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Engaging Aging

Contemplation's Impact on Aging: Rooted in Mystery and Poured Out in Compassion By Sister Liz Sweeney, SSJ

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“Everything I endure, with faith and love, by way of diminishment or death, makes me a little more closely an integral part of Christ’s mystical body.”

*Teilhard de Chardin
The Divine Milieu*

“You are not dead yet, it’s not too late to open to your depths by plunging into them and drink in the life that reveals itself quietly there.”—Rilke

This is our invitation. Aging calls each of us to plunge into our depths “and drink in the life/ that reveals itself quietly there.” Two summers ago at our congregational retreat house in Cape May Point, New Jersey, I had a conversation with two retreat directors (like me, over seventy) that still reverberates in my psyche. We talked about the profound reformation we’d experienced after Vatican II, noting how that had prepared us for new forms of prayer, community life and ministry. All three of these aspects of our lives changed radically in those years. At the heart of the shift, and what made it possible, we realized, was a profound and energizing spiritual reorientation that grounded us in scripture, discernment and God in ways we hadn’t experienced in our initial formation. As we spoke, we wondered what was needed now as so many of us face the stressors and the gifts of loss, suffering, aging and dying. The three of us sensed the urgency of a new individual and communal response that would prepare us to deepen to the

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next stage of letting go into aging and transforming union with the Mystery of God.

Over the past five years, I have studied two books by Kathleen Singh that, because of their scope and depth, qualify for me as wisdom literature: *The Grace in Dying* and *The Grace in Aging*. The author claims that dying is a *natural* psycho-spiritual transformative process; that the dying process itself transforms our consciousness. As a hospice worker who accompanied many persons through to their deaths, Singh observes that those in the dying process naturally experience a letting go of the small self. They release the part of us that identifies with our story, the roles we've played, tasks we have on our calendar, and descriptions that hold together our sense of self. Little by little, as we enter the dying process, we let go of any attachment to what may have defined us and, indeed, any concern beyond the present moment. Stripped of all, we sink into a deep interior space where God is active in ways beyond our conscious awareness.

But Singh emphasizes that while the dying process is naturally transformative, the transformation offered in the self-surrender of aging must be freely chosen and embraced, moment by moment. She writes, "Whatever transformative experience we have of aging is dependent upon our own intentions (and choices)." I would add that the transformation is also dependent on an ever-deepening reliance and trust in the profound interior impact of the hidden Mystery of God within us.

As I reflect on my own aging and what I've learned over years of spiritual direction with men and women religious and others now well into their seventies and eighties, I see the truth of Singh's thesis. So much of the beauty and grace that can light our aging depends upon



Photo by Sr. Carole Pollock, SSJ

whether we choose to make God, to make Love, the center of our lives. It depends upon our willingness to engage both the gifts and losses of the aging process as a spiritual path, even as a form of service to the world.

I suggest that for us as men and women religious whose lives have been shaped by prayer, the letting go inherent in community living, and by the gift of on-going service to others, there is already a grounding in God. There seems to be a predisposition toward contemplation and a desire for a contemplative lifestyle that makes the transformative choice more likely.

As I began writing this article, I asked those women and men over seventy years of age who come to me for spiritual direction, "What would you say about the impact of aging on your prayer? How does what you've learned through your prayer and in the aging process affect your way of being in the world?"

As these people shared with me what mystics through the ages have known, their responses evidenced a wisdom gained through personal experience. Repeatedly, they spoke of their prayer changing, becoming simpler and more

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contemplative. It is as if all of the words, techniques and styles that bore fruit when we were younger seem to somehow dry up and wither. To continue to rely on earlier methods of prayer, expecting them to bear the same fruit, only prevents the deepening union that will grow as our prayer becomes quiet and less mental. With increasing frequency, we simply sit in the Presence of Mystery; we rest in God; we find comfort in a quiet attuning to the Presence within. Prayer can feel like an uncomplicated alignment with our deep self, and at the same time, it can feel like nothing. In prayer and contemplation, we are merely the ones who host and make space for what is given; we are invited to

receive our prayer without judging its efficaciousness.

For some of us, this kind of contemplation moves deep into our being and we may have the sense of embodying the Presence, the Christ who lives within our own heart. Others describe it as a leaning back into the ever-present body or heart of Christ; a dwelling within the fullness of Christ. Often, there's a sense of silence, stillness and inner spaciousness that can feel timeless and yet so simple. There may be a felt sense of God's tenderness and love, or a simple resting in Being, or a sense of longing and darkness within which we are content to dwell.

Pictured below, Sr. Catherine Robinson, a Sister of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill, begins walking the labyrinth as a practice of contemplative prayer. As a former Coordinator of Ministry for her congregation, she found it essential to create balancing time for quiet prayer. This picture was taken by Sr. Carole Pollock, SSJ, just one year before Sr. Catherine's unexpected death in January, 2017.



Contemplation's Impact on Aging, continued

It is important to acknowledge as well the challenge that fidelity to contemplation, to a simple prayer of presence, holds for many of us. Distractions or anxieties can take over, making it hard to stay present. Our life-long habit of evaluating ourselves can bring up the self-critique "Is anything happening here? Is this even prayer?" All kinds of questions and self-doubts may and will arise. Our graced response is to keep showing up anyhow. Showing up is part of our deep fidelity to God's ongoing invitation to let Love work ever more obscurely in the darkness through silence and presence. Contemplation is God's work in us and paradoxically, little by little, as we show up faithfully, even the darkness itself is suffused with light, stillness and deep peace.

For all of us, the road to contemplation is long and hard with many challenging twists. It is through the suffering, losses and diminishment of life that God acts upon us, healing and purifying us, preparing us for deeper union. Teilhard de Chardin offers these gems of wisdom: "Everything I endure, with faith and love, by way of diminishment or death, makes me a little more closely an integral part of Christ's mystical body. Quite specifically, it is Christ whom we make or whom we undergo, in all things." Our lifelong effort to be patient in suffering, kind to those who irritate us, open to those whose ideas contradict our own are ways we undergo Christ. Indeed, these are the very ways we become one with the suffering Christ. Through our every gesture of love or act of kindness, Christ is done; through our daily efforts to respond to grace, we are being shaped into Christ.

And the more actively we can come to say 'yes' with faith and love to God-at-work in the sufferings we cannot allay in our daily lives, the more conformed we are becoming to the mystery of Christ. For although some practice of contem-

plation is important for transformation, the primary way the mystery of Christ works in us is through our life experience. When we struggle through failure, grief, loss or illness to come to open, active receptivity, to 'yes,' Christ is made in us. And when we savor beauty, express gratitude and feel joy, Christ is lived in us. We are always undergoing Christ. Truly, this ongoing yielding to the Mystery of Christ in our prayer and through our aging experience transfigures us. This transformed presence is the sacred gift we offer to a suffering world.

In "Awakening to the Present," an interview that Cynthia Bourgeault conducted with Thomas Keating, OCSO, Keating remarked that as an

Pictured below, Brother Al Gillis, SM (standing) and Brother John Totten, SM.



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effect of centering prayer (or contemplation) “...the divine presence begins to become more transparent, a spontaneous addition to ordinary awareness; it’s a dimension we can perceive, not through effort, but because it’s there and we have been awakened to it.” Our alignment with the Divine in prayer becomes an internal grounding in and an external attuning to this Presence. And this can happen while standing in the checkout line at the Acme or doing the breakfast dishes. It’s as if there’s a constantly streaming divine FM station available. If we can learn to intentionally tune into the signal, it will amplify our daily moments and encounters.

When we are attentive in this way, our contemplative practice gradually suffuses the experiences of our lives. It walks into our day with us and softens our perception of reality. This happens so very simply, often starting with our way of seeing ourselves and owning our weakness, brokenness and vulnerability. Key to this is that we slowly become more self accepting, vulnerable and open with others. We move toward a genuine transparency in relationships, willing to offer others what we can, with nothing to hide and no longer anything to prove.

I believe the transformative effect of contemplation on us is two-pronged: to the same extent that aging leads our prayer to become more contemplative, contemplation spills over into our lives as compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Because we can take a long look back over our lives, and see all the ways we’ve failed or were unable to live with the integrity and compassion we desired, a non-judgmental opening of our hearts to others in their limitations, suffering and brokenness becomes a graced possibility. As we watch the evening news, as we let in the suffering of so many people near and far, our hearts open and pour out in compassion and mercy.



Photo by Sr. Carole Pollock, SSJ

Furthermore, much of our adult lives necessarily have been organized around getting our egos’ needs met and doing the life tasks that led us to attaining some degree of proficiency and self-fulfillment. But now in aging, (until our last breath we are called to become more), a surprising fresh invitation comes that holds within it a transpersonal call to move beyond ourselves, to live Christ. This is a beckoning from the new possibility of our becoming, asking us more and more to surrender our self-focus so that we can take the giant leap into self-transcendence. “I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

In the climax of the Fourth Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, through “The Contemplation to Attain Love,” Ignatius’ mystical heart shines through as he uses for the first time the language of *lover* and *beloved* to describe God’s intimate self-giving relationship with us. The more thoroughly we are grounded in that abiding gift of love which is God’s very Self (“God is love...” 1 Jn. 4:8) springing up as a fountain within us, the more we will dwell in what Lonergan calls a “dynamic state of being in love” that spills out through us into the world. Our graced response to this gift of God’s love is

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what can lead us to self-transcendence, to a life like Jesus', lived in God and for others.

Along the same lines, in a webcast entitled *The Future of Love*, American philosopher Ken Wilber suggests that moment by moment we are drenched in divine love. Like Teilhard de Chardin, Wilber believes that love is a cosmic force that holds the universe together. He invites us to practice continually deepening our capacity to receive the love that's raining down on us. Becoming familiar with the contours of love, consciously letting love flow through our hearts to others, will move us beyond ego's needs into self-transcendence, liberating us to give ourselves in service to others and to the world.

What might be helpful to us now? I believe we could benefit greatly by the following:

- ongoing education around the shifting contours of prayer that happen as we age;
- opportunities to experience contemplative prayer styles in community with others;
- making faith sharing and/or any kind of intimate conversation with others a priority;
- intentional leisure for reflection and creativity (walking, journaling, coloring, knitting, listening to music);
- prayer spaces designed for silence and solitude; and,
- simply taking time individually and communally to rest in God whose work in us never ends.

In closing, let me return to my Cape May conversation that began this article. My sense from those I meet in spiritual direction, those with whom I share in my own community and beyond, is that as we age we are intentionally moving forward into deeper contemplation. Our greatest gift to the world is this contemplative

deepening of God within us, this call "to open to your depths by plunging into them/ and drink in the life/ that reveals itself quietly there." Everything, every small gesture of mercy and compassion, flows from this life in us.



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From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

Posting the spring issue of Engaging Aging is always an energy boost for us at NRRO. It signals winter's end and the promise of warmer days. At the same time, this issue situates itself in the midst of Lent, a season of spiritual challenge for even the best of us.



With this in mind, we think you'll find the writing of Sister Liz Sweeney, SSJ, a special gift. She invites us beyond ordinary time to consider contemplation's influence on the experience of aging. Referencing poets, theologians, and writers who share their hard won wisdom, Sr. Liz skillfully navigates a path through the complexities of aging's mysteries. She suggests that it is not in spite of but through the very ordinary challenges and blessings of life that "we are being shaped into Christ."

I was especially struck by Sr. Liz's point that the movement of transformative love is closely allied with the choices we make. This notion of choice introduces the psychological theory of secondary control that has such potential to impact one's quality of life.

In the aging process, when we lose primary control in so many areas of life, e.g. what we will eat or where we will live, we still have secondary control in our lives. We can still choose *how* we respond, our interior soulcape. For example, it's easy to get caught in ruminations over the negative encounters of a day, but secondary control points to the power we have to choose a different path. We can choose to be available to the way of contemplation, opening to

Christ's movements within that invite us toward charity instead of revenge.

Perhaps Lent is the perfect time to take up the challenge of examining how we might avail ourselves of the graces of contemplative living in our aging journey.

Calendar 2017

March 31

- Direct Care Assistance applications due (postmarked by March 31)

April 25 - 27

- Planning and Implementation workshop in Dayton, OH (filled)

May 16

- NRRO and AIG Webinar, 1:00 PM ET

Late June

- Direct Care Assistance checks mailed

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