

SPIRITUALITY AND AGING

A Sermon delivered at

First Parish in Needham (Unitarian Universalist)

Sunday, April 18, 2010

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Good morning, I'm glad to be back with you again.

A good place to start in considering our topic, "Spirituality and Aging" is to think of our own grandparents and how they coped with their own sense of aging.

In my family, my paternal grandmother, Maude, prided herself in NOT having a sense of humor. She was the wife of a Methodist minister, and loved the role of being the church's model of how to express a mixture of suffering and martyrdom. When my mother was pregnant with my brother and then me, "Grandmere" refused to look at her because her obvious condition meant that her son had done, well, You Know What. Being around her was VERY boring.

Now my maternal grandmother, Gwen, was quite the opposite. She was lively, lovely and had much more spunk than her other sisters. When, in 1895 she met an older man (he was 30), and they fell in love, her mother said that she would give her approval if first, my grandmother would singlehandedly cook a Sunday dinner (12 at table) and then design and create her own wedding gown. The resulting dinner and wedding dress had everyone's delight and admiration.

She was like that all her life. At the age of 99, she finally had to go into a nursing home, I visited her and asked if there was anything she didn't particularly like about being there. "Yes," she immediately replied, "They don't have any steamy novels in big print!"

Now this will not come as "new news." Our society worships youth and all that it represents. Just ponder the media, movies, and music.

But, curiously, have you noticed that many more ads now include older people and seniors whose pitch is to older folk like themselves? Yes, we are getting more a lot more attention. And why? Well, there are more of us now and

that means there are potential consumers who want to hold back time. Whole industries are built on the attempt to stay young—from face lifts to high power vitamins to Viagra.

Someone once quipped, “inside every 70 year old is a 35 year old asking, “what happened?”

We find ourselves looking back to our earlier years, remembering the energy, drive, and sense of connection that kept us growing and going.

Again, more often than not, our aging is viewed as something to be fought off as long as possible. We experience aging as a threat to our sense of self-worth and identity. With fewer roles and family responsibilities, we wonder, “where do I still fit in?” and “does anybody care?”

Because of these inner questions and not readily finding helpful answers, some aging people think that the only way to face the unknown is to grow rigid as an attempt to control “what’s important” and “what’s next.” Too easily they choose to be more critical of others and develop a kind of vision that easily spots human flaws in *others*. “Who does she think SHE is?! Or “what is this world coming to when there are people who act like that?!”

Sort of like my Aunt Lucille in Chicago. Nothing, no one every matched her expectations of what others were supposed to say, to think, or to be.

I remember when we were living in Knoxville TN where John had his first church. Aunt Lu deigned to make a visit, during which her eyebrows remained raised, her nose always up in the air. The right way, her way, was always, well...right. And then there was the “flawed way” or “flawed response.”

One morning at the breakfast table, after chatting about the weather and what was going to be on TV that evening, Aunt Lu set us up to show how flawed we were by asking whether we preferred Huntley or Brinkley as newscasters? How the hell were we supposed to respond?? However we answered, she would let us know that we were, once again, wrong, wrong, wrong.

Yes, it is so easy to stereotype others. I must admit that more than once I have been in situations in which I judged others and their behavior as “wrong, wrong, wrong.”

John and I had been to a concert in Boston and were waiting to pay at the exit booth of an underground parking garage. The four young African-American teenagers in front of us at the booth were pulling out their various pockets,

trying to come up with the fee. Laughing and rambunctious, they seemed to take forever. We waited and waited. I began to fume, “they’re holding us up... what is this world coming to?!! Finally enough money was found and they drove off.

To this day, I wish I had had the generosity of spirit to go up to the cashier myself and slip him the fee, but my rigid, self-righteous thinking had triumphed over kindness and open-mindedness.

So it is as we age. The very act of reviewing one’s own values is a marker for us all. While our past has indeed shaped us and who we have become, the very act of reviewing one’s own values frees us to be more aware of our inner voices of reflection, of reason, of feeling that comes, for example, with having been wrong, and then setting out to right it., or having been blind to the love and kindnesses that have come to us over the years.

According to Joan Chittister, author of The Gift of Years, an essential part of growing older is becoming more and more spiritually aware of both the meaning and meaninglessness of things, people, and moments of life. That is to say, we now have an opportunity to reconsider what has been truly valuable and life-giving and what has not.

It’s like one of Fontaine’s fable in which tells of a proud, mighty tree lordling over a small reed in a meadow. A terrible, furious storm comes up, so strong that the oak tree is split in half. “How come you survived, the dying oak asked the reed. “Je plie et no romp pas,” replied the reed—“I bend and do not break.” Our being flexible is so important to staying alive in heart and spirit.

Another spiritual path that can lead us into gracious aging as our days continue is to have a friend, or “kindred spirit” with whom to share our deepest thoughts, memories, fears, and hopes. Such a confidant provides a safe, loving place where we can be honest and trusting, truly “a port in the storms of life” for you both.

My heart almost broke when a close older friend of mine once reflected that throughout her 88 years, because they had moved so much, she had never had a true confidant. When she got upset or depressed, the only “safe place” she said, was in the shower where she could cry her heart out---and no one ever knew.

And, of course, as we get older we continue to year for—and I hope have attained, a sense of being an accepted, loved part of a community of fellow travelers. A community like First Parish, where we want to be a part of things even as our bodies begin to fail us and we can’t remember names.

I have a dear friend in Tennessee, who just turned 90, and who has struggled for the past 30 years having a devil of a time remembering names. I once asked her how she handled this in public. “Oh,” she replied, “I just put my arm around her shoulders, smile, and say, “my pal!”

One of the hardest parts of aging is the loss of friends and loved ones. This includes losing parts of our physical and emotional health as well. With each loss, we feel somehow diminished. For many people who feel a loving spirit within, or even God herself intertwined with all that we are and do, this can offer deep comfort.

As a hospital chaplain, I visit patients who are waiting, worried, and alone. As we get to know one another, if it seems appropriate, I suggest a way to bring comfort to their fears or worries. “Every time we take a breath, we are breathing in the love of God. I then invite them to try it. They begin to take deep, slow breaths, and appear to have been calmed. “See,” I reflect, “you seem to be more at peace.”

Finally, using and enjoying humor is essential to our keeping spiritually and emotionally alive.

Here are some quotes from the book, Age Doesn't Matter Unless You are a Cheese:

---Tallulah Bankhead once reflected, “if I had my life to live over again, I'd make the same mistakes—only sooner.”

---Mark Twain once said, “I am an old man and have known many troubles, but most of them never happened.”

---And the best one is from Gypsy Rose Lee: “I have everything now that I had thirty years ago, except now it's all lower.”

Then there are the stories, such as:

An 84 year old man went to the doctor for a physical. A few days later, the doctor saw him walking down the street with a gorgeous woman on his arm. The next time the doctor saw him he asked him how he was doing.

“Great,” said the old guy. “I did just what you told me, ‘get a hot mama and be cheerful.’” I didn't say that,” said the doctor, “I said, “you've got a heart murmur, be careful.”

And here's the most recent one. This past Wednesday Facebook contacted me to say, "John has just updated his relationship status to say that you two are married. He has listed your anniversary as June 21, 1972. Please confirm this relationship status." Hmmmmm.

But above all, my friends, the most important part of one's developing a deeper and more fulfilling personal spirituality is to be grateful, to be thankful for life itself. I'm even grateful for my husband, who took only 38 years to go public that we were—and are==truly married.

All in all, life is indeed good. Pass it on, in gratitude.

AMEN