legacy - we hope that our lives have not been meaningless. This requires us to see ourselves as part of something greater – a family and community. I see this need for legacy in my parents downsizing. Who will take the pine hutch?

Or the desk that belonged to grandpa? What will become of all the items of sentimental value? Material items are just symbols of the bigger issues of legacy: how will we be remembered, how have we influenced the lives of those close to us.

These development questions are critical in the elder years: Who am I, what will I do, with whom will I do it, what do I hope for?

In our elder years we can hope for a good death. Of course, what makes a good death depends on the person. I think that the book *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande should be required reading for everyone who will eventually die. The author tells us that having a good death requires a good relationship with death itself.

My 92-year-old father is working on that relationship – fluctuating between his desire not to live any more, and his fear of dying. This is good important work. We have had many, many emergency room trips in the last 5 years as the doctors try to keep his failing body functioning. After each one as we were getting ready to go home, he would say to me– “I guess this is not what is going to kill me.” The last time, when the doctors said that his heart was failing, we looked each other and he said “so now we know what is going to kill me, we just don’t know when.”

What is a good death? Freedom from pain, family present, whatever it means to you. But you can’t be passive – you must have this conversation with your loved ones. My parents and I sat down and went over a document called 5 wishes -which helps a person lay out all their wishes as they near death.

Of course, it’s not that simple. Many of us will face illnesses that require multiple decisions about treatment - complicated, difficult decisions.

The *Being Mortal* author says the fundamental question at this last stage in life, is whether fear or hope will rule the day. Fear or hope? Which one will be the driving force in your final years?

Choosing hope requires confronting your mortality – accepting that there are things you will never know, such as when you will die and what happens to you after death. You must make peace with mortality the best you can. Marilyn Reynolds modeled this well in her reflection last year – she said: I like life and hope that I’ve got several good years left, but whether it’s years, or months, or days, I trust that the universe is well-ordered and benign, and that whatever does or does not come after this life is nothing to fear.

Who am I , what will I do, with whom will I do it, what do I hope for?

I have focused on hope in consideration of the later years of life. But hope is not a passive activity. It is not waiting patiently for something to float by, so you can grab it. Hope is a muscle that needs to be exercised through our lives. You don’t want it to atrophy because you

will need it in your old age. You have to choose hope at all stages of life, choose to stay alive, choose to stay engaged in your own growth and development, even in the process of dying.

Not everyone will have a good death, or even good elder years. Some people get stuck in early trauma or pain, and don't have the resources within to stay with the questions or to live with hope rather than fear.

I have been watching my parents transition with trepidation as to their future. Despite my best efforts, my parents move did not go well. The unpacking was miserable, they had to change apartments, and it took more than a month to even begin to feel settled. They miss their old life and home. It seemed that every time I spoke with them there was a litany of misery – the food was cold at lunch, the telephone wasn't working, the laundry is not done to their specifications, the shower water was too hot. I didn't want to call them anymore because I couldn't deal with their misery. I want them to find some hope that this would be a good place, that this was a good choice. I want them to have a good elderhood. But I can't make them choose hope. I can pray for them, I can love them, but I can't make them choose hope.

We spoke yesterday morning and for the first time in two months they told me about something good that had happened. Lunch was delicious. And they had a wonderful visit with two of their great grandkids. My mother remembered how she had played with her grandson when he was young and was delighted to be developing a relationship with his son, her great grandson. Yes! – I thought- this is why they made this move. I suggested that perhaps the clouds of misery had lifted enough so that they could hold out hope for some possibility of happiness (these were my exact words). My father laughed. "Maybe", he said, "maybe so."