



Engaging Aging

The Privilege of Aging

By Sister Mary Ellen Dougherty, SSND

For me, diminishment came quickly. When I turned 75, I remember saying to friends that it is was my intention to make 75 look good. At the time, that seemed very possible. I was still quite active and even agile. On our provincial leadership council, I traveled a great deal, participated in meetings, actively engaged with others in my role as councilor, and had a rich social network. Life was good; very busy and good.

Within a year, with less than six months to go in my term on the council, I was experiencing weakness in my left leg and major fatigue. Three months later, in June of 2012, I had a large, benign tumor removed from my upper left thigh with a promise of quick and full recovery. Except for one major meeting, I was able (with determination, I acknowledge) to participate in all council work. I did recover from the surgery, but the symptoms I had before the surgery gradually returned and in a more acute form. As I discovered in the spring of 2013, the tumor was simply an addendum to other less malleable medical issues. And thus the most challenging transition of my life, the process of imminent and palpable diminishment, was clearly and conspicuously set in motion.

Inner landscape

I came to religious life to be holy, whatever that meant to a 20-year-old girl in the late 1950s. I did not come to be a teacher, although I taught for more than 50 years. I came with a deep desire to be close to God, as I saw many of the sisters who taught me were. That desire was simple and straightforward, however complicated

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“Each one’s journey is a thing wholly without precedent.”

Sr. Maura Eichner, SSND

From a Woman’s Life



Sister Mary Ellen Dougherty, a School Sister of Notre Dame from Baltimore, Maryland, is actively engaged in the ministry of writing. Her most recent article, “The Way of Waiting,” appeared in an online publication, “Contemplative Journal.” Mary Ellen was a professor of English at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, and was named the college’s Mullan Distinguished Teacher. While working for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as the coordinator of anti-trafficking educational efforts, she testified before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee. Mary Ellen has served as Councilor on the SSND Atlantic-Midwest Provincial Council.

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life was. My desire for God has not changed.

Nor have the terms in which I frame it. In the early 1960s while I was still at my first mission teaching middle-school children, I wrote in a journal at the end of a day of prayer that what I valued most were prayer, people and poetry. If I expand the word “poetry” to mean beauty, they are still the things I value most.

In my early 30s, there was a change in my prayer life. Schooled in structured meditation, with point-by-point reflection, I was finding myself unable to focus on the scripture reading. I thought I needed more time than our community prayer time in chapel allowed. With the blessing of a wonderful local superior, an older woman who radiated wisdom and holiness, along with an overriding common sense, I began rising earlier in the mornings. That allowed me time in chapel before our community prayer and common meditation. I was discovering another way of praying. Although I did not know it at the time, I was being invited into a more contemplative kind of prayer.

Then I was sent to our college to teach English, a formidable assignment. By the time I arrived there, my prayer life, like everything else, was erratic. I shifted back and forth between structured meditation

The front entrance of the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, now Notre Dame of Maryland University.



Sister Mary Ellen stands outside the men's penitentiary in Baltimore, where she taught college writing courses for fifteen years while a professor at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland.

and sitting wordlessly, I hoped before God. This lasted for months, until a spiritual director (my first) assured me that this “new” kind of prayer *was* actually prayer, and that I should give myself to it fully. I learned that transitions in the spiritual life would be like that, back and forth between the old and the new until I finally trusted the new. As during transitions in ministry and community life, I would now be reluctant to leave where I was but would ultimately be very happy with the place to which I was called. These early transitions continue to serve me well.

And outer realities

I have not quite reached that place of poise and grace with this latest transition. Even as I begin to write about it now, I feel my throat constricting, a sign to me of my reluctance to speak about it. I have not yet settled into what is my current life. I am still struggling to accept my limitations. Yet, they are real and in some elusive way, they are right.

After three surgeries in less than two years, I am currently in a wheelchair most of the time. I have been diagnosed with Parkinsonism or Parkinson Syndrome, a neurological disorder which produces symptoms like Parkinson's disease. My voice is quite unreliable, complicating communication. Often people cannot hear me or understand me.

When in the winter of 2013 it began to be clear to me and to others that there was something seriously de-

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bilitating going on, that my difficulties with mobility and with voice were rapidly accelerating, I was living in community with four other sisters. They were supportive, without being directive. I trusted them and was able to share candidly with them. It was a grace for me to be living with them, especially then.

In the spring of 2013, when I was diagnosed with Parkinsonism, I was devastated. At that time, I was doing “special projects” for Catholic Charities of Baltimore and for the National Religious Retirement Office. One of the “projects” for Catholic Charities was conducting book discussions with a group of homeless men. We scheduled a unit of six sessions, with one group in spring and another in late summer.

The spring session went well, although I was aware of my liabilities. By the time we reached the second group in late summer, I was acutely aware of my limitations. Getting from the car to the classroom was becoming increasingly arduous. My voice, even with a microphone, was precarious. I was always tired, very tired. Worst of all, I was teaching poorly, and I knew it. I could endure the difficulty with walking, and the fatigue. But I could not lower my standards of teaching. I had too much respect for my students, for the art of teaching and for myself to continue. After the fourth session, I wrote a letter to the woman who had hired me; I told her I would, of course, finish this current group, but that I would no longer be able to teach because of lack of energy and voice. I knew then that my life of classroom teaching was over. That was painful to face.

Sr. Mary Ellen’s local community before moving to Villa Assumpta: (from left) Sisters Sharon Kanis, Hanna Mignono, Stacy Gunnip, Grace Sciamanna, and Mary Ellen Dougherty.

As was the day I left the community I was living with, on Oct. 1, 2013, to go to the hospital for the first of two spinal surgeries. Although I did not acknowledge it, even to myself, I knew I would not be returning. After surgery, not connected to the tumor that had been removed 15 months earlier nor to my Parkinsonism, I was able to walk fairly well for approximately six weeks. By mid-December, my mobility had deteriorated noticeably. I am now a permanent resident at our Villa.

Learnings

Each one’s journey is a thing wholly without precedent. Some of the things that were major hurdles for me would not be such for others. For example, this disease felt like such public matter, making me more and more conspicuous. I minded that my image of myself was changing. I had always been healthy; I could walk five miles at a time and I went to a gym regularly.

I kept hoping that the spinal surgeries would solve my mobility problems. The doctors were not sure how much was due to herniated discs and how much could be accounted for by Parkinson Syndrome. Although the spinal surgeries have relieved me of most of my back pain, they have not yet diminished my difficulty with walking. So I am left with the Parkinsonism. It is clearly a progressive disease, as is my coming to grips with it.



The Privilege of Aging, continued



Gathering in Villa Assumpta for a game of bridge, (from left) Sisters Marylita Friia, Dorothy Daiger, Mary Ellen Dougherty, and Dolores Marie Todd.

whole process. I know the pain as well as the possibilities. I can experience the losses as genuine losses and understand that they are integral to the process. I am also aware of the deep peace that I have been graced with, as well as the underlying happiness that, in the end, overrides the loneliness.

In that regard, I have received many graces, some of them in terms of subtle and unsolicited interior shifts of mind and heart, others prompted by people who are wittingly and unwittingly present in my life. For example, the public dimension of this disease and my severe distaste for being conspicuous. I have been here at the Villa just nine months and I can say that I am no longer embarrassed about being in a wheelchair or by the changes in my image. Only when I see somebody whom I have known and who is seeing me like this for the first time does that feeling return and then only briefly.

People have helped me with this, people who have been in my life for years and people, like many here at the Villa, whom I have known over the years only by name. I have experienced so much love and unconditional acceptance, that I understand in a new way the gospel message of love. We are interconnected in many ways, but especially through our vulnerability.

One of the privileges of aging as I am experiencing it is the gift of awareness I am able to bring to this

When my sister was dying in 1996, her husband, I thought, was obsessed with making sure he was doing everything he could do for her. I suggested to him that he slow down some, that his own health might be in jeopardy. He answered, “This is the only chance I will have at this. ...” That is, I think, how I feel about what has been happening to me in this swift and total change in my life. This is the only chance I will have at this business of aging. I want to do it with awareness. I want to do it in God, with freedom and grace.



Sister Mary Ellen in a courtyard of Villa Assumpta

From the Offices of NRRO

Brother Bob Metzger, SM, Associate Director for Planning and Education

In this issue's main article, Sister Mary Ellen gives us a very powerful and personal story of her aging process. Many of us are faced with various medical conditions and we never really know how we will react until it happens. It is easy to say that with our belief and trust



in God we can accept anything in our future. Sister Mary Ellen's story shows that with a strong prayer life, this can be true. But, as Sister Maura Eichner's quote, located on the cover page, notes, *each one's journey is a thing wholly without precedent.*

This past spring I turned 65 and received my Medicare card. Even though I knew it would be arriving any day in my mailbox, it was still a small surprise to see it. Does this card signal that I am "old"? Does it mean that I can retire and put my feet up to relax the rest of my life? Does it mean I can now pursue my bucket list for the rest of my days? It does not mean any of these things. It just means that I am one year older and my form of medical insurance has changed.

I do not know what the future holds for me in terms of my ministry, my community or my health. I do know that if I have God as part of my life I can face whatever the future holds for me.

I recently ran across a quote from Saint Augustine of Hippo that speaks to me about our life's journey. *People go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without*

marveling! If I am able to behold the marvel of God in my life, then I am able to live the title of Sister Mary Ellen's article and appreciate the privilege of aging.

Resources

BOOKS

Bird, Chloe, E. and Rieker, Patricia P. (2008). *Gender and Health: The Effects of Constrained Choices and Social Policies*. Cambridge University Press.

Simmons, Philip (2000). *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*. New York: Bantam Books.

Sulls, Jerry, & Wallston, Kenneth A. (Eds.). (2003). *Social Psychological Foundations of Health and Illness*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing.

ARTICLES

Coping with a Diagnosis of Chronic Illness. Available online at American Psychological Association's website: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/chronic-illness.aspx>

Douglas, Deborah Smith (2000). Wounded and Healed. *Weavings*, 25 (2).

Hinson, E. Glenn (2010). The Absence of God. *Weavings*, 25 (1).

Russell, Kenneth C. (1998). Guigo I on Avoiding Suffering. *Review for Religious*, November - December, 57 (6).



Embraced by the Love of God

By Sister Jeanne Rodgers, CSJ

Embraced by the Love of God
we walk through the struggles of life
and
wait for the transforming grace of each moment.
We wait with tears streaming down our faces
with the pain of unbearable loss
burdening our spirits
but
we wait.
We believe that the life struggles of all of us
are not meant as obstacles,
but are the building blocks of Love.
So we offer each other our weakness
and
we wait
for the strength of motion
that our communion enables.
Because we have each other, family, community,
we wait
but never alone.





From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

Psychosocial and behavioral factors in health have been a longstanding interest of mine. The interplay between well-being and variables such as a health locus of control, mental attitude, social supports, belief systems, stress, and environment is complex and deserving of our best efforts in research and practice.

So, when we were planning this issue last January, I was excited by the prospect of delving into the material. But in truth, this fall issue of *Engaging Aging* has been hard; not because of re-writes, edits, or layout. Those things are incidentals for editors. They come with the territory. This time, it was our feature writer who stopped me in my tracks.

With unflinching honesty, Sister Mary Ellen holds her life up to the white-hot light of self-examination. Courageously and graciously, she takes us to places of profound change in her life. The unrelenting physical decline is obvious as the story of her diagnosis unfolds and with it, the consequential changes in ministry and place of residence. But if you look more closely, you'll see the subtler shifts that carry a high price tag.

Sister Mary Ellen allows us to catch glimpses of her relationship with God, her beliefs, self-image, prayer, and changing relationships in community. Layer by layer, she seems to be moving toward the unvarnished essence of who she is before and in God. It is not an easy journey. And to up the ante, she has placed her story at our disposal. How can we let such a gift go untended?

We'd like to invite you to bring this fall issue of *Engaging Aging* to your prayer. Reflect upon whatever stirs in you as you consider Sister Mary Ellen's free-fall from wellness into a medical diagnosis. What

happens as you imagine or live with the limitations of declines in mobility? What challenges and invitations present themselves in the loss of active ministry? Take time to imagine what you really would like to do in the coming months, then ask yourself what you're doing to make it happen. What changes have you seen in your own prayer life as you've grown older? Ask your companions how they perceive you now, and then reflect upon how that reconciles, or not, with your own self-image. Do the realities of your life reflect your beliefs?

Now, here's the challenge. Share your reflections! As Sr. Jeanne muses in her poem, it is our communion that enables the strength of motion. Gather your courage, take inspiration from Sr. Mary Ellen, and let your life journey become a source of healing for others. It may be your only chance. May we all be well!

Calendar

September 23 - 25

- **NRRO Planning and Implementation workshop; Dayton, OH**

September 25 - 28

- **CMSWR Assembly; Belleville, IL**

October 4 - 8

- **NCDC National Conference; Chicago, IL**

November 4 - 7

- **RCRI National Conference; St. Louis, MO**

November 17 - 20

- **CMSM New Leaders Workshop; Washington, DC**

November 18

- **NRRO Webinar @ 1:00 PM EST**

November 21

- **The Year of Consecrated Life begins**

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