



# Engaging Aging

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## Spirituality and the Second Half of Life

*by Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI*

When Nikos Kazantsakis was a young man he interviewed an old monk on Mount Athos. At one stage he asked him: "Do you still struggle with the devil?" "No," the man replied, "I used to, but I've grown old and tired and the devil has grown old and tired with me. Now I leave him alone and he leaves me alone!" "So your life is easy then," Kazantsakis asked, "no more struggles?" "Ah, no," replied the monk, "it's worse. Now I struggle with God!"

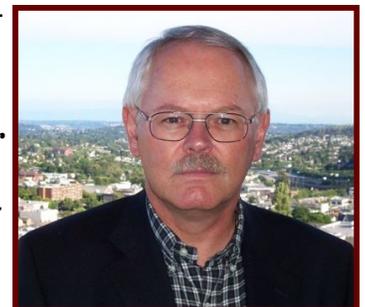
Someone once quipped that we spend the first half of our lives struggling with the devil (and the sixth commandment) and the second half of our lives struggling with God (and the fifth commandment). While that captures something, it's too simple, unless we define "the devil" more widely to mean our struggles with the untamed energies of youth - eros, restlessness, sexuality, the ache for intimacy, the push for achievement, the search for a moral cause, the hunger for roots, and the longing for a companionship and a place that feel like home.

It's not easy, especially when we're young, to make peace with the fires inside us. We need to establish our own identity and find, for ourselves, intimacy, meaning, self-worth, quiet from restlessness, and a place that feels like home. We can spend fifty years, after we've first left home, finding our way back there again.

But the good news is that, generally, we do get there. In mid-life, perhaps only in late mid-life, we achieve something the mystics call "Proficiency", a state wherein we have achieved an essential maturity - basic peace, a sexuality integrated enough to let us sleep at night and keep commitments during the day, a sense of self-worth, and an essential unselfishness. We've found our way home. And there, as once before the onset of puberty, we're relatively comfortable again, content enough to recognize that our youthful journeyings, while exciting, were also full of restlessness. We'd like to be young again, but we don't want all that disquiet a second time. Like Kazantsakis' old monk, we've grown tired of wrestling with the devil and he with us. We now leave each other alone.

*(Continued on page 2)*

**Used with permission of the author, Oblate Father Ron Rolheiser. Currently, Father Rolheiser is serving as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas. He can be contacted through his website, [www.ronrolheiser.com](http://www.ronrolheiser.com).**



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## ***Spirituality and the Second Half of Life*** (Continued from page 1)

So where do we go from there, from home? T.S. Eliot once said, "Home is where we start from." That's true again in mid-life.

The second-half of life, just like the first, demands a journey. While the first-half of life, as we saw, is very much consumed with the search for identity, meaning, self-worth, intimacy, rootedness, and making peace with our sexuality, the second-half has another purpose, as expressed in the famous epigram of Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I go back."

Where do we go from home? To an eternal home with God. But, to do that, we have first to shed many of the things that we legitimately acquired and attached ourselves to during the first-half of life. The spiritual task of the second-half of life, so different from the first, is to let go, to move to the nakedness that Job describes.

What does that entail? From what do we need to detach ourselves?

First, and most importantly, from our wounds and anger. The foremost spiritual task of the second half of life is to forgive - others, ourselves, life, God. We all arrive at mid-life wounded and not having had exactly the life of which we dreamed. There's a disappointment and anger inside everyone of us and unless we find it in ourselves to forgive, we will die bitter, unready for the heavenly banquet.

Second, we need to detach ourselves from the need to possess, to achieve, and to be the center of attention. The task of the second-half of life is to become the quiet, blessing grandparent who no longer needs to be the center of attention but is happy simply watching the young grow and enjoy themselves.

Third, we need to learn how to say good-bye to the earth and our loved ones so that, just as in the strength of our youth we once gave our lives for those we love, we can now give our deaths to them too, as a final gift.

Fourth, we need to let go of sophistication so as to become simple "holy old fools" whose only message is that God loves us.

Finally, we need, more and more, to immerse ourselves in the language of silence, the language of heaven. Meister Eckhard once said: "Nothing so much resembles God as silence." The task of mid-life is to begin to understand that and enter into that language.

And it's a painful process. Purgatory is not some exotic, Catholic doctrine that believes that there is some place in the next life outside of heaven and hell. It's a central piece within any mature spirituality which, like Job, tells us that God's eternal embrace can only become fully ecstatic once we've learned to let go.



*In order to possess what you do not possess*

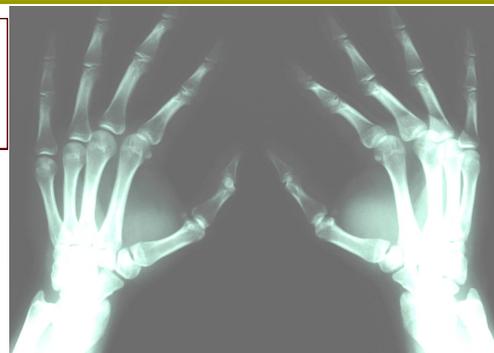
*You must go by the way of dispossession...*

*T.S. Elliot*

## Young in Spirit, Old in Bones

by Susan Perschbacher Melia, Ph.D.

To study spiritual well-being in late life I listened to the life stories and spiritual narratives of forty elder Catholic women religious, ages 80-100. I learned how these women age gracefully. I watched how elder religious sisters, surrounded with positive role models, encourage each other to remain engaged, practicing the “ministry of prayer and presence.” I saw how their spiritual lives deepened through faith. From them I learned lessons in graceful aging: be grateful, contribute, love God, pray, enjoy solitude, remain hopeful, begin now. Simple and yet profound, these lessons have enriched my life.



Gratitude is a way to remain positive, not dwelling on the pains and loss of old age. Gratitude means each day is a gift, life in its entirety is a gift, and whatever comes our way we are given the strength and grace to manage. One elder woman religious told me, “Prayer brings you to communion with God. It includes many things. Just walking out, just birds and flowers, and everything, too, can raise your mind and heart to God in a spirit of gratitude. I think a lot of my spirituality is more and more a spirit of gratitude. Being grateful for things that happened to you and all the gifts that God has given to you helps; I feel it helps keep me young, young in spirit, not young in bones!”

Contribution does not stop as we grow older. Giving is a way to connect with others and to remain aware of one’s gifts. As they told me, sisters contribute into late life: “Definitely, through their prayer life. There are so many sisters that feel they can’t do much of anything but pray. But it’s very, very important. Miracles have come about as a result of prayer. . . some of our sisters really think, ‘[Prayer] is a mission, something good that I can do right now.’”

Love for God deepens with age. “I feel much more in love with God as I grow older. I have a much more intimate love with God than I did as a younger person. And maybe I didn’t have the time to open up. As we grow older that is more or less where we have to find ourselves.” Love for God deepens with prayer. “The whole day can be prayer. I think it’s an attitude. A prayerful attitude. And that attitude is union with the Lord. It’s an attitude of union with the Lord that becomes prayer.”

Time for prayer is a gift in late life. An elder sister told me, “[I pray] all day long. Because into everything of the day you bring your prayer life. I think your prayer life changes as you get older. It becomes more simple, and more intimate. Intimate with the Lord.”

We learn to cherish solitude because we need not fear loneliness. “To tell you the truth, I have a sense of God’s presence always. That seems presumptuous perhaps, but it is true. There’s always a feeling of a real presence of God within me. God is the energizing force in my life, in my living.” It is a benefit of growing older that there is time for

*(Continued on page 4)*



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## ***Young in Spirit, Old in Bones*** (Continued from page 3)

solitude. “Now I have time to do some of the things that I love, things that I didn’t have time to do. I like to go in and sit in the chapel quietly and pray and think.”

Faith leads to hope in late life. One woman described how she remains hopeful: “Faith is a spiritual feeling that all’s going right in the world. That right overcomes evil, some way or other. And it’s supported by intellect. Faith is a feeling of knowing there is a God, that God is there, with you all the time.”

Several sisters emphasized we should begin now to practice. “Well, first of all, [you] have to grow young gracefully. As we grow old we build on what we have been all through our lives. So we start making efforts as soon as we are aware. Develop the qualities that we hope to have near the end.” Another sister added, “If [you’re] happy in what [you’re] doing it’s easier to grow old gracefully. Don’t let life overtake you. It’s in a sense planning for old age, planning to live your life and to know that it’s going to work along this way. You are going to get old. No one is immortal. You can’t begin this in your old age.”

The elder Catholic women religious I interviewed became my spiritual guides, encouraging me to speak of God in my life. They nurture my faith through an emphasis on gratitude, on contribution, on love of God, on prayer and on solitude. With the strength given by their example, I can begin now, in mid-life, with my own mission of prayer and presence. I am filled with hope.



*Be still and know  
that I am God.*

*Psalm 46*

### **A Spirituality of Aging** ***by Sister Janice Bader, CPPS, Executive Director***

It is sometimes said that persons who have been married for a long time eventually come to look like one another. Occasionally one does come across a picture of a loving couple whose lined faces bear a striking similarity.

Whether or not couples actually develop a physical resemblance after years of married life is open to question. That they share a common spirit is much easier to witness. Words become much less essential. A devoted presence to one another is often the only communication necessary.

As we consider the topic of the “spirituality of aging” in this issue, I am struck by how analogous a loving, marital relationship is to an individual’s relationship with God.

Just as no two marriages are the same, no two persons relate to God in exactly the same way. In that sense, it is impossible to define or pin down a spirituality of aging.

The spirituality of aging is as varied as each of the unique persons who are in relationship with God. Yet, I do believe that as we mature in relationship with God, words become much less essential. Just being in the presence of the Beloved is often enough. And, as that relationship grows and deepens, can we not hope that we will begin to look more like the One in whose image and likeness we are created?



# Engaging Aging



## Discovering God in Creation: An Inter-generational Program



In 2001, the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore merged with the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, Milwaukee. But long before that, the Baltimore community recognized the need to find better ways to utilize their large Motherhouse. They met that challenge by converting the building into space that provided supportive care for their Sisters as well as low income housing for the public. Then they faced a deeper invitation: how to best share what once belonged only to them. The program, “Discovering God in Creation,” helped them to do that, and more.

Designed and implemented by Sister Lorraine McGraw, OSF, (*pictured standing, left*) as a part of her graduate study, the intergenerational program brought together Sisters in residence and children of families living in Clare Court, the former Motherhouse of the Franciscan Sisters of Baltimore. For two hours every Saturday, they met in small groups to engage in planned activities designed to uncover the wonders of nature. Along the way, they found that relationships were a marvel of all created life, themselves included.



“We came to know each other by name. Acceptance grew into respect. Strangers became friends,” said Sr. Lorraine. “It was wonderful to see the excitement and anticipation as Saturdays drew near.” Wheelchairs and walkers ceased to be barriers as the children came to visit the Sisters in the community room or their apartments.



Now, each resident of Clare Court is expected to give ten service hours per year. What started as a simple outreach has continued to thrive.

**Aging is truly engaged by the Sisters and their neighbors!**



Interested in renovation plans?  
See <http://www.usccb.org/nrro/newsletter/spring05.shtml>

*Our thanks to Sister Lorraine McGraw, OSF, for her generous time spent during a telephone interview. This article was written based on Sister Lorraine’s sharing.*

## From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA  
(with grand-nephews Hudson and Graham)

While running errands this afternoon, I passed by a display of lawn furniture sitting outside a store. Without even thinking, I plopped onto an old fashioned porch glider and instantly found myself transported into summer. It was a wonderful moment – smoothly sliding back and forth in the warm sun and gentle breezes, listening to the laughter of children playing nearby. I even managed to slip off a shoe, pretending the Astroturf underfoot was actually grass. “Finally,” I thought to myself. A seemingly interminable winter and a spring counting days with gray, snowy skies has passed.

But as easily as my revelry had begun, just as abruptly was it ended. A salesperson, judging that I had no intention – or probably the means with which to buy the swing, summarily invited me to “move along.” “This isn’t a park, dear. It’s a business – for profit!”

I smiled and apologized, a bit embarrassed by my liberties with their “business – for profit.” But then it struck me; a profit had been made – by me. In those brief moments of relaxing, I’d found the gift of summer. Stumbling along with one shoe off and one shoe on, I called back over my shoulder to her, “Thank you for the glide. You should try it some time.” But the woman was already about her business of business – for profit.

In these coming days of summer I hope you will find opportunities to pause from the business of life. Let yourself glide for a bit into time of a different nature. Let your thoughts move without any need for logic or conclusions. Reach down and actually touch the earth on which we live. Linger with that morning cup of coffee. Don’t move until the bird you watch outside your window decides to fly away. Step outside or pause by a window with someone and just revel in the light. Instead of blowing out that candle, let yourself sit in prayer a bit longer. I think you’ll find yourself in the midst of untold profits.

Sometimes our best ideas come unbidden. Our deepest insights appear as naturally as breaths. In our pauses, in the lacunae of life, we find ourselves traveling to depths that defy the pace of agendas. Perhaps now more than ever, we need to let ourselves be transported to such places and times.

For your journeys of summer, we are especially pleased to offer you this issue of *Engaging Aging*. Our two guest authors of international repute graciously accepted our invitation to address the topic of a spirituality of aging.

- ◆ Father Ron Rolheiser poses thought-provoking reflections on the spiritual nature of life’s journey as we grow older. Any single paragraph is well worth an afternoon’s contemplation.
- ◆ Professor Susan Melia is a highly regarded and widely published researcher in the field of spirituality and aging. Her reverence for the women she studies is evident as she unfolds the narratives of their life stories for us.
- ◆ As always, Sister Janice finds a creative new angle to bring into focus a core component of aging’s spirituality: the nature of our relationship with God.
- ◆ Finally, we are delighted with our “Aging Engaged” feature highlighting an inter-generational program designed by Sister Lorraine McGraw, OSF.

Once again, we thank you for your interest and support in *Engaging Aging*. We look forward to your continued suggestions and ideas regarding how we might best serve you and your needs.

Blessings on your summer. Happy gliding!



## Mark your calendars. . .

### June

- ◆ Distribution of Basic Grants
- ◆ Distribution of Spring 2008 Supplemental and Special Assistance Grants

### August

- ◆ 1-4: CMSM - LCWR Joint Assembly, Denver Colorado

### September

- ◆ 30: Applications Due for Special Assistance Grants

### October

- ◆ 9-12: CMSWR Assembly, Belleville, Illinois

### November

- ◆ 18-21: NATRI Conference



## Did you know. . .

The number of taste buds decreases beginning between the ages of 40 and 50 in women and 50 and 60 in men.

Smell, touch and sight play a large role in the experience of taste.

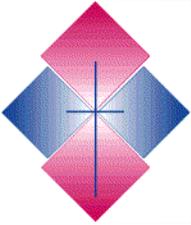
Aroma molecules move more swiftly at higher temperatures, creating a greater sense of smell and thus flavor in food.

Memory of flavors can influence the experience of taste.

The loss of pleasure and comfort that food provides can lead to nutritional deficiencies as people are less interested in eating.

Wellness, disease prevention, and quality of life are related to our diets.

The Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging in Boston has published a new food pyramid for older adults.



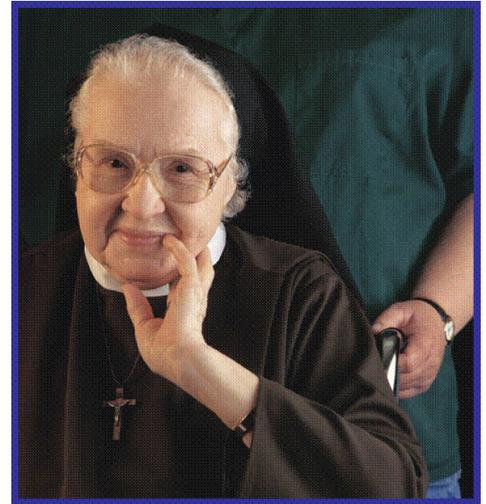
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