



Engaging Aging

Courage: Absence of Fear or Grace Under Pressure, by Walter J. Burghardt, SJ

In This Issue

Editor's Desk	3
Spirituality of Acceptance	4
Aging Engaged	6
From the Offices of NRRO	7
Calendar	7

“Aging is no accident. It is necessary to the human condition, intended by the soul.”

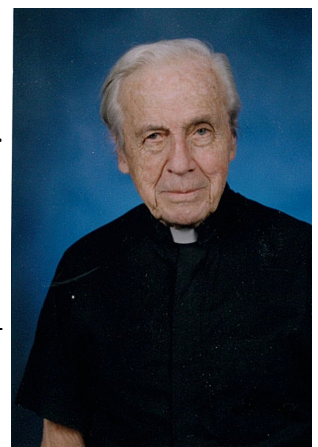
James Hillman

Several years ago I learned that I am afflicted with wet macular degeneration. Within 18 months I had no vision at all in my right eye, and the disease was progressing in my left eye. I continue to read books and articles, but only with the aid of an electronic magnifier. Add to this the probability that before long my "good" eye will enjoy only peripheral vision. On the face of it, a dim prospect for one whose professional and priestly life has been spent for half a century in theological research, lecturing and preaching. At 92 my mind is still clear, but a clear mind without eyes to see? And hearing loss to boot?

A dim prospect? Only if I cling immovably to the gifts that molded my past; only if my days are consumed in constant carping over a paradise lost. My personal example can be multiplied. Each man, woman, and child experiences situations wherein today is torture and tomorrow is at best unclear.

I should like to dwell on three questions that are highly important for courageous living: What demands courage? What important aspect of

Reverend Walter Burghardt, SJ, a renowned theologian, scholar, and preacher, died at the age of 93. During his lifetime, he authored more than 300 articles and 25 books. Father Burghardt held faculty positions at Woodstock College and Catholic University. He was a senior fellow at Woodstock Theological Center and director of "Preaching the Just Word." This edited version is reprinted by permission of National Catholic Reporter, 115 East Armour Boulevard, Kansas City, MO, 64111, www.ncronline.org.



Courage: Absence of Fear or Grace Under Pressure, continued

spirituality can help us grow in courage? How apply this aspect of spirituality to our day-to-day living?

Demanding courage Take our sense life. Am I afraid that although the sun will surely rise again tomorrow, I myself will never again be able to see it rise? Do you continue to marvel when your ears recapture a motet of Mozart, yet fear ending up deaf like Beethoven? Does fear flame up in you at the thought of your house igniting while you sleep and your not smelling the smoke in time to flee to safety?

Move now to human intelligence. Does my fear of controversy keep me from speaking out to make a difference? Do I have the courage to take an unpopular stand publicly?

Are we afraid to love? To love as Jesus loved, to love even when love is not returned? Dare we take chances to love the unlovable? These and myriad other problems confront humans from day to day and often compel us to yearn for tomorrow.

Aspects of spirituality What outlook on life, what aspect of spirituality may help us grow in courage? A three-word precept: Live this day. As a well-known Sanskrit poem, *Salutation of the Dawn*, put it, "Yesterday is but a dream and tomorrow is only a vision." Today is the only day any of us can actually live. Only today, only at this moment, are we living. Living this day is rarely simple; it is often an elusive goal.

In some situations such an outlook is frequently beyond our human powers. My own struggle to live this day with incurable macular degeneration has led me to St. Paul's advice: "Even now I find my joy in the suffering I endure for you. In my own flesh I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church" (Col 1:24). Sheer suffering is not something to be enjoyed; but it can and should be offered for those children of God in need of divine compassion. The pain may remain, but we are likely to experience a peace God alone can provide.

In fact, St. Paul's "solution" might well apply to many another agony: a dry spell in communion with God, a bruising criticism justified or not. Not easily glossed over, not dismissed with a "Win one, lose one" shrug, we hurt, we cringe, we may even rage with anger. These moments we are most in need of being open to gifts of God, what Christians call gifts of "grace," some of the gifts St. Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit," specifically "love, joy, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith" (Gal 5:22-23). To adapt a phrase from Ernest Hemingway, "Courage is grace under pressure."

Applied spirituality How apply this aspect of spirituality to our day-to-day living? There is no single solution to cover all cases. "Live this day" is not a blueprint for endurance, for stolid passivity.

Courage: Absence of Fear or Grace Under Pressure, continued

Sooner or later, my eyesight will change yet again. I know not when; I know not precisely how. Clad in uncertainty, how live I this spirituality? Fortunately I live each day in an era of changing technologies that are producing devices to help me adapt. Keenly I am aware that although I am losing my eyesight, I am not losing my vision. That distinction strengthens my spirituality, increases my insights, and redoubles my resolve to live this day.

Some ask how I live with these life-altering changes in my vision and in my hearing. Yes, these seemed "bad" enough until cancer invaded my colon, melanoma nestled itself in my left shoulder, and basal cell carcinoma found the right side of my nose a comfortable

cushion. I try to follow my own advice, "Live this day."

There must be times, will be times, when you, too, are afraid - afraid to love, afraid to give or forgive, afraid to cry out against injustice, afraid to face an incurable illness. Recognize a basic reality: courage is not the absence of fear. It is feeling afraid to do something but finding the strength to do it. For courage, reach. Reach into your deepest self and dare to discover the surprise found by a woman living with cancer: "The more courage I used to get through the day, the more courage I had. The more I embraced life, relationships, nature and the joys of every day, the richer my life became."

From the Editor's Desk, Sister Sherryl White, csj, Ph.D.



One certainty emerged during our annual planning session for *Engaging Aging*: another issue dedicated to the spirituality of aging. It seems to be a pot that never empties and always promises value. We think you'll find the stories especially significant in light of our Lenten and Easter seasons. If you're looking for starters to deepen your prayer, you'll surely discover more than a few here.

Each author points us in the direction of life-filled engagement rather than stoic endurance and status quo. "For courage, reach," advises Fr. Walter Burghardt. "I'm always trying something new," remarks Fr. Backherms. And Sr. Jan Craven closes with the observation, "They do not count the days, they make the days count." Imagine those three simple sentences informing your next strategic planning session.

Finally, we hope you enjoy the new look of *Engaging Aging*. In an effort to unify the publications coming from the offices of NRRO, we've adopted a new template. Let us know what you think! May our Lenten and Easter journeys be blessed. May all be well.

Spirituality of Acceptance by Sister Jan Craven, SP

“You just get up and go and keep living. ... It’s the best thing to do!” “There’s only one way: take each day as it comes!”

One might think I just finished walking through the corporate headquarters of Nike, but no, I was sauntering through Lourdes Hall, our assisted living area at the motherhouse of the Sisters of Providence. After visiting four sisters and asking them how they cope with their own aging and health issues, how they cope with all the losses in their lives, the words above pretty well summed up their spirit: just do it, but do it with the grace of God!

What is the connection between one’s own spirituality and one’s ability to accept the inevitability of poor health and diminishment? When talking about this article exploring how people’s spirituality assists them in accepting diminishment, illness and loss in their lives, Sister Jeanne Knoerle referenced our foundress, Saint Mother Theodore Guerin: “In Mother Theodore’s life the spirituality of love and the spirituality of acceptance seemed closely intertwined.” Each sister I visited said the same thing, using different words: only love transforms!

Each sister I talked to said that her own personal relationship with God and her on-going dialogue with God throughout the day are vital to her life as she walks, hobbles or scooters toward her day. “I get out of bed and the first

words out of my mouth are, ‘What are you, O God, going to give me today?’ and I start my day and before you know it, I have my answer,” said Sister Mildred “Millie” Giesler. On all



Sister Jan Craven, SP

four floors I walked that day, only a handful of sisters were in their rooms, which led me to believe that being out and about, being involved in life in any way they can, is part of their own spirituality of acceptance.

Some people believe that life is simply a pilgrimage and journey towards death. From the very moment of our birth, the process of dying starts; already we are moving towards death. If we are in denial about the reality of death we will miss life’s greatest mystery. We will have missed the whole point of having lived. We will live into the “true” meaning and purpose of life itself, because life and death are deeply involved with each other; they are not two separate phenomena. The journey and the goal are not separate — the journey has meaning only in relationship to the goal. Inside the mystery of each of us are holy sparks that need our permission to be released each moment of our lives.

Spirituality of Acceptance, continued

Our sisters live a reflective life, and they know that their lives have been filled with miniature diminishments each day, from birth to death. How they handle the smaller diminishments all throughout their lives is a sure indicator of how they handle them in later life. To fully live their vocation and call to diminishment and energy, to loss and gift is to live their authentic story, the only one they have, to the best of their ability.

How do we practice faithful and creative living in the face of these diminishments that will in all probability be part of our life? How do we allow the reality of loss to be in a way that holds its complexity and challenges, not just

the sadness, not just the pain, not just the suffering, but also the glory and the radiance, the love and the beauty of our lives? We do it with the invitation of the Providence of God. The Rev. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, says “it is no easy task to walk this earth and find peace.” All the more do I admire these women who have been such models to me of being in touch with their own passion for living their lives to their dying breath. They do not count the days, they make the days count. They do it well and with the grace of God right beside them. Sometimes, I think, even God has trouble keeping up with our Wisdom Sisters!



Above: Sisters Mary Patricia Cummings (left), Edwardine McNulty, and Dorothy McLaughlin, Sisters of Providence, enjoying an ice cream social.

This article was reprinted with permission from HOPE, Fall, 2011, a magazine of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, IN.

Aging Engaged: Saying Yes to Life

If you stop to visit Father Bob Backherms, SM, who lives at Mercy Siena, a retirement center near Dayton, Ohio, where many elderly Marianists live, you'd better call first. That's because Father Bob is so eager to try new things - a lunch, an educational seminar, a trip to a museum - chances are he won't be there. "The staff quit asking me if I wanted to go on these outings," he says, "because they know I always sign up. Now they automatically put me on the list."

It's one of the many ways this 83-year old Marianist stays active and fully alive. "We have art classes here, too. I enjoy working with clay. I'm always trying something new," he says.

Throughout his life, Father Bob served the Marianists in a variety of assignments, including his early years teaching in Marianist high

schools before being ordained in the early 1950s.

In the spirit of Mary, one of the guiding principles of his life is to say "yes" to everything he's been asked to do. With this open-hearted spirit, he found himself serving in ministries throughout the world: four times in India and twice in Africa followed by several years of retreat ministry in the States.

Father Bob especially loves getting others to try new things. Last year, he organized a dance at Mercy Siena. "We hired a small dance band and got everyone, even those in wheelchairs, out on the dance floor doing the hokey pokey. The place was packed," he says. "They loved it." "I like to challenge people," says Father Bob, who is trying to get a drama club together for a show. "Now that would be fun." (Fr. Bob pictured below)



From the Offices of NRRO, Brother Robert Metzger, SM Associate Director for Planning and Education



The theme of this issue of Engaging Aging is the spirit of aging. We hope you find the articles helpful as we all continue in the aging process.

The Aging Engaged article says Fr. Bob Back-

herms, SM, is a member of the Marianist Community at Mercy Siena. The Mercy Siena Retirement Community is a ministry of Community Mercy Health Partners, one of the many services provided by the South Central Community of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. Around fifteen Marianists reside in the assisted living and skilled care facilities of Mercy Siena. There are also four Marianists residing in a support community in one of the cottages on the property.

Thank you to all who participated in the webinar on February 6th. There were more than 250 locations registered for the webinar and many of those sites had two or more people listening to the presentation. We have also sent out almost 200 copies of the free DVD of the webinar.

We appreciate the many suggestions received for future webinars through the survey at the conclusion of the webinar. All of this work is only possible through the donations received in the Retirement Fund for Religious

collection. The next webinar is scheduled for May 1, 2012 at 1:00 PM EDT. Registration information will be sent in April. We hope you will join us.

Calendar

March 31

- Direct Care Assistance applications due
- Retirement Fund for Religious collection proceeds due

April 10-12

- Fundamentals and More: Doing Development in a Small Religious Institute – workshop presented by NCDC in Darien, IL

April 17-19

- Planning and Implementation Workshop – Dayton, OH

Apr 30 – May 4

- Orientation to Management of Religious Institutes – workshop presented by RCRI in Techny, IL

May 1

- Webinar co-sponsored by NRRO and Avila Institute of Gerontology

Mid-May

- Retirement Needs Analysis mailed

June

- Distribution of Direct Care Assistance



National Religious Retirement Office

Sponsor of the Retirement Fund for Religious

**3211 4th Street, NE
Washington, DC 20017-1194**

Phone: (202) 541-3215

Fax: (202) 541-3053

Email: retirement@uscgb.org

Websites:

www.usccb.org/nrro

www.retiredreligious.org

The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

Staff

Executive Director

Sister Janice Bader, CPPS

jbader@uscgb.org

Associate Director of Fund Distribution

Brother Hank Sammon, FMS, JCL

hsammon@uscgb.org

**Associate Director for Planning
and Education**

Brother Bob Metzger, SM

rmetzger@uscgb.org

Program Specialist

Monica Glover

mglover@uscgb.org

Administrative Assistant

Cassandra Malloy

cmalloy@uscgb.org

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
National Religious Retirement Office
3211 4th Street N.E.
Washington, DC 20017-1194

NON-PROFIT ORG.
US POSTAGE
PAID
USCCB