



# Engaging Aging

## Milestones of Growing Old with Peace and Joy

By Sister Evelyn McGarry, OCSO

In every life there are milestones which mark the different stages of life, one leading to another, each with their expectations, challenges, joys, and sorrows. Surprisingly enough, I have found this last milestone of aging in the monastic life to be most interesting. I would like to share a few observations and experiences now that I find myself in the category of being an elder. These reflections fall under four themes, which I have chosen to call: doors, spirals, little things for big graces, and education.

### DOORS

Jesus calls us to become like little children. He says: "Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3). I am told that everything in a child's eyes seems big. A little person standing in the great doorway of life sees infinite possibilities. A big door closes when we realize that much of the energy, talents and seemingly endless possibilities of youth lie behind us. Our limitations and disabilities are now so much more obvious than our abilities. So, as one grows older yet smaller in many ways, a smaller door is opened by our loving Father. This can be wonderful because it is so unexpected. Instead of bemoaning our losses, we gain new perspectives. We have become small enough and simple enough to recognize and receive the small gifts that are offered to us.

**Sister Evelyn McGarry, OSCO**, is a Cistercian nun of Mount Saint Mary's Abbey, Wrentham, Massachusetts. Born in Glasgow, Scotland to a Scottish mother and an Irish father, her sense of adventure led her to emigrate to Canada at the age of twenty-one. An acute experience of homesickness drew her deeper into relationship with God, which led her to discern a vocation to Cistercian life. She entered Mount Saint Mary's Abbey in 1969 and has never regretted her decision. Sister finds that the monastic life fills all her desire to love God even beyond what she was aware of. In the monastery, Sister has served in the cow barn, the bakery, the candy factory and as novice director. Sister Evelyn is currently the guest mistress and bread baker.



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*"What is more useful than prayer? Give generously of this. What is more human than love? This also give. Enclose the whole world in the embrace of your love.*  
*Aelred of Rievaulx*  
*Rule for a Recluse*

## Milestones of Growing Old with Peace and Joy, continued

These are some of the small doors that have opened for me. For many years I have regretted that, through circumstances, I had to give up playing the piano. I loved it so much. I remember, as a child, not being able to sleep at night because I was so excited, knowing that tomorrow I could play again. I should have pursued it later as an adult, but did not. Now, in my old age, I find that I have a little more time since I cannot do as much as I used to do. So, one day I sat down at the piano with the anticipation of a child. I could feel the excitement within me mounting as I listened with earphones so that only the Lord and I could hear my performance. An old door I thought of as long since closed was reappearing as a small door, opening to a touch of magic. Stepping through that door, the music began removing dust and cobwebs from old memories, and healing old regrets. I played little tunes of old, but it felt as if I had captured a concerto.

Soon afterwards, I heard of an artist who, at the request of a little paralyzed boy, painted a pic-

ture of him lying on the floor with a bicycle, as if riding it. He had the picture framed and placed on the wall. Each time the little boy looked at it, it brought great joy just as if he were really riding a bicycle.

One morning, not long after this, I sat gazing through our large refectory window as I often do, enjoying our view of lawn, trees, and a distant horizon. However, this time, my vision was different. I saw, instead, a beautiful sky and, at the same time, a gorgeous lake. This was not a false vision or a fairytale, but a gift from God. Doesn't Isaiah speak of the mountains and hills bursting into song and all the trees of the fields clapping their hands (Is. 55:12)? The Psalmist says, "Let the rivers clap their hands, the mountains shout with them for joy," (Ps. 97:8) and "the mountains skipped like rams and the hills like lambs" (Ps. 114:4). Such hyperbole points to a new consciousness and a little taste of what is to come, as St. Paul says: "Eye has not seen nor ear heard...what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor.

2:9). We can apply this also to times when God's will in our lives is puzzling to our inner sight and listening heart. Like children, we gaze on our Father's gifts through the little doors he opens on eternity.



Sister Evelyn McGarry (left) playing the organ at Mount Saint Mary's Abbey. (Photo: Courtesy of MSM Abbey)

## Milestones of Growing Old with Peace and Joy, continued



Sister Evelyn McGarry (center) at work in the Abbey's "Candy House" packaging Butternut Munch, one of the bestsellers available for purchase. Since Cistercian Nuns live according to the Rule of St. Benedict, they try to support themselves by the work of their hands. Their Trappistine Quality Candy industry provides this opportunity. In a video on the Abbey's website showing sisters at work in the facility, Sister Evelyn comments, "After a while your prayer seeps into your work and to everything else with it. After a while, it's a seamless garment in a way." (Photo: Jim Judkis)

### SPIRALS

The old saying, "history repeats itself," is so true. As Ecclesiastes puts it: "What has been, that will be; what has been done, that will be done. Nothing is new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). However, if we are open to it, finding ourselves at a familiar turn in the road can yield more than just a sense of sterile repetition. I have found life to be more like a spiral going round and round in an ascending pattern, providing new ideas and horizons.

There was an old spiritual father who, when questioned by an old friend as to what he did now, said: "When I was young, I carried the water. Now that I am old, I still carry the water." Yes, indeed, but he had grown wiser in the course of his interior journey. William of St. Thierry, one of our Cistercian Fathers, says that our progress through life is not that of a speedboat or a race, but more like a sweeper crisscrossing a space several times. I recall my uncle, Tom, whose life work was to paint the Forth Bridge in Scotland. When he reached the end of the bridge, it was time to begin all over again

at the other end. But the work was always different because the procedures were different, and he had himself changed.

I am reminded of my old Novice Mistress who called me a "little steam engine." If she were to see me now, she might call me a "slow boat to China." However slowly I may move these days, I do still arrive, and I get to see more scenery on the way. I find myself noticing details in the monastery I did not see in the same light before.

Accepting this quality of life as a spiral can lead to contentment in our daily duties and tasks. Contentment and its opposite are woven into the Rule of St. Benedict. "Seek after peace," he says, "refrain from murmuring," and "be a cheerful giver." I have found great joy and peace in my monastic life through trying to be thankful for what I have done and not complain about what has been left undone. The same task will come around tomorrow, but with new energy to handle it. I often ponder the words of St. Bernard who says in one of his sermons: "If



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we are not grateful, we shall be ungrateful.” This is so true. Either can become our habitual attitude and eventually our mindset. We have to choose daily how to approach the tasks and events of life. St. Benedict says that “Our lifespan has been lengthened by way of a truce, that we may amend our misdeeds.” To put it another way, the spiral of life gives us repeated opportunities to choose contentment and gratitude and to find God anew in the familiar.

### LITTLE THINGS FOR BIG GRACES

I recall an old song by Kitty Kallen entitled “*Little Things Mean a Lot.*” Little things mean a lot in any relationship. Jesus tells us: “If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones” (Lk. 16:10). Sometimes it can be harder to do the little mundane thing, such as lifting a piece of paper from the floor when you are in a hurry, than doing something really difficult, yet the same dynamic is at play. Our Cistercian martyr, Christian de Cherge, wrote: “From experience we know that little gestures often cost much, especially if they have to be repeated

every day. ...We gave our heart ‘entirely’ to God, and it costs us much when he takes us at our word. Putting on an apron as Jesus did can be as serious and solemn a thing as the gift of life...and on the other hand, to give one’s life can be as simple as putting on an apron.”

Looking back on a time when I was living with a big trial, having pulled a muscle in my back, I remember reading in Scripture that Jesus said he would be with us – His church, and, therefore, each of us – until the end of time. Now, in little trials or minor catastrophes, I hear Him say: “I will be with you always and in your time right now.” I feel His loving presence when this little trial seems big and even desperate, such as losing your belt ten minutes before Vespers!

We are told that in our on-going formation, God does ninety percent and we must do the other ten percent. However, just like the widow’s mite, I think He gives more dividends to the ten percent in old age since it is all you have to give, small as it is.

The view from the refectory window at Mount Saint Mary’s Abbey, Wrentham, Massachusetts.  
(Photo: MSM Abbey)



## Milestones of Growing Old with Peace and Joy, continued

On October 12, 2020, the feast of Our Lady of Aparecida, the sisters at Mount St. Mary's Abbey celebrated the solemn profession and monastic consecration of Sister Maria Karla Gonçalves. Pictured right, sisters welcome Sister Maria Karla. (Photo: Raquel Gonçalves)



This reminds me of a special grace I received recently. A guest asked me to give her a Lenten practice. She was already doing a lot for the Church and was faithful in many practices such as *Lectio Divina* and silent prayer. Just as I was about to pray over it, I heard clearly: "Little things for big trials." The woman accepted it, although she thought it was too easy, but I insisted. To my surprise, this became my own practice also. When the COVID-19 crisis appeared on the scene, I kept offering little things, and sometimes even tiny things at the nudging of the Holy Spirit. I am convinced it really makes a difference even when the results seem poor.

God does not measure by size but by the loving intention. I remember Julian of Norwich and her vision of the world as a tiny hazelnut in the palm of her hand. Jesus said to her: "It lasts, and ever shall last, because God loves it. All things have their being in this way by the grace of God." A number of guests have told me with sadness that they have so little to show for their long life. To this I usually ask: "Have you drawn closer to God?" They usually reply in more or less the same way that, yes, He is so much more present in their lives. He is their main focus now. I have read about famous people who have given generously and accom-

plished much for humanity but ended life's journey with a feeling of emptiness and estrangement from God, even to the point of suicide. So perhaps it is a special grace to see one's life and all its accomplishments as just a little thing, tiny really, but held in being by God, loved by Him and always under His gaze.

### EDUCATION

One of the gifts of living in a multigenerational community is that we are educated by our Sisters who have gone before us. We have watched them grow old and seen their needs and suffering, so that when our aging makes itself felt, we realize that we have gained so much from their experiences and example. I remember once when helping an older Sister, she was so grateful and relieved, at that moment it seemed she had accomplished the task herself; we were so united in spirit, we were one. At times when an older Sister who is handicapped in many ways speaks of the goodness of God to her and the gift of her

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vocation, we realize that she has been invited by God in a new way to answer the call she received. Having had to let go of many gifts and talents of younger days, she now experiences God's love just for Himself. As Gregory of Nyssa puts it, our goal is not just to love God for His gifts but for Himself alone.

I was truly blessed to come across a prayer by our Cistercian Father Baldwin of Ford, who knew fallen human nature so well. "I have grown old among my enemies within. Deliver me from myself." Oh, what joy to see this so clearly now that I am older, as I recall rash judgements, anxieties, hurts, childishness and so on, all from the enemy within of self-love, self-centeredness and, of course, pride. This might sound depressing, but it is not so; it brings so much freedom with its truth. Moreover, I join others in saying that if I knew then what I know now, life could have been so much simpler and more straightforward. Yet, in reality, the wisdom we now possess comes from the ups and downs, the twists and turns that have made up our past life. Our life has been our education in wisdom. We see this now, and we rejoice in finding the glass of our life half full, rather than half empty.

I would like to end with a quote from an address by Pope Francis to those attending the January 2020 International Congress, "The Richness of Many Years of Life." He states, "... the elderly are also the present and the future of the Church. Yes, they are also the future of a Church that, together with the young, prophecies and dreams! This is why it is so important that those advanced in years and the young speak to each other, it is so important."

Yes, it is important that the young and the old share their lives with one another. Isn't this what we are doing as we live our cenobitic life?

We can help one another to find contentment with our progress on the way and gratitude for God's untiring work of bringing us to Himself. We come to see the little doors God opens for us into joy, the spiral pattern of life through which we are invited deeper into the encounter with God in the ordinary, and the little things that draw us into the great grace of knowing ourselves cherished by God. This is the education in wisdom that many years of monastic life has given me, the milestones of growing old with peace and joy.



Advent window at Mount Saint Mary's Abbey (Photo: MSM Abbey)

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Office as we continue to 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.**





**From the Offices of NRRO**  
**Sister Georgette Lehmoth, OSF**  
**Education & Outreach Manager**

In his latest encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis states: “In his simple and direct way, St. Francis

expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives.”

We have entered the season of gathering together to give thanks, to celebrate God’s love outpoured in the person of Jesus and to welcome a New Year, filled with both much anxiety and great hope. As the Coronavirus continues to spread and strengthen, doctors and scientists are warning us that this is not the time to gather with those whom we love. They are asking us to be patient and wait.

Being patient and waiting are at the heart of the Advent Season. Pope Francis challenges us to appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity. Let us do so, being especially mindful of our own sisters and brothers in eldercare facilities who are experiencing so much isolation and aloneness, as they, like all of us, await the advent of a new year filled with hope and promise.

Pope Francis writes in the encyclical that “We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead.” He states that “Hope is bold,” and invites us to open our hearts to renewed hope in these difficult times.

Together then, let us be hopeful and let us be bold!



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

As the liturgical year brings us to Advent, we are pleased to once again share with you a view of aging through the lens

of a particular community’s spirituality. We think you’ll be delighted this December to read the article by Sister Evelyn McGarry, OCSO. A Trappistine Nun at Mount Saint Mary’s Abbey in Wrentham, MA, Sister Evelyn’s words ring loudly with a spirit steeped in Cistercian writings and Scripture.

I imagine that some of us hold a rather magical image of contemplative life. Thoughts of candlelit chapels and beautiful chant seem alluring, especially now as lessening daylight draws us indoors, inviting a quieting of hearts. If that’s the case with you, spend some time with Sister Evelyn’s words. What you’ll find will carry you far beyond any magic to approach, instead, the mystical, i.e. a communion with God grounded in every aspect of life.

In the fullest sense of the word, Sister speaks to us of a life touched with both letting go and letting come. She tells of the routine of repetition that can be made new by a spirit of openness and gratitude. Sister shares with us the inheritance she has received in the example of senior members, and of the responsibility she now carries as one of the elders to leave that same legacy for others. In the ongoing work of reconciling her life, she comes to peace and joy.

As guest mistress for the Abbey, Sister Evelyn writes of a single question she often poses to those who come for a visit: “Have you drawn closer to God?” What a profound query with which to begin our Advent journey!

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