



# Engaging Aging

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*“The second giving of God is the great giving/ out of the portions of the seraphim,/ abundances with which the soul is laden/ once it has given up all things for Him.”*

Jessica Powers  
*The Second Giving*

## How Did I Get Here?

**By Sister Helen Maher Garvey, BVM**

“How did I get here?” This question hovered in my mind and heart as I traveled from the foothills of Appalachia in Kentucky toward our retirement facility in Iowa. I was moving to our Motherhouse. Driving across the beautiful, fertile flat lands of the Midwest, I kept wondering. When did this transition begin? How did the Motherhouse ever become my destination? How did I get here?

Up to now, my life has included small group living, international travel, and interaction with a variety of groups as a presenter or facilitator. It has been a world of rich relationships and broad interests. I have deep bonds with my community, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM), and have served in congregational leadership and community governance positions on a regular basis. But this time was different. I was going to live in the Motherhouse.

I couldn't help thinking how often I had glibly counseled sisters about the joys of living in the Motherhouse. Now it was my turn! Although I would continue my work of facilitating and presenting, my home base would be different, my daily routine would be different, and some of my relationships would be different. My geographical distance from my family would be greater. In short, my life would change.

## Sister Helen Maher Garvey, BVM

Helen Maher Garvey, BVM, is a part-time organizational consultant for religious congregations, parishes and schools. Presently she lives in the Motherhouse of Sisters of Charity, BVM in Dubuque, Iowa. Helen serves on the Board of the *National Catholic Reporter*. She was the director of the LCWR History Exhibit, *Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*.

Helen held the position of Director of the Office of Pastoral Services for the Diocese of Lexington for ten years. She served in the presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious from 1986-89 and was a U. S. Delegate to the International Union of Superiors General. Helen was president of her congregation.



## How Did I Get Here? continued

For a while, I had noticed some shifts. At meetings, I was always the oldest person in the room. Although I still enjoyed presenting and facilitating, I slowly recognized that I did not have the stamina for running up stairs, driving long distances at night, or for being the last one at the party. I also understood that living with one sister, eighty-four years of age, six hundred miles away from other members of my community might not be the best arrangement. Of course, I denied these realities on a regular basis for months. There were long probing talks with one of the leaders of our Congregation, ongoing prayer and discernment, lingering looks on the familiar, and finally saying, “Yes.” Reluctantly, painfully, Gayle, the sister with whom I lived, and I came to the decision to move to the Motherhouse.

Saying, “Yes,” led to the duty of communicating the news to family, friends, church community and colleagues. There were a variety of responses. Some reacted with questions about my health. Others wondered if I would live a normal life, continuing my work as a facilitator. Many saw the wisdom of the move.

Pictured below, Sister Gayle Brabec, BVM, in her garden at the Life Center, Frenchburg, Kentucky.



No one enjoys moving. For planning, I used a large calendar that my friends mocked to map the hundreds of details involved in such a project. Our move was enhanced and complicated by the fact that we were transferring our residence and office to the Sisters of Notre Dame of Covington, Kentucky (SND). Intricate legalities tested us: the transfer of the deed; dissolution of the corporation; and cancelling utilities, phone, and cable services. The trip to the post office to confirm a change of address made the move real.

Did I mention purging the house and myself of unnecessary objects? My companion’s great loss was the garden where she had planted tomatoes, green peppers, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries. She had planted her heart. In 1998, Sr. Gayle created the Life Center, an organization devoted to education and sustainability. What started in the basement of a downtown office building became a nonprofit corporation with a residence and office that included a straw bale section on an acre of land. When we left, the blackberries were in full bloom.

Of course, there was cleaning, cleaning, and more cleaning. We wanted to leave the property in a state worthy of the SNDs who are marvelous organizers and cleaners (besides being outstanding educators and health care specialists). In the midst of all the planning, cleaning and grieving, we experienced many loving farewell parties. In a way, I would have preferred escaping in the middle of the night, but I knew that saying goodbye was important for everyone, whether leaving or staying. William Bridges, a noted authority in transition literature, tells us that there are three overlapping stages of transition: the ending, neutral zone, and new beginning.

The ending is a time when you decide to leave something significant, e.g. a situation, position, or home. It is a final and usually hard decision. The neutral

## How Did I Get Here? continued

zone is that time between the ending and a new beginning. It is a time of vacillation between the old and the new. You do not belong completely in either place. During this difficult time you experience disorientation and grief. You may even second guess the original “final” decision. Everything in the original situation becomes desirable. You may forget all the reasons why the change is right. The familiar life exerts a strong pull. Still, the pull is also felt for the new. The ending and the new beginning sometimes overlap.

Those overlapping stages of ending and new beginning came home to me when I was still in Kentucky trying to sort my belongings. I had a system of dividing my books into four categories: give away, keep, leave, and bewildered. In the midst of it all, the Motherhouse personnel were contacting me repeatedly with questions about my preferences regarding a bedroom, medical records, and doctors. At the same time, they were also making every effort to welcome me in myriad ways. I was even invited into a local “cluster.” So, I was urged to the new while I was still living in the old. Every beginning ends something. The new beginning is the future. It holds the promise.

An important part of the old and the new are friends. They cleaned the kitchen cabinets, packed the car, drove one of our cars to Dubuque, brought their van to transport our “stuff” and were “companions on the journey.” We needed our friends. We were never alone. In the book, “Transitions,” Bridges counsels that “transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external; transition is internal.” So as I traveled with friends, as I came to terms with a new situation, I did so in community with my BVM sisters, friends, and family.

Especially during the neutral zone, that in-between



Straw bale house residence for Sisters Helen and Gayle in KY time, we need anchors. While everything seems to be changing around us, we gravitate to the solid foundations of our lives, the immutable axis around which the winds of change swirl. Prayer, the basic understanding of religious life as a quest for God, communication with friends, the daily security of physical work, memories of other changes successfully navigated, and the very acts of packing, cleaning and planning all facilitate the great passage.

This great passage compelled ritual. On the week of our departure we invited the leadership of the SNDs to a luncheon that included an opportunity to meet the neighbors and share prayer. During the prayer both congregations shared their mission statements. Then, Gayle presented the keys for the Life Center to the SND provincial, Sr. Marla Monahan. We were now ready for the journey.

Arriving at our Motherhouse on the afternoon of August 1, 2013, our sisters met us at the door. The sense of leaving was starting to be replaced with a sense of coming home. Marked by the kindness of staff and residents, our homecoming was warm and practical, but it did not immediately erase the sharp sense of loss for the twenty years we spent in Kentucky. Perhaps it is easy to feel guilty for this sense of loss because I have been given so much. Imagine the loss experienced by refugees, victims of floods and forest fires, and women in war. Yet I know that to love is to experience loss; to love is to be vulnerable, regardless of the context.

## How Did I Get Here? continued

Vulnerability has taken many different shapes as I find myself in a completely new culture. From learning a new email system (God bless Information Technology persons) to becoming accustomed to dining with over a hundred sisters, I've had to journey from familiar to unfamiliar. For example, in Kentucky, we had a routine of planting, growing, harvesting and cooking our own food. Now, I was moving through a buffet line overflowing with nutritious food I'd never seen before.

To function effectively, any large group must develop procedures for the common good. In a small group those procedures are intuitive, automatic and easy. To move into the Motherhouse is to realize the common good in practical ways. It is to share the newspaper, to respect the daily schedule, and to have dinner at a regular time rather than when you feel like it. I had to learn new ways: where the linens are stored; how to keep bananas from breakfast for an afternoon break; and how to get a parking space. (Most of the sisters here do not retain a car, but because of my work, I have kept my car and obtained an office.)

On a deeper level, I find myself resonating with the observation by Brother James Zullo, FSC, that transitions are characterized by movements from stability, to vulnerability, to new self-definition. A new self-definition or any self-definition compels a sense of purpose. In a different situation, I must slowly redefine my purpose. Of course, my basic life purposes continue to shape my identity and ground my life in prayer, relationships, and vowed commitment. This new situation is an opportunity to strengthen and deepen these fundamental orientations. But my purpose in this specific place with these particular people must be discerned.

Studying my environment, seeing the Mississippi River, observing the generosity of the sisters, appreciating the kindness and commitment of staff, I am gradually

finding my place in this hallowed home. And it is hallowed. I am stimulated and motivated by the broad interests of my sisters, their awareness of the issues of our time, their deep commitment to international justice and immigration reform, and their inspiring efforts to promote peace through fasting, action and prayer. I am in a holy environment.

This environment requires careful stewardship. My congregation, our donors, unsung heroes in finance and development offices, the National Religious Retirement Office, and sisters working for minimal stipends over the years have provided a graced, bountiful setting for me. In the midst of these changes, in the midst of this transition, I am surrounded by the love and kindness of residents, staff and nearby BVMs. I am enfolded by natural beauty, as well as by a lovely, well-constructed residence enriched by history. I am encircled by opportunities, by new beginnings.

My challenge is to acknowledge loss, to accept limitations, and to reinforce strengths. My challenge is to make those limitations and strengths a window lighting the way to a new future rather than a wall that darkens the path to that future. My challenge is to create my home and to enrich our home within the abundant life of the community. I recall the Carmelite poet, Jessica Powers, whose poem, "The Second Giving," reminds me of God's "second giving" and my reluctant, grateful, halting, faithful response.

This "second giving" may not have been obvious to me as I traveled the interstate from Kentucky to Iowa. But, in retrospect, that journey epitomizes the continuing call of this "second giving," this flourishing. Probing the question, "How did I get here?" gives meaning to this transition. It compels a deeper contemplation, a profound gratitude, a full embrace of this new beginning.

## Resources

### BOOKS

Bridges, William (1980). *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Perseus Books.

Bridges, William (2001). *The Way of Transitions: Embracing Life's Most Difficult Moments*. Perseus Publishing.

Morgan, Richard (2006). *Settling In: My First Year in a Retirement Community*. Upper Room Books.

Pauley, Jane (2014). *Your Life Calling: Reimagining the Rest of Your Life*. Simon and Schuster.

Rohr, Richard (2011). *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Jossey-Bass.

Zander, Rosamund S. and Zander, Benjamin (2000). *The Art of Possibility*. Penguin Books.

### ARTICLES

Anderson, George M. (2003). Turning 70 and Beyond. *America Magazine*, September 8, 189 (6).

Douglas, Deborah Smith (2010). Though the Straight Way be Lost. *Weavings*, 25 (3).

Hansen, Ron (2004). The School of the Heart. *America Magazine*, February 16, 190 (5).

Prevallet, Elaine M. (2010). With Open Eyes: Discerning the Pattern of God's Presence. *Weavings*, 25 (3).

Simsic, Wayne E. (2011). For Darkness is as Light. *Weavings*, 26 (1).

Zullo, James R. (2001). Navigating Transitions. *The Works*, Winter.

### REFLECTIVE POINTS

"When we pray we stop trying to control life and remember that we belong to life."

Rachel Naomi Remen

"When you're stuck in a spiral, to change all aspects of the spin you only need to change one thing."

Christina Baldwin

"We are taught in the school of the heart the crucial difference between acceptance and resignation, hope and dread, doing and being."

Ron Hansen

"In rock climbing...you must trust that you're tied to more than what you're standing on... Jesus offers the same lesson: the one to whom you're connected is far greater than any circumstance."

Mary M. Morrissey

"If you always imagine God in the same way, no matter how true and beautiful it may be, you will not be able to receive the gift of the new ways God has ready for you."

Carlos Valles

"When an old culture is dying, a new culture is created by those people unafraid to be insecure."

Rudolf Bahro

"It is not the book or the class or the idea that changes us, as important as those things are; it is the experience."

Jim Wallis

"Sometimes this letting go of old ways is painful, occasionally even devastating. But this is not why the night is called 'dark.' The darkness implies... only that the liberation takes place in hidden ways, beneath our knowledge and understanding."

Thomas Moore

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



The theme of this issue of *Engaging Aging* is making the transition from a life of fully active ministry to one that is less active, to one that *might* seem “less important.” Leaving a cherished ministry and moving to the motherhouse or retirement home can be a very

challenging time of life. It takes great fortitude, deep faith and tremendous flexibility to move gracefully through this life-changing experience.

Sister Helen Garvey, BVM is in the midst of such a transition. Helen is a regular speaker at our NRRO planning workshops. When she came to our September workshop, I was aware that she had recently left Kentucky, her home for 20 years, and moved back to her motherhouse in Dubuque. I asked her if she would be willing to write the lead article for this issue of *Engaging Aging* since she seemed to be someone who would be able to share her experience in a way that would resonate with others. She immediately answered in the positive and explained that she was still trying to fully understand this time in her life. She expressed a hope that writing would bring her to greater clarity.

Sister Helen has done a wonderful job of describing both the heartbreaks and joys of making this major life transition. “How did I get here?” is a question we ask many times throughout our life. As Helen says, how well we are grounded in our prayer life, in our relationships and in our commitment to our vowed life will determine our ability to navigate these transitions. We are grateful to her for sharing her insights and we hope you will find them a guide for your own journey.

**From the Editor’s Desk  
Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.**



In 1976, psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe published The Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). Designed to measure the impact of stress in someone’s life, it assigns a value or weight to a series of 43 events. To take the test, (available online) you simply read through the list of events, checking a box

if you’ve experienced any of them in the past year. Your score is the sum of points that you received for each event you’ve been through. The higher your score, the more likely you’ll be physically ill and the more important it is that you take steps to get help.

In 15 of the 43 events on the SRRS, “change” is the key word. Changes in eating habits, residence, relationships at work, recreation, and sleeping habits all signal a shift from the familiar. And each change precipitates toll-taking stress.

Sometimes, I think of religious as masters of change. Even if we stay in a local community or ministry for an extended time, there is that internal tug of desiring to be totally available for mission, wherever that may take us. In those places like motherhouses, where life seems most predictable, a ride in the elevator will tell you otherwise as you’ll see a wall filled with postings of change. And remember, there is no such thing as an insignificant change.

As we move through this season of Advent, the precipitating edge of an event that has split all time, maybe we need to consider the invitations and challenges of change in our lives. By reflecting on Sister Helen’s poignant account of change and transition, from bidding farewell to the blueberries to surrendering the keys, what wonderings are rising in us? Where are the crossroads and which turns are ours?

Merry Christmas to you all, and may all be well!

## Announcements and Calendar

### Free Webinars Will Continue

NRRO and the Avila Institute of Gerontology have agreed to continue the webinar series for next year. An e-bulletin will be sent from NRRO about 4 weeks before each webinar with the speaker, topic and registration information. All webinars will begin at 1:00 PM ET and will last one hour, including time for questions and answers.

**The dates for 2014 are February 11, May 13, August 19 and November 18.**

### Help NRRO Go Green

If you are not already receiving this newsletter electronically and would like to do so, please contact us at [retirement@usccb.org](mailto:retirement@usccb.org) to have your e-mail address added to our distribution list.

### Help Us Keep in Touch with You

Please send changes in address, phone, e-mail, or congregational leadership to Tiffany Lezama, ([tlezama@usccb.org](mailto:tlezama@usccb.org)) so that we may keep our records and mailing lists updated.

## Calendar

### January 2

- Direct Care Assistance applications mailed

### January 31—February 2

- NRRO Planning and Implementation Workshop; San Antonio, TX

### February 11

- NRRO & Avila Institute of Gerontology Webinar

### March 31

- Direct Care Assistance Applications Due

### Copy and Circulate

We want to remind you that anyone is free to copy and circulate *Engaging Aging*. Help us to expand our reach and serve new audiences.

Pictured below, from left to right: Monica Glover; Henry Sammon, FMS, JCL; Robert Metzger, SM; Tiffany Lezama; Janice Bader, CPPS



*Please join the staff of NRRO as we give thanks this Christmas for the generosity of our many friends and benefactors. We pray that the birth of the Christ Child will bring peace and joy to your life and to our world throughout the coming year.*

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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.

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