

“To Live in the Layers: The Spirituality of Aging”

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“You are God’s beloved dust, and to dust you shall return.”

At a recent clergy retreat, my colleague, Robin Bartlett, shared her experience of leading the Ash Wednesday ritual in her congregation, First Parish Sterling, a federated church affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. Their Ash Wednesday service includes people of every age and this particular service also included her own family. She recalls:

I trembled as I put ashes on the heads of children, including my own. “You are God’s beloved dust, and to dust you shall return,” I said to children just born this year, and the children I created in my womb...

She continues:

The day I gave birth to Cecilia was the day I realized I was going to die, and so would she. I wept at the thought of it. We would one day be rent from one another...

“How could I have brought this beautiful child into this brutal world, knowing this horrible truth?” was my first thought upon seeing her. I was instantly filled with terror and awe. For the first six weeks, I hid the 12-month onesies people gave me because I was terrified she wouldn’t make it that long...so close was the fact of death to the fact of life. Some people call that postpartum depression. I call it postpartum truth.

There’s also a strange sort of comfort in knowing your mortality. A strange humility in knowing you’re no different. A strange sameness to placing ash on the 92-year-old forehead, right after the 2-year-old forehead...¹

Robin Bartlett’s reflection, speaking to a central truth about all of life, also speaks to a central truth about the spiritual enterprise. Knowledge of our mortality and the mortality of everyone and everything we love drives the religious impulse. I

¹ <https://www.revrobinbartlett.com/sermon-blog/beloved-is-where-we-begin>

am grateful to Forrest Church, the late minister of All Souls in New York City, who said it plainly: “religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die...Knowing that we must die, we question what life means. The answers we arrive at may not be religious answers, but the questions death forces us to ask are, at heart, religious questions. Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What is life's purpose? What does all this mean?”

Thus, from our very first breath to our last, the lives we live inform how we understand and perhaps how we answer these eternal and primal questions. Most of us spend our first years sorting out the basics – where babies come from, why the sky is blue and why the cat acts like that when you try to put it into a dress. But, in time, our questioning becomes more complex, our conclusions more nuanced – the truth of who we really are, what is most important in life, how to carry the weight of grief from one season to the next.

And as we know, and learn in a more personal way if we are fortunate enough to reach middle age or older, our bodies change over time in ways that are sometimes empowering and sometimes feel diminishing. Maybe we have more and more trouble reading small font. Maybe we can no longer go for the long hikes we enjoy or even walk up stairs. Maybe we are diagnosed with a chronic illness that robs us of energy or sense of well-being. Maybe we begin to lose our memory. Maybe it is many of these challenges at once. I have learned that when people get together to tell these stories, to bemoan how our bodies have declined and seem to betray us, it is called an “organ recital.”

But through it all, there is a thread. Despite all the stages of life, changes and challenges, there is continuity, an inner continuity we may not begin to see or understand until many years into this adventure called living. There is a foundational essence inspiring Stanley Kunitz to observe, “I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.”²

I pause here to name something you might be thinking, a question that may often come to mind while listening to a sermon. You may be asking, “How do you know?” This question may come to mind *this* morning as one look at the preacher suggests that I can’t know much about aging. While at age 45, I am likely more

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54897/the-layers>

than half way through my time on earth, I know I have only begun to learn what it is like for a body to change over time. I have only begun to have the humus of my life experience bear seedlings of wisdom. I have only a few “layers” of ages and stages to shape my self-understanding and my world view.

So I explore the spirituality of aging with more questions than answers. But Quaker educator and activist Parker Palmer assures us that it is a blessing to be “born baffled;” our uncertainties and curiosities lead to more authentic discovery than our confidences.³ And I come to exploring the spirituality of aging with many tremendous teachers. No matter how many rings you count within your own trunk, I invite both students and teachers on this subject – explorers all – to join me in this inquiry.

One teacher who inspires me in considering the “religious questions” of life in regards to aging is Mary Catherine Bateson, author of *Creating a Life Further: The Age of Active Wisdom*. Bateson makes a bold observation: For the first time ever, with recent advances in the human lifespan among those who live with enough resources to not worry about survival, there is a new phase of adulthood. There is now ample time between the demands of work and raising a family and the period of life when, due to decline, one can no longer participate in civic and social life.

Bateson calls this chapter “second adulthood” or “the age of active wisdom,” a season when one has the time to engage in what they are most passionate about, bringing their individual skills and the fruits of their acquired experience to the needs of the world. In our context, many currently in their “active wisdom age,” the baby boomers, are veterans of social and liberation movements. This provides a unique lens through which they live out what brings meaning to their lives and further reveals their deepest selves. Bateson affirms that the possibilities for individual growth and community health born of “active wisdom” are a “major source of hope.”⁴

When I think of “second adulthood,” I can’t help but to think of a man we will call Bill, a member of another congregation I once served. Bill and his wife – we’ll call her Eleanor - were long-time members of the church’s Aging Support Group. I

³ <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/born-baffled-musings-on-a-writing-life/>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mn8haRJMWWY>

asked to meet with Bill and Eleanor when I began my ministry there to learn more about the group.

After they welcomed me and talked about the group's format and traditions, Bill said, "Oh, there is one more thing before we go. Sometimes I like to ride my motorcycle to the meetings. Is it alright if I park in the side lot?"

Bill didn't see the irony I did, that he rode a motorcycle to his Aging Support Group meetings. While this might not be the kind of energy and vitality Mary Catherine Bateson meant when she referred to "active wisdom," I was impressed.

But there are challenges with aging that cannot be ignored. On a serious note, we know there is a high rate of suicide among the elderly. Sometimes this is a result of generational stigma around seeking mental health care. Sometimes this is a result of loved ones and health care professionals mistaking depression for the expected blues of experiencing more physical illness. Sometimes elders choose suicide as they are afraid of becoming a burden or losing their ability to function on their own.⁵ The rite-of-passage some experience, of transitioning from active late adulthood to dwindling years of decline, can be significant and incredibly difficult.

Another member of the Aging Support Group we will call Dorothy often offered profound testimonials about crossing the Rubicon from stage of aging to the next. Struggling with emphysema, Dorothy slowly walked into our meetings, dragging her wheeled oxygen tank behind her, a piece of medical equipment she affectionately named "Tankersly" and sometimes decorated for different holiday seasons.

I remember one meeting when she recalled a visit with a past minister. They met in the hospital, she recovering in bed, he sitting alongside. "Dorothy," he said, "what are you going to do with the last ten or fifteen years of your life?"

Dorothy paid close attention to the question and heard the distinction. He did not ask about the "next" ten or fifteen years but the "last." Throughout Dorothy's participation in the group she would often return to this question, focused on and

⁵ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-do-we-stop-the-elderly-suicide-epidemic_us_59b0439ce4b0c50640cd641f

aware of the closing aperture of her future and the deepening meaning of her past, a past that included the death of her beloved daughter.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face...

Another teacher I bring into conversation is spiritual leader and author Ram Dass. In his book *Still Here: Embracing Aging, Changing and Dying*, Ram Dass cites his debilitating stroke as the event that has served as the most profound lesson in understanding physical change and preparing for death.

Ram Dass believes in a literal “principle of being,” a soul that endures, reincarnating across many different lives. Thus Ram Dass does not understand aging and death as endings. Yet our egos experience these processes as annihilation, perhaps because our egos cannot imagine a world where it is absent.

Ram Dass’s counsel to his reader is to draw on all of life, including the ego’s experience of a shrinking world and declining physical agency, as a way of growing closer with the divine. “How can I use this to learn about the soul?” he asks. Through his experience as a stroke survivor and hearing the stories of others, Ram

Dass learns and reminds us that, with all things, we have a choice in how we make sense and respond to what happens to us. “Anything that brings us closer to God is healing,” Ram Dass affirms.

But I wish to thank yet another teacher for putting all this in perspective. An elder in a Unitarian Universalist church attended a conversation I facilitated among older members. Who has taught you to age with grace? I asked the group. We shared stories of people who inspire us, me recounting conversations with Bill, Eleanor and Dorothy and the others talking about the bright and lively people who have demonstrated by example that growing older is not necessarily to be feared nor reviled.

Later, the elder shared her disappointment with me that I asked this question in the first place. Our age is part of our identity but not the most important thing, she told me. We are first and foremost a person, a person with interests and ideas and complex lives.

I realized she was right. Just because some older people are getting together, why would they necessarily want to talk about aging? As Unitarian Universalism teaches us we are always learning, until our very last breath, that there is meaning to be found in every moment, I should remember that there are so many other things to talk about!

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

The final teacher I bring into conversation is Irvin Yalom, considered the founder of existential psychiatry. As Forrest Church names the essential human religious questions, Yalom identifies four “givens” of human experience: our mortality and the inevitable death of all we love, the freedom to choose our path as we will, the ultimate reality of our aloneness and the absence of any obvious meaning in life.⁶

⁶ Yalom, Irvin. *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy*, 5.

Yalom argues that these truths are at the heart of most psychological struggles. The more we live unresolved with these realities, the more we fear dying. To leave this world in peace, we are tasked with accepting our choices and life experiences, finding our own worth beyond how we are received by others and making personal and authentic meaning out of “our layers.” Thus no matter how close we may be to the end of our lives, there always remain opportunities to grow towards integration within, to complete a cohesive narrative of our time since birth.

“You are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This is the “strange humility” we all live with, the truth in which we struggle across the arc of time, exploring our human and religious questions.

Yet, what our culture defines as an ending, the conclusion of youth and the approach of our physical death, can be a time of great meaning. As Ram Dass reminds us, it can be a time of healing, of learning about the soul, of moving closer to the divine. For we are forever changing, a new dimension of our “principle of being” accessible with every turn:

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
“Live in the layers,
not on the litter.”
Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.