



Engaging Aging

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Transitioning with the Elder from Independence to Interdependence

by Ray Mattes, IHM, MSG, MPA, MA

Once at a workshop on later life, the facilitator asked the participants what they envision themselves to be doing when they will be in their 90's. One woman raised her hand and said that she hoped to still be active, continuing to learn new things, still engaged in some type of meaningful activity and living independently. The facilitator then asked her what else she hoped to be doing at that age. To this, the participant offered additional thoughts. The facilitator asked the respondent the same question a third time. After an extended pause, the woman answered: "I guess if I want to be doing all these things at age 90, I had better start doing them now."

Like the example of the woman in the above story, planning for later life transitions from independent living situations to interdependent environments requires both forethought and a willingness to actively engage life's circumstances within the context of the present moment. As administrators, community life coordinators and leadership working with our elder sisters and brothers who are addressing these realities of change within their own lives, our role may take on the form of companion or life coach at times.

As a companion we journey with the elders as they embrace the changes this new relocation will mean by recognizing that change entails loss and that the normal and natural reaction to any loss is grief.

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Ray Mattes is a gerontologist and currently serves as Home Care Administrator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Los Angeles Province.



“Transition is the process of letting go of the way things used to be and taking hold of the way they subsequently become.”

William Bridges



Transitioning with the Elder from Independence to Interdependence

(Continued from page 1)

Therefore, our role as companion is to first honor the unique story of the elders. We must recognize that their responses to the changes just introduced in their lives may include conflicted feelings. While the physical relocation may be viewed with a sense of relief for opportunities of greater support in daily living, at the same time, sadness may rise because familiarity of routine, certain relationships and ministry endeavors no longer exist. In our walking with the elders, we allow them the freedom to address these losses and grieve in their own way and time. All the while, we provide a safe environment, offering support in which their grieving may occur.

In the role as life coach, we partner with the elders to assist them to **GROW** into their own personal vision of what this new phase of later life means. This includes addressing what their individual journey means for the collective journey of the community. We assist in the discovery of new opportunities for ministry endeavors, whether these entail the act of “doing” or “being”. We foster a supportive framework upon which one’s adaptation to the newness of the living situation may, in time, be constructed. This partnering may consist of the following:



- ◆ mutual **G**oal setting as they continue to transition into the new living environment
- ◆ ongoing discernment of the present **R**eality brought about by the physical relocation or perhaps a health condition
- ◆ exploration of the **O**ptions for decision making and ongoing formation that match their energy level and present ability
- ◆ honest assessment of the personal **W**ill to discover both meaning and purpose in this particular phase of later life.

Whether our role is that of companion, life coach or, perhaps, a mixture of the two, in order to be effective it must emerge from an awareness of the uniqueness of each elder and the sacredness of her/his own life story. At times, we ourselves may be challenged in our own certainties as to what constitutes the best approach or programmatic structure to eldercare. We may need to question our assumptions about what the appropriate form should be for an elder’s re-engagement in community life. We may assume that what worked in the past in terms of programs, policies, and approaches to care is sufficient for both the present and future. However, no two elders are the same.

Those living in interdependent situations may span various age cohorts, each with a different lived experience of religious life. Differences in initial formation, ministry assignments over the years, and living arrangements create varied needs and outlooks on life for the elder member. Each of these presents a challenge for those responsible for the administration of the eldercare setting. We must create an environment that adapts to the diversity brought by each new member. It is an ongoing process of maintaining a balance between the individual needs of the *(Continued on page 3)*

Transitioning with the Elder from Independence to Interdependence

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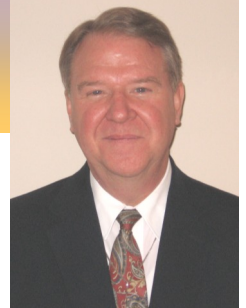
elder and the communal needs of the congregation to which one committed one's life.

A temptation may emerge to focus solely on the provision of medical care addressing the physical needs of the elder because these are often the most obvious. This approach, however, often fails to address the ongoing psychosocial, spiritual dynamics integral to later life. It is through these dynamics that one is invited to move toward well-being and to grow into a deeper understanding of the vocation of later life.

Therefore, it is our task to provide opportunities for ongoing spiritual formation, counseling, and retreat time. These should be specifically crafted to match the particular needs of the elder participants and offer personal engagement for spiritual renewal beyond a sacramental model. In so doing, we will be creating environments where not only the physical needs are met but where later life, in its totality, is celebrated in ways radiating far beyond the limitations brought about by the natural processes of aging.

From the Offices of NRRO

Brother Robert Metzger, SM
Associate Director of Planning & Education



The theme for this issue of *Engaging Aging* is making the transition from independent to dependent living. Several weeks ago I wrote to the elder care consultants who volunteer their time for the National Religious Retirement Office to ask for some ideas around this topic. Sr. Paula Cooney responded that she has concerns about the use of the phrase “moving from independent to dependent living.” I asked her if she would be willing to write an article about her concerns and she graciously agreed. Her premise is that we are really interdependent and, I'm sure, this will resonate with all of us. I hope you enjoy reading her ideas.

In our lead article Ray Mattes writes about ritualizing the transition from independent to interdependent living (see sample on page 6). Because of the importance of support during times of transition, NRRO would like to begin a collection of various ways that we as religious congregations assist our members in making this transition. If you have rituals, prayer services or practices that your community uses, would you be willing to share it with NRRO? We will remove any references to congregational names and will make these available on our website as models for other religious institutes to use or adapt. Please send your material to RMetzger@usc.cb.org.

On June 30, NRRO co-sponsored a webinar with the Avila Institute of Gerontology entitled “Helping Members of Your Congregation Transition from Independent to Dependent Living”. This webinar was a first time event for NRRO and a good way to reach a large number of people. By means of the live presentation, an archived version of it on Avila Institute's website, and a free DVD version from NRRO, we estimate more than one thousand people participated in the webinar. (*Cont. on p.4*)

From the Offices of NRRO (Continued from page 3)

If you are interested in receiving a free copy of the DVD from the June webinar, please write me and we will be happy to send it to you.

We are beginning to plan some additional webinars for 2012. Our hope is to be able to host one webinar per quarter throughout the year. If you have any suggestions for topics or speakers for these webinars, please contact me at R Metzger@usccb.org.

It's All About Relationships

Sister Paula Cooney, IHM
Administrator, Sisters of St. Joseph Regina Residence
Orange, California



Sr. Paula Cooney

Are we ever really only “dependent?” There was something about the suggested focus of this issue of *Engaging Aging* that didn’t resonate with my experience of the women religious who grace my days at Regina Residence.

As I called their faces to mind, I couldn’t think of one who was not in a relationship of “interdependence” that daily brings joy to their lives and those around them.

Two friends, one living with late stage Alzheimer’s, spend time together daily. One chats about the events of the day, the other responding with eyes that say, “I know that you love me and I you, even though I cannot say the words.”

Women arrive for a Wisdom Circle. Some are in wheelchairs and Amigos, escorted by loving staff or a sister friend. Among them are those who are physically dependent for their most intimate physical needs. There are others with growing loss of vision sitting by their friends who will quietly read whatever is handed out so that all can fully engage in the conversation.

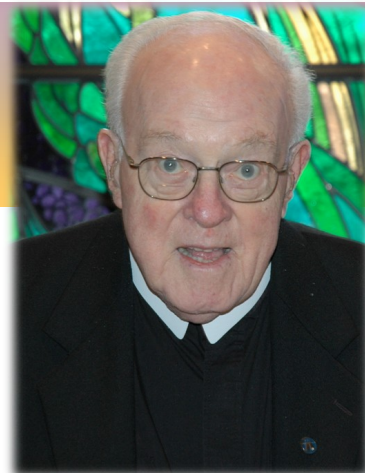
A sister dies and the stories are shared of how much she meant to the staff on the days when it was easy and the days when it was challenging. The funeral is held on a Saturday when most staff is not scheduled and, yet, there they are, representing all shifts, celebrating this woman’s life among them.

Prayers are requested by staff as they experience life changing events. Brides to be, expectant mothers, as well as those anticipating surgery, gather for a blessing by the sisters. The whole community checks the bulletin board regularly to hear how the surgery went or to learn the name and weight of the new baby. These sisters are readers of the Los Angeles Times and the National Catholic Reporter, watchers of CNN and PBS, and a number have learned that Skype and e-mail are not difficult once you get the hang of it.

I am certain that these seemingly simple events resonate with the experiences of women and men religious living their elder years engaged, even with the limitations that physical and mental changes bring. Sometimes it’s just a matter of stepping back for a moment, noticing and naming what is already there.

Aging Engaged

Brother Patrick Power, FSC, has the distinction of being the most senior Brother in the USA/Toronto Region of the De La Salle Christian Brothers. This past December, he celebrated the grand occasion of his 98th birthday with friends, family, and community. Festivities included brothers from the St. John's College High School (Washington, D.C.) and La Salle Hall (Beltsville, MD) communities along with several of Brother Patrick's former students from St. Johns. A late afternoon Mass was followed by a social and dinner. Brother Patrick enjoyed the tribute, and in return, used his sharp mind and Irish wit to regale everyone with some words of wisdom from the vantage point of his 98 years.



Brother Patrick Power, FSC

More recently, a much larger group gathered at St. Joseph's Church on September 3, 2011, to celebrate his 80th anniversary as a brother. A Mass of Thanksgiving was celebrated followed by a reception and dinner at La Salle Hall, the retirement home which is Brother Patrick's community of residence.



Most of Brother Pat's active years as a religion and Latin teacher were at South Hills Catholic High School (now Seton-LaSalle) in his hometown of Pittsburgh, and at St. John's High School in our nation's capital. After his retirement from classroom teaching, he lived for twelve years in the Central Catholic community in Pittsburgh before moving to LaSalle Hall in 2005. He spent part of his Pittsburgh retirement years conducting classes to teach others how to trace their Irish genealogy.

Brother Patrick still carries on correspondence with former students who fondly remember his daily exhortation to "Speed to the board!" These days, he volunteers in the development and auxiliary offices, calling donors to thank them for their support for the retired brothers and for the community's educational ministries.

Reflecting on these milestone events, Brother Pat noted, "It is important to maintain a spirit of gratitude in life." He continued, "I am especially grateful for my continuing association over the years with my former students through reunions, correspondence, phone calls and, most importantly, in prayer." Let us all join the brothers in saying, "*Ad multos annos*, Brother Pat!"

This article first appeared in La Sallian Visions, December, 2010. It has been edited and is reprinted with the permission of the De La Salle Christian Brothers.

A Sample Ritual of Welcome

Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Holy Family Community, Los Angeles, CA

Leader: With grateful hearts we gather to welcome N. to our Holy Family Community. We pray that God will bless N. as she continues to respond to the call to later life and joins her sisters in this community.

All: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, bring us hope and understanding during the transitions of our lives. May our vision be clear and our minds open to the new possibilities that life presents to us.

Leader: Let us pray: O Spirit of God, let our dreams and visions soar. You have given us the “gift of years” so that our lives may continue to celebrate your presence. Grant us the strength, courage and insight we will need as we work to bring our vision for the later years of life to reality. Guide us in our plans and imaginings, for it is only through dreams and hard work that the beauty and wonder of your kingdom will be made known. Spirit of God, be with N. as she continues to dream your dreams for her life and the life of our community.

Reading:

Leader: N., as you continue to respond to God’s invitation for your life, may you find Holy Family Community to be a place of loving support and encouragement. We pray...

N., may you feel welcomed here among us as your very presence continues to witness to “the profound love of God.” We pray...

N., in those times of uncertainty, may you know that you are loved and supported by us, your sisters. May you be held in God’s loving embrace. We pray...

N., may you continue to grow into a deeper awareness of yourself. May the days ahead be filled with openness to new endeavors, opportunities and ongoing enrichment. We pray...

N., may you recall with fondness the people to whom you have ministered and the places where you met Christ in the other. May each new day remind you of the beauty of your own soul and the gift that you continue to be for us, your sisters. We pray...

N., may you trust in God’s plan for your life at this moment in time. May your “yes” to the gift of years you have been given serve as witness to God’s faithfulness. And may the sacred story of your life reveal anew the dreams God has dreamt in you.

New Resident: Loving God, as I begin this new chapter, may I be granted the strength and courage to live into the vocation of later life to which you have called me. May my life be a witness to others of your faithful love as I celebrate your “gift of years”. (Continued on page 7)



A Sample Ritual of Welcome (Continued from page 6)

May I continue, with your help, to live with purpose as I strive to make meaningful each new day you grant me. May I embrace my elderhood with dignity, faith and hope being ever mindful of your continued desires for my life.

All: May the God of years bless you. May the God whose face was revealed to the elders Simeon and Anna shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God, whose beloved you are, grant you peace. May God always be with you and wherever you are may you always be with God.

Each new resident is presented with a battery powered candle signifying this transition as a time of continued ministry.

From the Editor's Desk

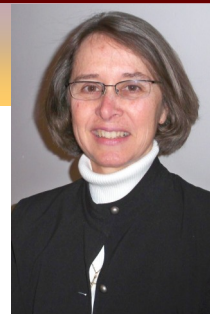
Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA

I love rituals. They are wonderful occasions of grace inviting us to new interior awareness through the exterior movements of gesture, song, and prayer. They help to mark the sea changes in our lives: professions, jubilees, missionings, homecomings, births, and deaths.

But it's not only the major life changes that propel us into the land of transition. Our arrival in the zone of adjustment and coping can happen almost without our knowing. It's as if the cumulative energy of tiny daily shifts finally reaches critical mass. Suddenly, we lift our heads to find ourselves in places of vulnerability and confusion. Familiar markers are gone. What used to

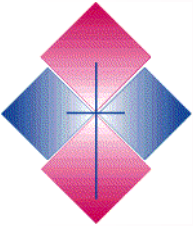
work, no longer does. "Who am I?" and "What am I to do?" are mantras of transition. These times need tending as well.

Transition calls for the ordinary strength captured by Reynolds Price's fictional character, Kate Vaiden, as she proclaims, "... you stand up at sunrise and meet what they send you and keep your hair combed." How can we help each other do that? How can we empower each other to grasp hold daily with courage and hope? What risks are ours to take? In our transition from summer to fall, may all be well.



NRRO Calendar

- Sept. 20-22 NRRO Planning and Implementation Workshop
- Oct. 6-9 CMSWR Assembly, Belleville, IL
- Oct. 14-15 NRRO Workshop *Through Grief to New Life*, St. Louis, MO
- Nov. 4-6 NRRO Workshop for Institutes with Fewer than 25 Members
- Nov. 8-11 RCRI National Conference, St. Louis, MO
- Dec. 10-11 Retirement Fund for Religious National Collection Date



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Website: www.usccb.org/nrro

The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes this money to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs.

The National Religious Retirement Office supports, educates and assists religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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