



Engaging Aging

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A Blue-Blanket Christmas

by Sister Marie Beha, OSC

My favorite aunt had a present for me. I could hardly wait to open the large package that my mother had put into my lap. I tore through the tissue and discovered... a beautiful blue blanket! I can still hear the cry of disappointment that came from my hurting heart. But "a blanket is not a present!" When you are only six or seven, gifts are things like dolls, story books or other toys. Blankets weren't on my list and the accompanying gift card did little to help: "This is for your college hope chest." College! That was way beyond me; at that time being an eighth grader was as far as my imagination would stretch.

It took all of my mother's considerable powers of persuasion to get me to write the requisite thank you note. I wasn't all that grateful despite her efforts to explain to me that my aunt, who taught almost all her life at Ohio State, loved me very much and wanted to share with me the richness that higher education had brought into her life.

With the passage of the years, I have come to appreciate my aunt's love and the gift she was giving. As she found age appropriate ways to share with me, our relationship deepened. Trips up to the university campus were times of special sharing. I came to realize how much she loved me. She was always there to listen to me, to be with me. I told her things I shared with no other, not even my mother or dad. And ultimately, I did go on to college and became a college teacher myself!

I think it is often like this between us and God. We are offered a gift but it seems so far beyond us that we
(Continued on page 2)

*"Place your mind
before the
mirror of eternity!*

*Place your soul
in the brilliance of
glory!*

*Place your heart
in the figure of the
divine substance.*

*And transform
your
entire being
into the image
of the Godhead Itself
through
contemplation.*

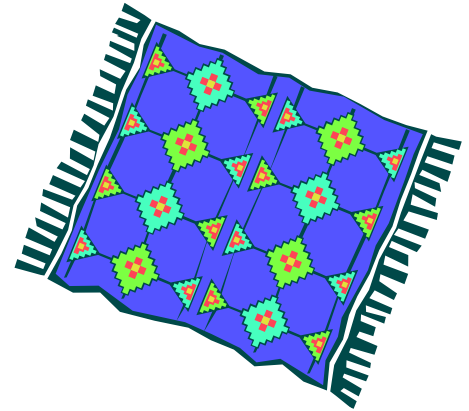
St. Clare of Assisi



Sister Marie Beha, OSC, resides at the Monastery of St. Clare in Travelers Rest, South Carolina. Sister has served her community as directress of formation, abbess, and member of the council. Through the years, Sister's writings have appeared in numerous journals such as "Human Development."

A Blue-Blanket Christmas (Continued from Page 1)

cry out in protest. This isn't the present we had hoped for! Loss and pain come into our life and we cry out in disappointment. This isn't the present we had hoped for. God is patient, giving us time to grow into what is being offered. God keeps saying "I love you so much; I want to share with you. Trust me; I am calling you forth into new life, my life." Repeatedly, over the years, I have had this same experience of "blue blanket" gifts. Failure in an area where I had been confident of success seems devastating. It takes a long time for my heart to heal enough to say thank you. Now, looking back, I can see it was the only way to touch and heal my compulsive need to succeed. At the time, the gift was beyond me, but now I am grateful for an experience that has led to greater freedom to just do the best I can, knowing that is good enough in God's sight.

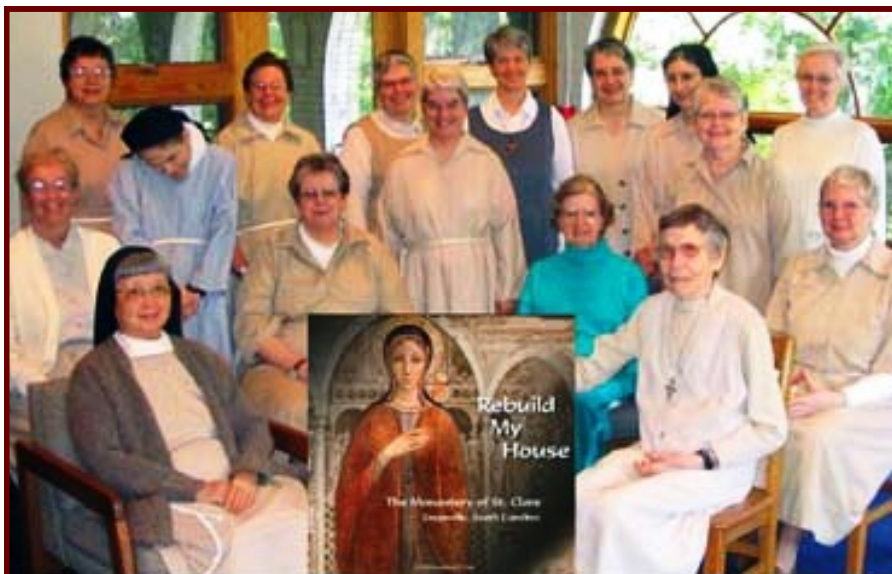


In much the same way, I have come to discover other presents in strange wrappings. When my parents died, my heart was broken; I was not ready to let them go, but ultimately I was able to grow into a new and deeper relationship. Childish misunderstandings have healed and now I am just grateful for the richness of life they gave to me.

The "blue blanket" rhythm goes on. As I face more of the diminishments that come with the added years, I am again being called into trust. I can choose to stamp my foot in protest, feeling sorry for myself and aggrieved. Or I can write my thank-you note believing that this is still another way in which the God who loves me so very much is inviting me into a new level of sharing. When I can no longer do as much, I am freer to be more. And I find God there.

I invite you, this Christmas season, to reflect on some of the experiences of your life that were so disappointing and painful at the time. At the time you may have felt like you could not go on, but somehow you did and now you look back and say "thank you." I know a family where the loss of a child through a tragic accident opened their hearts to providing a wonderful home for several children whom they ultimately adopted. The loss is still felt, but the blessing has also come. Or a job loss makes possible a more satisfying career change. Illness can become a wakeup call and a life changing experience.

The gift exchange goes on. God is always offering us fuller life in Him. How do we respond? We can stay locked up in non-acceptance or we can try to open our hearts to receive. We may be slow to write God our thank you note while God continues to wait for our slow maturation. Hopefully, someday we will be able to say with Dag Hammarskjöld, "for all that has been 'thanks'; to all that will be, 'yes'."



Sister Marie's community of Poor Clare nuns was featured in the National Religious Retirement Office's 2004 Annual Report. At the time, they were in the process of moving from their former monastery of 55 years in Greenville, South Carolina, to a newly constructed home in Travelers Rest, South Carolina. The former building far exceeded their capacity and was ill-suited for the needs of elder members. For the complete story, go to http://www.retiredreligious.org/downloads/rfro4_poorclares.pdf

Narrative Gerontology: Telling our Stories and Claiming our Sense of Self



For several years now, we have presented a mini “in depth” story of different men and women religious in each issue of *Engaging Aging*. Every time, it has been both a pleasure and a privilege to speak with those who shared their life stories with us. For this issue, we decided to take a closer look at the field of narrative gerontology and were surprised at its growing significance in the field of aging and spirituality.

Consider how many times you have started a sentence with the phrase, “I remember when...”. Returning to events of the past in our conversations is more than a means of entertaining ourselves and each other. Reclaiming the past is a developmental task of aging. It is a way to connect the proverbial dots and discover patterns in our lives, revealing meaning and deepening our understanding of self.

Research shows that life review processes have been demonstrated to foster a higher level of functioning, increased mental alertness, a greater sense of personal identity, and a reinforcement of coping mechanisms. Clearly, the merits of sharing life stories is worth our attention. Listening to and eliciting life stories from elders are important ministerial activities. Psycho-gerontologist Gary Kenyon suggests that courage, trust, and a non-judgmental, accepting environment are important factors in creating a wisdom environment that will facilitate the storytelling. In this Christmas issue of *Engaging Aging*, we are delighted to be able to share with you the stories of Sister Marie Beha, OSC, and Brother Louis La-perle, SC. Both writers invite us into a glimpse of their lives as they relate to us a memory of holidays past. Theirs is storytelling at its best.

From the Offices of NRRO... Brother Robert Metzger, SM Associate Director of Planning & Education



We are nearing the end of another year and also the end of the first decade of this new millennium. Many of us use this time to reflect on the past year and to think about what the new year will hold for us. In this issue of *Engaging Aging* we invite you to reflect on your life and to give thanks for all of God's blessings.

Here at the National Religious Retirement Office we continue to pray for all the donors to the Retirement Fund for Religious. These very generous people allow the work of our office to continue during the 22 years of the national collection. We ask once again that all religious join us in thanking them by keeping them and their families in your prayers throughout the year.

During this past year NRRO initiated the Planning and Implementation Process to assist religious institutes in long range planning. We are grateful to the 15 religious institutes that joined us in this pilot project even though they were unsure of where the process was leading them. We also give thanks to the 42 consultants who have volunteered their time to assist us in the process.

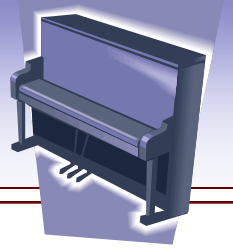
We pray that the birth of the Christ Child will bring peace and joy to your life throughout the new year.

Merry Christmas & Blessed New Year

From the Staff of the National Religious Retirement Office
Left to right: Sister Janice Bader, CPPS; Mrs. Jean Smith; Brother Robert Metzger, SM; Brother Henry Sammon, FMS, JCL; Mrs. Monica Glover



Agging Engaged



Brother Louis Laperle, SC

Brother Louis Laperle is a Sacred Heart Brother living in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. During his community life, he has ministered in a variety of positions, usually involving the management of finances. Brother Louis served as one of the very first consultants for the National Religious Retirement Office. He also served for 31 years as Treasurer of his Congregation. Still in the midst of more jobs than you can imagine, Brother Louis took time from his busy day to share with us his favorite Christmas memory.

Brother Louis writes....

I am sure that many of us remember some great Christmas mornings when we were growing up in our families. I also believe that each one of us must have a special Christmas story to remember and even cherish to this day. Well, I have one also.

On this particular Christmas morning, when I was about seven or eight years old, the youngest boy in a family of four boys and a girl, I was very anxious to run into the parlor where the family Christmas tree was lit. Under the tree were several gifts for the five children. My curiosity was the driving force for me to run at full speed to see what Santa Claus had brought Louis.

Well, I was running so quickly that I did not notice the piano bench in my way. I knocked it over and sent it crashing onto the three pedals of the piano. When I picked up the piano bench, I noticed with horror that the three pedals had been broken.

Fear gripped me as to the kind of punishment I would suffer for my hastiness in wanting to find out what presents were there for me. Well, as fast as I could run, I went back to bed and hid under the covers until my Mom and Dad came in the bedroom, calling me to join the family in opening the gifts. I was still crying, not knowing what the outcome would be. This wasn't just any piano. My Mom had received it as a gift on her twenty-first birthday.

I was reprimanded, but lovingly. To this day, I don't remember what I received, but I do remember the incident as if it were yesterday. My Mom and Dad consoled me, telling me that the pedals could be reattached to the piano since a tenant in the house that we were living in was a welder by trade. Once reattached, the piano would be good as new. And it did happen, for I was fortunate to take piano lessons later, practicing on the piano with "welded pedals".

Reflecting on this memory at this time of the year, I can only compare the love my parents showed me that Christmas morning to the love that God showed us when He was born in Bethlehem. We have, at one time or another, broken pedals in our relationship with God. But when it was time to reconnect with God, He, being the Great Welder, with love and compassion soothed the hurt we experienced for failing to love Him as He loves us. Just like my Mom and Dad loved me. Merry Christmas to one and all.



From the Editor's Desk

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



For several years now, a few of our local communities have been gathering for a Christmas party. It's nothing fancy; a bowl of chili and games around the fireplace constitute the evening's agenda. And then there's the gift exchange.

"Rules" dictate that the gift must come from your trunk - a treasure-trove of accumulated junk - and through the evening, the gift may be claimed repeatedly by anyone. It's fun to watch faces fall as "switch" is called out and the gift you really want is snatched from your grasp.

Remember now, we're talking about items such as a Steelers' Terrible Towel or a Steelers' pom-pom, or a Steelers' hat, or a Steelers' shirt (can you tell that I live in Pittsburgh?). Most everything is recycled right back into our trunks to await spring cleaning. But every year, everyone really gets into the gift exchange game. It seems as if there is something about the prospect of getting a present that awakens a sense of anticipation and excitement within us. Ultimately, of course, the gift we leave with is a renewed sense of the community we share with one another. Who could ask for more?

Now, here's a little twist for your reflection. Consider, if you will, not the gift itself or the prospect of receiving it, but the one who gives the gift. Moving from the ridiculousness of Steeler's hats to the sublimity of Christmas, consider the person of God who extends the gift of the God-self to us. Then ask yourself, what might such giving entail of us? How might we emulate such extravagant giving?

In my own musings, I remembered a story about giving that I offer now to you. I think it is in keeping with our focus in this issue of *Engaging Aging* on the value of storytelling as a means of accessing meaning.

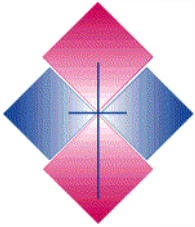


The tale is told of a wise woman who happened upon a precious stone while walking in winter's forest. Resting in the snow, this rock was like no other she'd ever seen, sparkling in the sun's light. Carefully, gently, she placed it in her bag and continued on her journey.

Eventually she met another traveler in the forest, cold and hungry from his journey. As she opened her bag to share some food, the man saw the stone and gasped. With that stone, he realized, he would never be hungry again. "Can I have it?" he asked. Without hesitation, she gave him the treasure and continued on her way.

The man celebrated his great fortune for days, holding the stone, pondering how he might spend the wealth it would bring him. But gradually, his delight faded. He realized what a fool he had been and set off to find the wise woman of the forest. It took days, but eventually he came upon her, sitting quietly in a clearing. He approached slowly, and bowing, placed the stone before her. "My lady," he said, "this stone is surely valuable and could ensure my wellbeing for a lifetime." The wise woman nodded, smiling. He continued, "But I return it in the hope that you might give me something even more precious." As he paused to draw breath and courage, the wise woman waited in silence. Then, with trembling voice, he asked, "Will you give me what is within you that enabled you to surrender the treasure?"

In this holy season of Advent, may we all be blessed with the gift of giving. And as the New Year approaches, may all be well.



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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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