

Generative Aging

Let Go
and Begin Anew



A Congregational Study Resource
For Older Adults

Reverend Don Robertson



Forward

Welcome to this adventure in Generative Aging!

The term “generativity” was used by psychologist Erik Erikson to describe a prime task of the older generation to care for the next generations. “If there is any responsibility in the cycle of life,” Erikson wrote, “it must be that one generation owes to the next that strength by which it can face ultimate concerns in its own way.”

In this resource I dare to expand on Erikson’s meaning of “generative” to mean expressive of life that is original and creative. Simply put, it is life in the elder years that generates deepened meaning and fresh purpose. My sincere hope is that this resource is a supportive companion in the adventure of aging.

My heartfelt thanks to my partner Sandy, with whom I spent 55 years adventuring in love and marriage and whose support was an indispensable ingredient in helping me to think through the many thoughts and ideas that swirled in my head. Many other people played a creative and supportive role during the writing of this resource! It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. Now I can say that it takes a village to write a resource on aging. My heartfelt thanks to each and to all.

I am also very grateful that you have decided to engage this resource. It takes courage to launch into a study that proposes a reframing of ways in which we think and act as “oldsters.” My hope is that you will be challenged and excited by this adventure in exploring aging as a liminal, creative, spiritual, and generative time.

You may choose to use this resource as an individual, stopping along the way to write in your journal, contemplate your own experience, and pray about what arises. You may choose to engage this resource with a small group of other folks in the retirement age bracket. In which case you may use the prompts at the end of each chapter as fodder for your group reflection. Or a combination!

Just a note about the use of the ages 65 and 85 in this resource. As you read you may be thinking – that didn’t happen for me at 65 – it happened at 63 or 67. Each of us has our own unique experience of aging and the two numbers 65 and 85 are intended as placeholders for age related transitions societally, and culturally. Don’t let these numbers get in the way of the characteristics of generative aging being explored in this guide!

I am writing this resource through the lens of my own experience and the experience of folk in my immediate community. As such it reflects my particular social context of a white male with privilege. I am aware that for women, for people of colour, for those who do not conform to society's gender norms, for those with different economic conditions, their experience of aging will be dramatically affected by their personal and social realities. I hope that this resource and the opportunity it provides can offer a space for diverse experiences of aging to be expressed and respected.

As I write I am deeply aware of living on the traditional and unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷə́yəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. The indigenous traditions of the Elder encourage and challenge us to think about the place of older people in non-indigenous society.

Here's to the conversation on aging!
Blessings!

Don Robertson



About the Author

Rev. Don Robertson

Don is a Minister of the United Church of Canada, now retired. Don graduated from UBC and from Berkeley Theological School in Berkeley California. He was in active ministry for 36 years serving congregations in Berkeley, Richmond, Kamloops, North Vancouver, and Vancouver. The development of small groups as centers for change and transformation were among the priorities in Don's ministries.

In his retirement Don facilitated workshops on life transitions which then led him to focus on the issues of aging. Over the years of retirement, he has been an active participant in the life and work of First United Community Ministries. Currently Don co-chairs a working group relating to large numbers of retired United Church ministers in this region.

Don is 84 years old, father of Joanne and John, grandfather to Ella and Adam. Don brings his years of experience, passion and excitement to this project of writing this resource on generative aging.

*For Sandy,
with love*

Index

Chapter 1: The Landscape Called 'Old'

Chapter 2: Agism Turns Inward

Chapter 3: Generative Aging: Saying Yes to the River

Chapter 4: Rhythms of Change and Transition

Chapter 5: The Ending Experience

Chapter 6: Endings: A Challenge to the Inner Life

Chapter 7: Liminal Space in Our Elder Years

Part One: Introducing Liminality

Part Two: The Ark and The Whale

Part Three: Liminal Process in Three Acts

Chapter 8: Revitalize Purpose and Passion

Part One: Thresholds of Purpose

Part Two: Ritual and Liturgy

Chapter 9: Last Call

Acknowledgements

Additional Suggestions for Group Engagement

Chapter One

A VIEW OF THE LANDSCAPE CALLED 'OLD'

We have arrived at our destination

“An official looking envelope comes through the mail slot and drops to floor: The Canadian Government. I open it to find my first Old Age Pension cheque. At sixty-five years of age, I am officially "old." I am now 84 years of age and remember that moment vividly.

With that Government declaration in hand, I join a fast-growing segment of the population who, like me, are over 65. The 2021 Canadian census indicates that in the years to come the number of seniors 65 and older will far exceed the number of children in the 0-14 age category.

As if that is not enough to want to put a limit on the club membership, according to Statistics Canada this population gap is expected to grow. By 2031 close to one in four Canadians (23%) could be 65 years of age or older, while the proportion of children 14 years of age and younger could remain on par with the 2016 level (16%). By 2061, it is expected that there could be as many as 12 million seniors and fewer than 8 million children in Canada.

It is not socially or economically healthy for society when the birth rate is low, depriving us of all the joy of the young as well as bereft of the important benefits that younger generations bring to a society's wellbeing, present and future.

It is therefore understandable that the latest news from the 2021 Canadian census of a bulge in the elder population would be greeted with some alarm. But there are other reasons why this bulge of 'oldsters' does not receive a warm welcome:

Ageism!

**Growing old is
being increasingly penalized
for a crime you haven't committed.**

Pierre Teillard de Chardin

AGEISM A CANADIAN REALITY?

Making fun of growing older is considered socially acceptable, yet ageist humour reinforces negative stereotypes that growing old is linked with physical and mental deterioration, dependence and less social value.

Awakening Canadians to Ageism; A study
Protocol BMC Nursing Journal

The pandemic has revealed a lot of hidden realities about how we, as a society, view 'old age'. Ageism, like sexism and racism, is a stereotyping and a prejudice against others because of their age. Canadian society has a rather grim view of the elderly.

A startling reality highlighted during the pandemic is how our society treats older people in care facilities. Andre Picard writes on the subject in his book "Neglected No More" and reports:

"Elder care in this country is so disorganized and so poorly regulated, the staffing so inadequate, the infrastructure so outdated, the accountability so non-existent and ageism so rampant there seems to be no limit to what care homes can get away with.... It's hard to imagine a population that has more profoundly neglected their elders."

CBC radio program IDEAS broadcast a program titled: "Fear Ageism not Aging: How an ageist society is failing its Elders." The program began by saying: "In Canada, 81 per cent of all COVID deaths occurred in long-term care. Age critic and theorist Margaret Morganroth Gullette calls what happened 'eldercide.' (Andrew Lee/CBC)

Andre Picard moves on to ask what he says is a key philosophical (we would say 'theological') question: "What value do we give to older people?" The implied answer is "Not much!"

It seems that to become old means to become 'the other' in Western society. For the most part ageism continues to be a socially acceptable prejudice to the point of being murderous, according to Margaret Morganroth Gullette, "As we age, we are seen as less human. Many children and youth have only a passing awareness that old people exist."

One article I read definitely made me feel like going back to bed! It suggested that negative mindsets about old people are more dominant than positive mindsets and older people are seen as being generally "unappealing, sexless, often miserable and often sick."

I am not a fan of the TV Hit “Sex and the City”. However, when one co-star commented on the criticism she received for how the actors’ physical appearances have changed as they’ve become older, she said, *“I know what I look like. I have no choice. What am I going to do about it? Stop aging? Disappear?”*

Recently I was sharing some of these social perceptions with a group of seniors. After finishing my presentation, I chatted with a 97-year-old woman - alert, bright and thoughtful. I asked her how she was seen now at her age and in a wheelchair. Without a second of hesitation, she said “Invisible.” How sad that this woman with 97 years of life experience now feels herself to be invisible.

Ageism in individuals starts with the fact that we assimilate age stereotypes early in childhood.

Becca Levy

We must consider this United Church of ours and wonder if in our own communities of faith ‘old’ means to become the “other.” Every congregation wants to have a portion of children, youth and young adults and, as a church, we should not give up on that desire even as the population of society changes. Some congregations continue to have a mix of generations present on a Sunday morning. But such congregations are the exception.

The growing reality is that our congregations are populated primarily by older adults and increasingly so. ‘The church does not have a future without young people’ is the often heard lament. However, the church does have a future and increasingly the future is in the older people sitting in the pews Sunday by Sunday. And - there is a steady supply of people becoming old every day.

A person at 65 stands an 80% chance of living another 3500 days. People reaching 85 are no longer out of the ordinary and could live 7000 days beyond 65. And how about people who are in the growing number of those who live well into their 90’s. They will live more than 11,000 days beyond the so-called beginning of old age at 65. Now that is a future!



The United Church of Canada is very aware of sexism and has addressed the issue over the last number of years to the point that changes have been fundamental and not ornamental. We are in a process of learning and change about racism and privilege. Our collective commitment to reconciliation is an indicator of both confession and serious engagement with Indigenous peoples. These are all works in progress, and areas of conscious learning. Ageism, however, is seldom talked about and the existence of ageism rarely recognized nor addressed within the church or in our Canadian society.



Claire Townsend Filmmaker describes old age as the "*last segregation*."



The 2021 Canadian Census is a wakeup call for society and for church to respond both to the population growth of the post 65-year-old cohort and also to the reality of ageism.

I hope the use of this resource will contribute to that awakening. When talking about 'generative aging' we need to consider the context for aging as described in this chapter. How easy it is for us 'olders' to be defined by the society in which we live. How powerful it is for us to refuse that limiting definition.

Just a *reminder note* about the use of the ages 65 and 85 in this resource. As you read you may be thinking – that didn't happen for me at 65 – it happened at 63 or 67. Each of us has our own unique experience of aging and the two numbers 65 and 85 are intended as placeholders for age related transitions societally, and culturally. Don't let these numbers get in the way of the characteristics of generative aging being explored in this guide!

GENERATIVE QUESTIONS

1. The premise of this chapter is in part that ageism exists in ways that are detrimental to the old in our society. Take time to name and explore what most stood out for you as you read this chapter.
2. Which of these two excerpts captures how you are feeling, thinking, and living into your elder years?

“Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:”
-Robert Browning, excerpt from *Rabbi Ben Ezra*

“The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloons,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”
-William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II Scene VI

3. Share your reactions to references made to the 2021 Canadian census? What are the implications for our congregations in increasing focus on ministry with, by, or for Seniors?
4. Yes? No? Maybe? Have you personally experienced ageism in your day-to-day interactions in society? Without naming or blaming, describe that experience in storytelling with others, or in journal writing. What happened? How did you feel at the time? What do you think about that experience now?

Chapter One Questions Continued

5. Yes? No? Maybe? Have you personally experienced ageism in your congregation or community of faith? Without naming or blaming, describe that experience in storytelling with others, or in journal writing. What happened? How did you feel at the time? What do you think about that experience now?
6. To what degree do your personal experiences of life at your age inform your current sense of identity, role in society, or role in the congregation?
7. What term do you like best to describe your age:
 - Old
 - Older adult
 - Senior
 - Senior citizen
 - Elder
 - Retired
 - Other??



Chapter Two

AGEISM TURNS INWARD

As women age we encounter not just the inevitability of aging but the revulsion we have internalized for the old lady who awaits within us.

Christy Ann Conlin Globe and Mail

The bus was crowded. No sooner had I started down the aisle but three young women, in unison, sprang to their feet. It seemed they were responding to some kind of emergency but there was no sign of fire. The emergency was me.

I was, by their definition, old and I needed a seat. But, “No no, I am ok. I exercise, I skip, I bike, I am not old.” Why does “old” have a different sound than “young”? When and why, I belatedly thought to myself, did I become so reactive as if I was embarrassed if not ashamed for being seen as old? Is an ageist social script co-opting my mind? I want so much to be seen as young?!

Many of us recoil at being described as “old”. It has a kind of musty connotation. If you imagine a line with a generally

upward trend from birth to 65, then comes 65 and ‘old’ and a sudden sharp shift downward like a plane losing its powers. For this reason people often use modifiers when describing an “old person” like “My he looks good for his age,” or “Spry isn’t she?” As for the photo that goes with a death notice, the family agrees: “Let’s use a photo of a younger age!”

Becca Levy in her excellent book *Breaking the Age Code* writes:

One of the most harmful things about age stereotypes: they don’t only color our actions and judgements towards other people; often...they influence how we think about ourselves and these thoughts - if they are not counteracted - can impact how we feel and act.

Dr. Levy goes on to make the point that we are simply not aware of how stereotypes about aging affect our health outcomes. She writes that age stereotyping unconsciously affects everything from how neat or messy our handwriting is to how quickly we walk.

The old man Larry in Carol Shield's novel *Larry's Party* has bought into this self-depreciating view of aging: "... and by the time you get into the cheese course of life you have lost your appetite. What's left for us oldsters is a free fall into hoary age and thinning of the imagination."

I want to throw out the crippling assumptions that keep many from being a voice in the world. I want to start over with an imagination adequate to the possibilities and the strangeness and the dangers on the earth at this moment.

Rebecca Scott Hope *in the Darkness*

RESIST

In the church and in society we need to have conversations about ageism. The picture painted by Andre Picard and Dr. Becca Levy is of concern to us as Christians and as Canadians. Ageism is a social construction, and like racism, there is no basis for treating or fixing a category of human beings as being one less valued than another. Collectively and as individuals, we need to resist such hollow constructions. To be sure, the world cannot play with the inside of our head - unless we give the world permission to do so.

To ask questions is the beginning of our capacity as older adults to resist being defined by ageism. In Aiden Chambers book *This is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn*, Cordelia prepares for the

birth of her first child by asking herself probing questions on behalf of her unborn child. Cordelia's questions are powerful to ask in our elder years, too.

- Will I allow people to dam me up and confine me so that I flow only where they want?
- Will I allow them to turn me into a canal to use for their own purposes?
- Or will I make sure I flow freely, coursing my way through the land and ploughing a valley of my own?
- Do I change like a river, widening and deepening?
- Will the I that is me grow and widen and deepen?
- Or will I stagnate and become an arid riverbed?

Whether from outside of ourselves or from inside ourselves, we older adults must resist ageism. I consider resistance to ageism as an essential component of generative aging. Generative aging is our capacity to define ourselves as growing, developing human beings in opposition to 'degenerative' social definitions characterized by decline, deterioration, and obsolescence. Beware! Social mindsets can shape how we view ourselves at any age, including as older adults!

***Every hymn we sing
Every prayer we utter
Every sermon preached are acts of
resistance against a flattened
understanding of the world.***

Wendell Berry

In his book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, Atul Gawande MD, MPH, surgeon, and public health researcher writes: *"We are no less valuable at the end of life than we are at the beginning of life."* He continues, *"The battle of being mortal is the battle to maintain the integrity of one's life to avoid becoming diminished or dissipated or subjugated that who we are becomes disconnected from who we were and who we want to be."*

Maggie Kuhn was not going to let the lack of value of senior people become a definition. Kuhn was a 1960's crusader who acted on behalf of the 'grey-haired' of society and founded the Gray Panthers in the United States. She writes: *"Old age is not a disease - it is strength and survivorship triumph over all kinds of vicissitudes and disappointments trials and illnesses...We are elders, the experienced ones, we are maturing, growing adults responsible for the survival of our society. We are not wrinkled babies, succumbing to trivial, purposeless waste of our time and our years."*

She says emphatically "We are elders!"

The resistance we are considering is a core concern of the Apostle Paul. He says to the early church that the mind of Jesus Christ is very different than the prevailing mind set of Rome and of Caesar.

He writes in his letter to the young church in Rome:

Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold but be transformed, by the renewing of your mind, that you may express the perfect will of God.

Paul's good words are addressed also to us.

GENERATIVE QUESTIONS

1. This chapter offers a perspective on the impact of negative stereotypes on our experience of aging. Don encourages a resistance to the inner self-perception we hold as well as to the outer societal definition. In your journal or in conversation with others reflect on how you have resisted these stereotypes. Or, to what degree it is difficult to resist.
2. What feelings/thoughts do Maggie Kuhn's words evoke for you?
3. In your journal take time to respond to the questions Cordelia from Aiden Chamber's book asks herself. In a small group choose one or two of the questions to share your reflections with others. What do you hear yourself saying? Which question is most generative for you?
4. Several authors quoted in this chapter describe resistance. How do you define resistance to ageism in your words?
5. As you reflect on the scripture text from Paul write in your journal or share aloud what implication those words have for today for we who are Christian and for we who are old!
6. In what way is the process of aging a spiritual process for you?



Chapter Three

GENERATIVE AGING: SAYING "YES" TO THE RIVER

You cannot understand life and its mysteries as long as you try to grasp it. Indeed, you cannot grasp it, just as you cannot walk off with a river in a bucket.

Alan Watts *The Wisdom of Insecurity*

Ageism, along with every other 'ism' requires a response which begins within each of us as seniors. We have a responsibility to decide what part of ourselves we bring to the table of our society. The counterpoint to ageism might include the attention and commitment we bring to generative aging. A goal? To initiate one's own age liberation and to encourage the liberation of others.

Generative aging is an affirming 'Yes' to becoming what we are not yet. In a morning coffee conversation, an 84-year-old friend remarked "I am learning too late." She went on, "Insights and truths I understand now are too late recognized. At 84 I see, and I understand, and I have a lot I want to say." We had a great conversation that morning. Never too late at 84 to say it! Life is a work in process, we learn, we comprehend, we change. Life is saying 'Yes' to the river.

The larger, more cosmic context of our lives is that change is constant. A scientist I heard interviewed spoke of his interest in the birth and death of stars. He spoke passionately of a kind of cosmic rhythm of stars being born, living for billions of years and then they explode. He went on to say that if stars were not being born, living, and dying, we humans on planet earth would not be here. It has taken three generations of stars of being born, living, and dying, to create the chemistry for primitive life forms to exist and through that process we come to ourselves. "When we fail to see life is change," wrote philosopher and writer Alan Watts, "we set ourselves over against ourselves."

The person reaches out naturally for a self beyond his/her own self in order to know who he/she is at all.

Ernest Becker *The Denial of Death*

Cordelia Kenn, the expectant mother we met in the last chapter, continues to think out loud:

I thought how lovely and how strange a river is. A river is a river, always there, and yet the water flowing through it is never the same water and is never still. It's always changing and is always on the move. Over time the river itself changes. It widens and deepens as it rubs and scours, gnaws and kneads, eats and bores its way through the land.

In our Elder years it is wisdom for us to know in our bones that life is change. Novelist and poet John Updike said that theology must always unravel and be reknit. This is also true of life.

However, while we might comprehend our lives set in the context of the river's flow and change, a change of mind is, indeed, quite another matter.

Mindsets! The word itself resounds as a declaration that one's mind is firmly set in concrete. "I have made up my mind, don't bother me with the facts." Fixed mindsets can be like a dam in the flow of change. In one congregation the worship committee wanted to create a circle in the sanctuary for a group of about 30 people. To accomplish this plan, they moved the front two pews or so and placed them in a circle. Two days later they were surprised to discover that those pews had now been bolted into the cement...in rows. (Whoever did that didn't know that for the first 1200 years of the Christian church people stood!)

***I want to touch the tapestry of my life,
melt its meaning, taste its fruit. I reach for
permanence only to taste transience.***

Robert A Raines

We DO have our mindsets, from pews to hymns to grocery stores to appropriate behaviours! Pews are made for rows not for circles! Old Angus was asked what he does in the life of the congregation to which he replied, "I'm the one who says no to all this change."



A familiar path - our Cow Path!

- That's just the way I am.
- Things will get better if I wait.
- Someday the kids will appreciate me.
- Things will never be as good as they once were.
- I've always done it THIS WAY!
- I feel safe on this path.

We live with our own personal 'mindsets' that have developed over the years. It is our framing of what we see and hear. We always see the world through the filter of our mindsets, but our mindsets are often incomplete and can result in distorted ways of viewing the world. They shape our everyday lives. Their hidden web of influence permeates everything – all the time.

A colleague in ministry said with a note of discouragement in his attempt to innovate, "It's the 'seven last words of the seniors in the church' -We've never done it this way before."

Is it something about being older that causes us to close our minds?

Our relationship to the past is always negotiable.

Jeanette Winterson

There are reasons why a given percentage of us older adults are resistant to change. As a habitual list maker, let me suggest some of the following as causes framed in the form of questions:

- Is there a feeling that we are finished? "Leave it to the younger ones to figure it out whatever 'it' is."
- Is there a feeling of exhaustion with change? "Enough already! Stop the world I want to get off!"
- Is there a feeling of safety and security to stay with what is familiar and comfortable for us?
- Is there a sense of satisfaction with life as it is? "Change? Why would I? Life is good as it is!! It has worked ok so far - so no need to change."
- Is there a felt obligation to respect tradition, to conserve and not to create? "Elders are the custodians of the past. That's our job."

Nostalgia is a powerful attraction and gives us quite a lovely place to live our last stage of life, removed from the present whirlwind of change.

To let go is to lose your foothold temporarily.

Not to let go is to lose your foothold forever.

Soren Kierkegaard

All of us live with mindsets, and we also live with the potential to amend our way of viewing ourselves and the world outside of ourselves. It is always possible to unmake a mindset because of what we later come to know. That, I believe, is a faith statement.

Mind Change

The unmaking and the renewal of minds is close to the heart of Christianity as referenced earlier in the words of the Apostle Paul.

It speaks to us oldsters that in our elder years we will not settle for anything less than a renewal of the way we think and the way we act. Jesus put it this way to Nicodemus "You must be born anew." Nicodemus responds with a question to our age group: "How can a person be born when he is old?" Can we change our minds or, indeed, change our way of seeing ourselves? Can we change our way of the world when we are old?

You must be born anew if you are to see the Reign of God.

But...How?

A magazine I subscribed to for years had a series called *How my mind has changed?* Only the title has stayed with me, none of the stories. Take a moment and note how your mind has changed over the years up to and including yesterday!

A changed mind may just be living proof that we are indeed getting better. This later stage of life comes as an invitation to examine what has brought us to our elder years. For example, perhaps someone who was employed in a corporate system for years, earned a living and receives a handsome pension may now wonder what that was all about? Or, a woman who worked in the home all her life may now look back with both satisfaction and some regret at the path not taken.

Is there a need now to unravel what had defined one's life and, in the elder years, to be open to some quite different definition of what it means to be human? What does it mean to be a Christian human? Joan Chittister asks the question, "*What am I when I am not what I used to be?*"

But, let's face it, a mindset in the life of a senior has been reinforced over many years. The cement is well set. So, it is an act of courage if, in our senior years, we are willing to have a change of mind about ourselves, our identity, our purpose.

With the right mind set and tools we can change our age beliefs. But to get at the origin of beliefs, the ageist culture needs to change.

Becca Levy

The Elder years are the right time - the last chance - to clear the mind of a particular opinion, or belief or way of looking at the world or even a way of looking at ourselves. It may be time for us to decide to give ourselves a spiritual shake and enter into some negotiation with ourselves, risking cracking open of long held mind sets. Take heart!

It is said that Sigmund Freud had the honesty and courage as he grew older to acknowledge fundamental errors in his previous thinking. Why not us?

***We do not see the world as it is.
We see the world as we are.***

The Talmud



I want to hold tight to that time in my life
when life was good and life felt so right -
To make indelible in my mind
that place I knew - seems one of a kind.

I want to go back to the day that was
when I was free to ramble, just because
I want to feel the strength in my bones
when I walked forever in the woods near my home

It was then that I felt truly content
It's there I want to pitch my tent
There and then, like gravity,
Pulls me back to yesterday

Endings intervened,
Disoriented,
uncertainty convened
Endings required a response -
hope, it would be
Hope's a forward motion, that is plain to see.

One day I walked by a river close by
'I'll stay here a moment' I did decide
What is a river? I wanted to know
What is this mystery with its constant flow?

It comes from and it goes to
I said to myself 'that's just like you.'
I feel its life, its currents, its flow
the meandering river is myself to know

The river runs and keeps on flowing
From where I stand
I cannot see
just where it's going
It twists and turns
with an ebb and flow
There's a river in me
I'm coming to know

Let me ask you, in your Senior years, has your mind changed about:

- Your values? Have they changed in what you value most? Have you also elevated caring for the planet up a notch or two or 10?
- The way you think of yourself?
- The way you view others?
- The way you view Capitalism? Or any other societal construction
- The way you view gender roles?
- The way you think of life's purpose?

Mindsets need to be examined. It is an essential task for us as elders. The creative, open-minded spirit Leonard Cohen had this advice, *"To keep our hearts open is probably the most urgent responsibility you have as you get old."*

From Atul Gawande's book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Happens in the End*: *The battle of being human is the battle in maintaining the integrity of ones' life... to avoid becoming so diminished or dissipated or subjugated that who you are becomes disconnected from who you were or who you want to be.*

Hazel Henderson is an economist and futurist and over the years has become a favorite of mine. Now that I am a senior, her thoughts gain even more relevance. She encourages the development of a supple mind.

Life is about invention not survival. We are here to create not to defend. We are a world that delights in its explorations.

Hazel Henderson

Keep Fertilizing the Soil

As Elders we need to keep the soil of our lives fertilized to guard our minds from becoming arid and closed. Here is some fertilizer that I happen to think is important in keeping the door of our senior minds wedged open!

Curiosity

Curiosity is more needed than certainty. The curiosity of a child belongs in the mind of a senior. Curiosity means there is reason to get out of bed and find out where your life is taking you. Studies indicate that with aging there is a decrease in one's inclination to be curious. Let's not do that! Why not begin a day wondering about a star in the sky, or a time in history, or about the idea of God. There is so much in every day about which to be curious!

"Old age starts where curiosity ends," Jose Saramago wrote. Curiosity has an unknown destination and can lead us somewhere quite beyond where we are now. Curiosity is an essential ingredient to generative aging.

Questions

Questions to be lived are more needed than answers to be given. What questions are we asking as Elders? One Rabbi imagines that God begins each day with a question: "What in my world needs mending today?" After years of living and life experience, what questions are the important and exciting ones to live? There is no point in having the right answers to the wrong questions. One philosophy professor's exam question: Come up with a question and write the answer. You get as many marks for the question as you do for the answer.

"Questions," wrote Robert Raines, *"and living the questions may be a more realistic and faithful style of Christian living than seeking answers to those questions."*

Questions build the road to truth for us.

"Grandad," a grandson asked, "What are the most important questions you think we need to ask?" "I think," responded the Grandfather, "The question you are asking is one of the most important questions we all need to ask."

I wonder if there is a 'generational' question for us as older adults to ask? For example, where might our generation have gone wrong that we are now facing a climate catastrophe?

What question rises for you as more important to ask right now in your life? It needs to be a question that loosens the structured experience of time, the appointments, the obligations, the deadlines and wedges the door open to vitality and engagement in your life today.

Imagination

Does your capacity for imagination decrease with age? In an article by Kieran Egan, Professor Emeritus at Simon Fraser University, "The elderly person is a store of memory, knowledge, and a perspective across time that only age can give. Imagination in old age has its own distinctive forms and possibilities, unavailable to those younger, or available only in attenuated modes."

To think about God requires a very vivid imagination.

Don R

British Futurist Hazel Henderson linked imagination with our survival as a human species when she wrote, *"Our perceptions are limited to space and time... therefore imagination is the key to our survival."*

Given years of life and experience, what if imagination is a particular and generative work of the elderly? Are we the ones who are free to dream a different world into existence and thus to imagine the look of a more just world, a more peaceable world, a more equitable world?

Are we prophets or poets who, in the words of scholar Walter Brueggemann, “break fixed conclusions and press us always toward imaginative possibilities.”

Or, perhaps with age our imaginative generative potential has diminished, and imagination is left to the young of mind and heart? I hope not! Use the following meditation of mine to go on a short journey of the imagination.

Have you ever sat on the ground and talked to a tree? I have but only in my elder years. There is a giant Beech tree across the street from where I live. I visit the tree regularly. It is older than I am by many years, and just maybe wiser too. We don't always talk. Sometimes I just listen to the tree. Remember a tree that's special to you or go and find a tree that you are getting to know. And listen to it.

To its roots burrowed deep in the earth and imagine the depth and root length needed to hold the tree tall and straight. Imagine its roots on a search for water. The tree knows what it needs to sustain the life within it and the branches and the leaves...

Listen to the trunk, the bark, the branches holding thousands of leaves, each leaf a miracle of photosynthesis, of transformation.

Know that your life is intertwined with the life and destiny of the tree. You are part of the same one LIFE.

In your imagination the tree speaks to you, and now really do listen to what the tree is sharing with you about life.

What does it know about change?

Stretch out your arm and touch the trunk of the tree with your hand. Feel the strength of the tree and in your imagination, feel the strength of that tree making its way down your arm and into your body. Gain spiritual strength from this tree.

Another day visit the tree once again.

My son John introduced me to the poetry of William Blake. Ever since that introduction, I have been inspired by Blake's imagination. When I visit the tree across the street, I often take Blake with me:

*To see the World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
and Eternity in an hour*

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

Prayer!

Prayer is a yearning voiced in the presence of God. Perhaps a deep yearning resides in your heart. The filter of your years of life leaves you with a tutored longing, a deep heart desire.

**To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning
of an uprising against the disorder of the
world.**

Karl Barth

Might it be that a deep yearning of an elder, a yearning of the years and deep desire of the heart, is that the reign of God might come on earth as it is in heaven? Have we come to acknowledge the truly radical and revolutionary nature of our yearning.

Perhaps in the busyness and demands of our younger life God became minimized. Now, in our elder years it is refreshing and renewing to welcome the generative Spirit of God into our last stage of life. Inviting a deep trust in a love in which we live and move and have our existence. Perhaps we can hear again with fresh ears and deepened intent the yearning as we pray, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

Prayer is to trust that we are being addressed by that which is both beyond and deep within. Prayer is to answer back from the place of our deepest yearnings. Prayer fertilizes the soil of life's days and opens the door of life to a holy reality that is beyond us and deep within us.



***I am curious she said
as she gazed at the sky
I sit with a question
and I want to know
Why?***

***I am quiet for a moment
and imagine
What if?***

***I pray
through my years
Keep me open and growing***

***I pray
keep my life fertile
like soil ripe for sowing***

Don R.

GENERATIVE QUESTIONS

1. Do you recognize a 'cow path' in your life? You can take some time to write or draw in your journal about this – Do you have a cow-path way of thinking? Way of doing a task? Way of praying? After a time of private reflection, you may choose to share one of these responses with others.
2. "The true nature of everything is to be a state of flow and change."
On a continuum with "*I am more set*" on one end, and "*I am more flow and change*" on the other end – where along the line would you put yourself?
3. What is more challenging for you these days, the 'set' feeling or the 'flow and change' feeling?
4. Think of a time when you changed your mind about something important. You can write in a journal about this. If you are part of a study group, you may then decide to share some of your reflections with others. What was the change? What prompted the change? What helped you to make the change of mindset?
5. Four 'Fertilizers' are suggested that can make a positive contribution to generative aging: Curiosity. Questions. Imagination. Prayer. Which ones hold particular significance for you?
6. Is there anything from this chapter that speaks to you in a particular way about how you understand generative aging?



*Chapter Four***RHYTHMS OF CHANGE AND
TRANSITION****Part One: Change and Transition - What's the Difference?**

*The twinge in your knee
 Your hearing gone
 Years cloud your eyes
 Last driving test - failed!
 The pace of change
 is picking up - not neutral
 It carries a message: Endings
 by degrees
 immobility, limitation,
 dislocation,*

lost identity,

*lost desire
 Endings!*

Don R.

Change and changes in the elder years can't just be passed off as "Oh well, things change." Change plays with aspects of our lives that have been central to our personal identity, to our place in society and to our health and wellbeing.

Herb, at age 75, thought he could get away with one more climb up the ladder to clear the gutter of leaves. He remembers well the lesson he supposedly learned that a metal ladder leaning against a metal eave makes for slippery conditions. His wife Jean suddenly appeared and called to

Herb: "Get down off that ladder. Your ladder- climbing days are over!"

For Herb, this new limitation led him to think the unthinkable. Maybe he is no longer able to do what needs to be done to keep up the old house. Is this the time he was dreading? Is this the time to sell and to 'downsize?' Is this about to be one of the major changes in his life? (Oh yes, his tool shed with his table saw is something he cannot imagine being without.)

Cindy, at 82, flunked her driving test. “This damn Government demands that anyone over 80 get a medical every two years in order to keep your driver’s license.” Cindy got nixed today and that is the end of driving after 60 years. So much for the enjoyment of Sunday afternoon drives and the routine necessity of trips to the grocery store. Life is going to change big time for Cindy.

Bruce’s wife was diagnosed with dementia. She is declining and not able to be left on her own. Bruce has been very involved in the community since his retirement and now feels lost and bewildered and fearful both for his wife and for himself. He wonders how long he can hold out before his wife needs more care. He worries hearing about the lack of caring in care homes. He has budget worries. Changes on his mind are like his daily bread.

Every time we are jolted in life, we are faced with the need to make new departures.

Henry Nouwen

Change is not transition.

Put briefly, change happens, sometimes chosen, most of the time not chosen. Transitions however are a process. Often the word ‘change’ is used interchangeably with the word ‘transition’ as if they have the same meaning. I want to make a clear distinction between the two words.

The transition process begins with an ending. When change happens, it means something has come to an end. A clear acceptance of change recognizes that something has come to an end. I remember the day when we went into the shop to purchase a walker for my partner Sandy. Surrounded by so many aids for the aged, it was clear from the moment we came in the door of the shop that we were experiencing an ending.

When something in our life comes to an end it is not only the end of something, but it is, potentially, the beginning of a transition. This recognition alone can be generative as we recognize something new is in the making. The transition process can lead to a renewal or re-constructing of our life.



Transitions are a time of trusting a path that, with stopovers, winds through a landscape of ‘not knowing’, including feelings of disorientation. The ‘not knowing’ space is probably what folk philosopher and baseball player Yogi Berra had in mind when he wrote: If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll end up somewhere else. We oldsters get it! Changes often come with such suddenness and with such frequency that we oftentimes face roadblocks when deciding where we go and how we get there.

To move with change is to join the dance, and to make sense of change is to dance to a transitional rhythm. This movement, this transitional dance, can be described in different ways but has the same essential rhythm and movement. Here are a few examples of traditional transitional dance rhythms:

There is the Easter Rhythm of transition:
life, death, resurrection

There is the movement that social theorist Margaret Wheatly describes as:
organized, disorganized, re-organized

There is the movement theologian Walter Brueggemann sees in many Psalms:
secure orientation, disturbing disorientation, surprising re-orientation

There is the movement William Bridges outlines in his book *Transitions*:
ending, neutral zone, new beginning

It is a rhythm of renewal and transformation to which we dance. It is Good Friday/ Holy Saturday/ Easter Sunday. It is endings/ wilderness/ life renewed/ reconstructed. We need to feel the beat in our heart and beat it with our feet and clap it with our hands. As Christians, it is a rhythm we recognize and trust!

Everything dances! Everything has rhythm.

Maya Angelou



I feel the beat feel the rhythm

Day and night

Sun and moon

The tide is low the tide is full

Summer sun and winter snow

Rhythms I love and rhythms I know

My heart beats within my chest

Day and night it never rests

lungs breathe in

lungs breathe out

this rhythm in me I never doubt

My Easter comes but never goes

A rhythm of death and life I know

It's a rhythm of life that keeps going on

Buried here though hard to see

New beginnings for you and me

Now, feel it in your heart and feel it in your mind

Nature's rhythms are one more sign

Feel it in your body

and feel it in your soul

This rhythm of life always flows

Endings come and endings go

It's a rhythm in life we need to know

Don R



Part One Generative Questions

1. What experience from your own life is similar to Herb, Cindy or David's experience? Take some time to share, or journal about those moments where you recognized a change because of age.
2. What were or are some of the feelings and thoughts that arise for you out of these experiences of change, of endings?
3. Think of a time in your life where you can recognize the difference between a 'change' and the 'transition' that followed.
4. What change or transition are you living into right now in your life?
5. Do your life changes have a rhythm or beat to them? Can you describe or share what that rhythm sounds, looks, or feels like?
6. Does a Christian faith make a difference in trusting the rhythm? If so, in what way?



*Chapter Four***RHYTHMS OF CHANGE AND
TRANSITION****Part Two: The Ending Experience**

How can I begin again when all of yesterday is in me.

Leonard Cohen

There are endings we choose and endings we do not choose. We have no control over the timing of many endings. And sometimes deciding to end something – an activity, a job, a dream – is very hard to do. Sometimes a realization dawns, and we know that until we consciously make an end happen, we will be forever deprived of the possibility of new beginnings. We can exercise our control over some endings – even if the end is painful, complicated, or difficult to consider.

Many of us seniors have lived a long time with the familiar:

- beautiful Oak dining room table handed down through the family
- set of crystal goblets we bring out for special times and bought on that trip to...
- grandad's hand planers
- neighbors we know so well who were always there for us in a pinch

To hold on or to let go. I knew that when we downsized I would have to get rid of most of my tools, some of which had been given to me by my father-in-law. He was such a good carpenter that whenever I held one of his tools, I felt I was being helped to be a better carpenter, too.

Releasing our 'things' is one kind of ending we need to face. And our things remind us of the self we've been. It may be that we have trouble saying goodbye to that self which our engagement in the world affirmed in us. I have spent considerable time thinking about this in relation to my own lost identity upon retiring as an active Clergy person.

A Nobody

***Years ago, a children's story appeared,
Its essence has stayed with me
all these years
I think of it now as older I get
and how soon who I was, oh, the people
forget!***

**I was working, upfront
 on this committee and that
 I was a somebody and that's a fact
 I wasn't just anybody filling a pew
 I was a somebody who people knew**

**I was a somebody who other ones needed
 I preached and I taught,
 counselled and greeted
 I dressed in robes that gave me identity
 And I was father of one darn nice family**

**But all these years later
 a somebody I'm not
 I'm a who-body now and all but forgot
 "Who was that?" you say,
 "I don't know the name -
 nobody I know, what's that name
 again?"**

**"Oh Don," you will say,
 "You're not just a nobody!"
 I know that is true,
 but I'm not my old somebody
 I'm the who-body who
 still teaches and greets
 I say 'hello' in the halls;
 I'm still a go-getter!
 Now I can be anybody!
 And for that I'm the better!**

Don R
 inspired by Whobody There, Charles and Ann
 Morse (1977)

Endings and choices to be made!
 Perhaps there are endings in your elder
 life that leave you questioning how you
 will survive a dramatic change. The longer
 we live the more endings and losses are
 ours to experience. I think of seniors who
 know the loss of a partner, the grief
 experienced, and the question asked: How
 shall I know joy again when I feel so much
 loss, and sadness today? I know that
 feeling for myself with Sandy's death, my
 partner in love and adventure. Endings are
 hardest when the ending is with someone
 we have loved.

**We would rather be ruined than changed
 We would rather die in our dread
 Than climb the cross of the moment
 and let our illusions die.**

W H Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque
 Eclogue*

Think of a move from a house to an
 apartment or from an apartment to a care
 facility. Regardless of how clear it is that a
 move is necessary, who doesn't miss the
 home left behind or feel the emptiness of
 the new place. I talked to a new tenant in
 the apartment building where I now live
 and who had recently moved from their
 house and friendly neighborhood. "How do
 you meet people in this building?" she
 asked. Sadly, the answer is that in this
 building it is very difficult. It's nothing
 like a neighbourhood. There is no
 welcome wagon. What was in life has
 ended – and this is lonely, disorienting
 and full of loss.

In Our Elder Years... a bucket full of endings.

As oldsters we may experience a series of endings all at the same time. With reflection, we know a lot about endings. Retirement is a major ending. This can also mean a loss of routine connection with people, and shared endeavours with them. Death of friends is a major ending. Changes in health and mobility result in activities that are no longer available to us. A good friend was told by her doctor that she could no longer drive again. She was shocked and then saddened by that ending. Endings are loaded with feelings.

William Bridges in his book *Transitions*, lays out five dominant experiences which often come along with endings. We may experience any one of these, we might experience each of them in different degrees of intensity. When Sandy died and life with her came to end, I experienced each of the five at various times and in different ways. Here are five ending experiences:

1. Disengagement: grief turns outside in
2. Disenchantment: loss of joy and delight
3. Disorientation: confusion and worry about the future
4. Disidentification: Who am I now? 'And the two shall become one' was declared in the marriage ceremony. When Sandy died this phrase took on a new and different meaning for me.
5. Denial: It takes a while for the new reality to be fully comprehended.

Each one of these five emotional responses to endings can spiral and become more intense and even dangerous level. Endings are hard.

**Endings often hurt,
catch us unawares
leave us
desolate, disoriented, and alone.
Ends or dead ends?
We mutter the question God asked Ezekiel:
"Shall these bones live again?"
Don R**

With endings it is easy to drift into the cynical camp. The truth is that we all may feel cynical at some time. Cynicism often comes cloaked in realism.

Trying and difficult circumstances where hope is elusive can turn one into a cynic. The Covid-19 pandemic left thousands of older people isolated, and unable to contact friends and family. For months on end, they longed for their hand to be held by a loved one. Death was a frequent visitor to care facilities where we were lodged. Such isolation readily turns into cynicism: "I'm old history. These bones will not live again."



Quite apart from the Pandemic, just being older can quite easily cause one to become cynical. Aches and pains, walkers and wheelchairs, loss of a partner and friends, your own days are numbered. It is an inner challenge not to sour on life! "Is this the reward I get for a lifetime of love, work, community, and service?"

Discouraged? Despairing? From the heart of creation there comes an incredible invitation:

***Come all who are tired and heavy laden,
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke
upon yourself and learn of me. I am
humble and lowly of heart.***

God's compassionate heart is accessible. There is a resonance in this verse, an immediate connection with the human condition...a connection with me and times in my life when I felt very tired, burdened as if a heavy yoke had been placed around my neck. In response to these times and feelings there is a remarkable invitation to come and to rest! Pray and trust in the closeness of God. Unburden yourself in the presence of compassion. Be still and Know that God Is and that God is available always.



Prayer for Us and Our Endings

***Creator and Friend,
endings intrude on my life
and I feel numb,***

***Journey inwards toward my aching heart
and there mix strength and hope together.***

***Grant me trust I need to accept endings -
Grant me courage I need to choose endings.
Touch me with a fragrance of newness.***

Don R



Part Two Generative Questions

1. Take a moment and read again the poem, “Nobody”? To what degree do you see yourself in this experience? What were your circumstances or what sort of change had taken place?
You may want to write in your journal about the experience allowing your own poem of identity change following an ending to emerge as you write. If you are part of a study group, you may choose to share your writing, or part of it, with others as you reflect aloud.
2. Five different ending experiences from William Bridges' *Transitions* are included in this chapter. Which one of these is most familiar to you as a part of your experience of endings, especially as an older adult.
3. To what degree are the five experiences of change a healthy, expected result of loss and grief? Or, to what degree are these experiences acknowledged, affirmed, or recognized in your circle of friends and family? Or in your community of faith?
4. Have you felt cynical as a result of your experience of aging? Write about that experience. Let your writing become a psalm or prayer naming and releasing that cynicism to God. You may choose to share your writing if you are part of a study group.





ENDINGS: A CHALLENGE TO THE INNER LIFE

Richard Wagamese, renowned Ojibwe writer and teacher, shared his grandfather's words, *"nothing in the universe grows from the outside in."*

We think and act from the inside out. Whether we are conscious of this or not. It is somewhat embarrassing to be caught wearing a shirt 'inside out'. The label dangling from the back in full sight is no secret. "Say, I think you have your shirt inside out" is not what we want to hear in our elder years! But living our lives from the inside out is the most authentic way to live. We perceive the world from the inside out. When we are experiencing change and therefore endings, many endings, what generative responses might we make from the inside out?

***If we lose our inner commitment
the cost rapidly becomes apparent
in the outer world.***

Julia Cameron

Attention to our inside out responses can help limit the potential for cynicism and disconnection from the new possibilities that appear following loss, change, endings. The following are some inner responses to outer changes. You may have others, but here's my list:

1. Gratitude
2. Relinquishment
3. Lament
4. Laughter
5. Wisdom
6. Acceptance
7. Mindfulness
8. Faith

Gratitude

Paul the Apostle gave this advice to the early converts to Christianity as a response to change and to endings when he said: *"I have found it to be within me that in whatever circumstance I find myself to be in to give thanks."*

When endings come, gratitude may seem difficult or even impossible to feel. It is paradoxical to give thanks during an ending. Gratitude may not be the first

feeling we have when life goes sideways. However, I think it is healing to make room for gratitude if only to mumble or mutter it. I see gratitude as important because it keeps us from getting out of alignment with the goodness of God and the essential goodness of life. *"Nothing makes me more grateful for life, even in the hard times,"* writes Parker Palmer, *"than the realization that life is a pure gift and that it won't last forever."*

Gratitude counters cynicism. Giving thanks is a posture that recognizes and names the simple and profound source of life. We are the recipients and participants of life - not the source of life. Gratitude outruns the present and plants our souls in soil that endings cannot destroy. Paul poetically described this soil where our gratitude finds roots.

Nothing can separate us
from the love of God
Neither height nor depth
nor anything in all creation
can ever separate us
from the love we know
in Christ Jesus our Lord
Romans 8:38,39

The expression of gratitude is an empowering act. It reminds us that while something is gone there is much that is left. I read of an elderly man who was close to dying. When his wife visited him in the hospital, he said to her: "I would like an obituary in the paper. I want it to contain my name, when I was born and when I died, and then, nothing more than the word 'Thanks.'"

At the doorstep of death, the ultimate ending, gratitude has the last and the lasting word.

***If it be possible and grace prevails
Let the last words I utter be a simple
and profound 'Thanks'
Be it at the end of my life
Or the end of a day
May my endings be infused with thanks
Gratitude aligns my soul
with what has given me life
And sustained this life that is mine.***

***Now, in my elder years,
The time is right to know
down deep gratitude.
For love that has embraced me
For sustenance that has fed me
For faithfulness that has accompanied me
For amazement that has inspired me
For laughter that has enlivened me
For wisdom that has guided me
For the Holy One who has picked me up
and dusted me off
and sent me on my way again
And on this day I am at one
with the poet in saying:
i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for
everything which is natural which is
infinite which is yes***

-Don R with excerpt from *i thank you God for most this amazing* by e.e.cummings

Relinquishment

You may not know that the prophet Jeremiah was an old man when mighty Babylon invaded tiny Israel in 550 BCE. Jeremiah got into trouble when he encouraged the people to let go of yearning for the past and to “build their homes” in Babylon. “Are you joking Jeremiah? Let go of all our land and houses along with our identity as a people and accept our captivity in a strange and foreign land?” Jeremiah was thrown into a stockade because his call to relinquish the past was seen as betrayal. It wasn’t that he was defeatist, or even unwilling to resist but he offered counter-intuitive wisdom. He knew that the way forward was the way of letting go. What was wisdom for Jeremiah is wisdom for us as well.

As older persons, we know or fear that there will be little joy in relinquishment. For Jeremiah, he had no idea of what would come next but two things he did know. One practical reality he knew was that tiny Israel was no match for mighty Babylon. So, there are practical reasons to practice relinquishment.

The second thing that Jeremiah knew was that God was not left behind in Israel. Surprise! The creative, life-giving accompanying presence of Yahweh, for so long centered in the Temple, was a presence in Babylon. New beginnings are made possible if God is with us everywhere we go. Surrender can be generative.

We must be willing to let go of the life we planned, so that we can have the life that is waiting for us.

Joseph Campbell *Reflections on the Art of Living: A Joseph Campbell Companion* ed. Diane K Osbon

Grief and Lament

Endings include sadness and grief. Jeremiah’s cause encouraged the people to embrace their loss and to recognize the depth of their woundedness. He summoned the people to grieve for their beloved Jerusalem. This was not to anchor them to ‘what used to be’ but to liberate them to live in the new and different. Let go and lament.

The book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Scriptures is a book of grieving said to be the lamentations of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was known as the ‘weeping prophet’. I include here some words of lament as one way that we can express our grief. In this passage Jeremiah is lamenting for the lost temple back in Jerusalem:

***How lonely sits the city
that was full of people.
How like a widow has she become,
she that was great among the nations.
She who was a princess among the cities
has become a vassal.
She weeps bitterly in the night
tears on her cheeks
Among all her lovers
she has none to comfort her.***

**Behold Lord I am in distress.
My soul is in turmoil.
My heart is wrung within me
Hear how I groan.
There is none to comfort me**

**Cry aloud to the Lord O daughter of Zion
Let tears stream down
like a torrent day and night
Give yourself no rest.
Pour out your heart
like water before the
presence of the Lord.**

When we are experiencing endings and when life goes sideways, grieving clears the way for moving on. Francis Weller is a psychotherapist, writer, and soul activist specializing in grief work. He writes:

Grief is an act of protest that declares our refusal to live numb. There is something feral about grief, something essentially outside the ordained and sanctioned behaviors of our culture. Because of that, grief is necessary to the vitality of the soul. Contrary to our fears, grief is suffused with life-force. It is not a state of deadness or emotional flatness. Grief is alive, wild, untamed and cannot be domesticated. It resists the demands to remain passive and still. We move in jangled, unsettled, and riotous ways when grief takes hold of us. It is truly an emotion that rises from the soul.

In our Senior years the losses pile up and how to grieve or whether to grieve when there is much for which to grieve is a dilemma. Sometimes a particular loss surfaces: "I am really missing Paul today." So tonight it would be good to light a candle, place it on the dinner table and tell stories about what you miss about Paul. Or place a photo or rose on a table and talk write, tell stories, and feel what you feel and express what you feel.

All forms of grief need recognition. Feeling sorry for yourself is ok! Live into feeling sorry for yourself. Spend time with it, and then let it go.

When the Israelites found themselves captive in a foreign land, they sat down and wept as they recalled their beloved land and holy temple. Writes Professor Brueggemann: "How does one continue in the face of devastating loss?" This is the question that God's people are left with in the face of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BCE. He continues, "Grief is a sign of our aliveness. It is an index of our humanity."



Laughter

Joy is soul work.

W.A. Mozart

**An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing,
and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress**

W. B. Yeats *Sailing to Byzantium*

Shakespeare has a wonderful twist in some of his plays. Sometimes in the midst of tragic situations, or times of high drama and tension, from the wings of the stage come eccentric, playful, humorous characters, their antics in complete contrast to the prevailing tragic mood. They may present a radically different way of viewing the world than those held by most of the play's characters. Some of Shakespeare's fools demonstrate a subversive potential.

Joan Erikson, collaborator with husband Erik Erikson in the shaping of a model of human psychological development and life cycles says about older age, "*You should enjoy it, you should laugh and sing and dance and make merry as much as possible.*" Joan was 90 years of age when she shared this perspective!

Laughter or humour in the midst of sadness is subversive. It hides under the cover of sadness as a reminder that sadness is not the last word. Laughter is

a tip off to another reality that is real. Shakespeare's subversive characters are a literary device but maybe also a 'life device'. Sometimes in transitional times we simply forget to laugh. Laughter is an expression of joy not necessarily of happiness. Joy breaks into our circumstances even during much unhappiness. Joy is a happy intruder. "... but he who kisses the joy as it flies, lives in eternity's sunrise" (William Blake). When change rattles us and when endings come close to devouring us, there is always the possibility within us to 'kiss the joy'.

Early in the Covid-19 pandemic a boy said he knew people would be feeling sad. So, on his street he set up a table, sat behind it with a sign "The Joke Table". Anyone who came by and stopped was offered a joke. In the midst of the pandemic, he knew people needed to laugh. He was right. For that moment in front of the joke table, the griefs of pandemic were forgotten.

Life is tragic. Life is also humorous, funny, or sometimes even hilarious. In my experience as a minister, at the saddest of deaths, someone will recall a funny time, a humorous story reminding us of another dimension to sadness. Will Durst an American comedian says, "*And it's laughter that allows hope to creep back on the inhale.*" When we are going through transitions, laughter reminds us of a dimension of our existence that we have forgotten about.

Laughter finds us – but I have learned that we can construct laughter too! Try it sometime! Just sit there when no one else can hear and start to laugh ... giggle... laugh, roar.... It is like releasing something deep down that needs to get expressed.

*Give to us laughter, Oh Source of our Life.
Laughter can banish so much of our strife.
Laughter and love give us
wholeness and health.
Laughter and love are the
coin of true wealth.*

Lyrics by Walter H. Farquharson (1974)

The point is we need to laugh. It is a nutrient in the soil of the fallow time, it provides perspective in the wilderness times. Laughter coming from an elderly person has a very special significance. At the end, after all the falls into life's pits, after mountains of challenge have been climbed, after disappointments have been experienced, and losses felt oh so deeply.... at the end laughter!



Wisdom

Life is a learning experience. Sometimes we learn from what we have been taught; Often we learn from what we have experienced. The elder years are an invitation into a time to reflect on what we have learned about life. These elder years carry with them a responsibility to, in the words of the Irish poet Thomas Moore, “stop and listen to whatever signals of wisdom come along.”

“To stop and listen” is to take time to reflect and to comprehend what has become truth for us. I have heard it said that as elders we are meant to be the prophets of a society, its compass, its truth tellers. If so, our responsibility is to discern what is wise. Such discernment requires a commitment to stop and listen to our life and in that reflective space to listen for any signals of wisdom that come along.

Lest it be thought that we seek wisdom as an elder only for the sake of the other, it needs to be clear that in this last stage of life, we seek to discern wisdom for our own path. This path leads, writer William Bridges says, “to a kind of ripening...that provides an angle of vision on life that one can get nowhere else.” It is an angle of vision that requires us to ‘stop and listen for any signals of wisdom that come along.’

Wisdom is also embedded in the community of the Church. This United Church of ours expresses in its traditions, ritual, and in its worship a cornucopia of wisdom. In worship the biblical word is broken open in sermons, and song and prayer - a searching out of wisdom by which we can give shape to our lives.

We have within us as older adults' resources of wisdom that, like a well of water, we can draw upon in times of change and when endings are experienced. What have we come to know about endings? Are endings really the end? Can we pull back from the circumstance of our endings and be reminded of truths about life that we have come to trust? Where is the wisdom of faith in our endings?

Acceptance

One Sunday morning after worship, my partner and I stood chatting with a longtime friend. We noticed changes in her participation in conversation. She was uncertain and losing track of what she was saying. As we stood with her, she suddenly spoke with unmistakable clarity. "This is who I am now", she said. She courageously accepted the reality that she had dementia.

Her words are unforgettable because she spoke her truth but also unforgettable because they were spoken to us in our elder days. Those words spoke of changes over which we have little or no control. "This is who I am now." The grace of acceptance is liberating, no matter how hard to acknowledge. Denial of who I am

or where I am leaves me stuck, not free to lay claim to the future.

Louise Speaks

***The look in her eyes,
her unsteady gait,
her search to find the right name
for old friends.
We pretend it's ok.***

***Suddenly, thankfully, pretense splinters
"This is who I am now."***

Louise speaks.

And her words

***summon from within me a 'Yes'
to this unwelcome change.***

Done pretending.

***Acceptance makes newness possible, so,
This is who I am now.***

This is who we are now.

Don R

As mentioned earlier, the prophet Jeremiah was not popular when his summons to the exiles was to accept their new reality and make homes for themselves in Babylon. This possibility was, at first, simply beyond comprehension. "Absolutely ridiculous idea", I can hear someone muttering. But they did settle in this new land. And they made homes for themselves in this foreign place. And God was there. This attitude of accepting and living a new reality is a good part of what it means to make our way through these elder years. When we throw our arms around a changed circumstance in our lives and say "yes" to it then we are ready for the next stage in this journey into our elder years.

Mindfulness

There is the past and there is the future and there is the fleeting present, the here and now. As older people, we have a lot of 'past' that can absorb us and not so much future which can worry us. Tucked in between the past and the future is the 'present fleeting moment.' Being mindful is being aware of life right now, in this moment.

Try this now:

Find your pulse in your wrist, or neck.
Gently keep your finger on that pulse for a few moments.

Recognize that pulse is a sign of your aliveness!

Simply follow the beat of your heart and lungs in the beat of your pulse.

Notice if your mind wanders to the past, or to the to-do list, or a conversation unfinished...release that and come back to your pulse.

Notice if the pulse is quick, slow, light, heavy...notice the rhythm that only you have in your pulse.

Allow a prayer of gratitude to rise in you.

"Thank you Holy One. You are here. I am here. I am alive. I am present."

Gently release your pressure on the pulse point. You can do this anytime you need to connect to the present moment.

Being mindful of the time that is now is an ability to be fully present and aware but not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us. Living in the here and now takes practice!

My wife Sandy took a course in mindfulness training and in the months following her death I would come upon little notes she made to herself. They were reminders of life in the here and now, the view, the sky, the smells, the tastes, and, yes, of me, her partner and love. Sandy lived into her future by being alive to the present.

The route to our future is through the present. We go deep not long. We go deep into the mystery of love. With every moment in which we know love and every moment we express love we become what we are not yet and creation becomes what it is not yet.

With every hello how are you?

With every goodbye deeply felt

***With every kindness expressed
and received***

With every action taken for others

With every I love you

With every forgiveness

With every smile

With every muffin baked

We live into the future

By living in the here and now!

Don R

Faith

***Everything invites us into a conversation
with God.***

Walter Ong, Theologian

As an Elder person, don't you find that something you read or experienced from years ago has stayed with you because it

resonates over the years? In my 30's I read Dag Hammarskjöld's book *Markings*. He was the General Secretary of the United Nations in the 1950's and to this day I recall him reflecting on a certain point in his life when he said 'Yes!' to a life of meaning; a meaning that he gave himself to discover and to live. It is good in our elder years to acknowledge the 'Yes' by which we have lived.

A few years ago I wrote my autobiography; I determined that it would not only be about the facts of my life but it would also be about my 'Yes'. On Easter, 1949 I was baptized by immersion thereby confessing my belief in the Creator made knowable in the person of Jesus. 70 years later it is as if those waters have, like a river, run through the landscape of my life shaping it and reshaping it. In different ways these waters kept calling to me "Go deep, seek justice, be compassionate of all and listen to this whisper of the waters: "Remember your baptism. Remember your Yes."

And, we have the chance to keep on saying 'Yes' to God, to faith, to life. There are different ways to experience this 'Yes': Each sabbath the Community of Faith gathers for our communal 'Yes.' Imagine yourself entering the worship space and whispering: "What happens here in worship is my 'Yes' to that which is ultimate and infinite in life." Many years ago I was taught this prayer, which I call "My Yes Prayer."

**God I give myself to you this day
All that I am and all that I have
To be used wholly and without conditions
by You
Take me away from myself and use me up
Where you will
When you will
And with whom you will**

Often in our older adult years, we may feel a weakening, a fading, a useless feeling. If we reach for our 'yes', wait for it, listen, and pray for it, be surprised by it – it is there! Our 'Yes' to God and faith right amid all that life holds.

**The river runs it does and keeps on flowing
From where I stand
I cannot see just where it's going
It twists and turns with an ebb and flow
There's a river in me I have come to know
I feel its life, its currents, its flow
To know the river is my truth to know
Don R**



This chapter has been about assumptions we live by. The eight responses to endings are elements of generative aging.



1. Gratitude: keeps us aligned with the goodness of God and the essential goodness of life



2. Relinquishment: Life must always unravel and be reknit



3. Grief and Lament: Acknowledge the grief, let it go in prayer and clear the way for moving on



4. Laughter: "Laughter can banish so much of our strife."



5. Wisdom: embedded in community and in reflection on our own life experience



6. Mindfulness: Tucked in between the past and the future is this present moment - Be here now.



7. Acceptance: This is who I am now.



8. Faith: Renew your 'Yes' to life of meaning and faith.

GENERATIVE QUESTIONS

1. Don identifies 8 practices which support generative aging. How do we respond to change in our lives and thus to endings? Are any of the 8 already a part of your generative process? Can you share a story when you drew on the that practice? How did it support you?
2. At this moment in your older adult growth, which one of the 8 practices is most timely for you? To what degree is that a practice that is already familiar or unfamiliar? What might you do to use this strategy more frequently?
3. Take some time in a journal, or in quiet contemplation to recall a moment in your life in the more distant past where you said 'Yes' to a life of meaning. If you have the opportunity in your study group, share that story of your 'yes'! Enjoy it.



LIMINAL SPACE IN OUR ELDER YEARS

Part One: Introducing Liminality

***There are things you know about,
and things you don't, the known
and the unknown,
and in between them are the doors.***

Ray Manzarek, co-founder of The Doors

Our plane landed in a country that was so different in so many ways. Sandy and I walked out the doors of the airport and stood there feeling so much! Excited about the adventure and disoriented by the strangeness of the unknown. Curious. A little Anxious. Full of Anticipation. Uncertain. We didn't have any idea which way to turn.

Liminal space is like that. It is a space between the "what was" and "the not yet" and between "the known and the unknown."

The word Liminal comes from the Greek word meaning threshold. The concept of liminality or liminal space was first used by Victor Gennep and was further developed by Victor Turner (1920-1983). Turner observed that when an individual or social/cultural group transitioned from one social status to another there were

rites of passage ceremonies to mark the transitions. Liminal space is part of many rites of passage. It helps delineate the move from one social standing to another: from younger to older, from older to older still.

One familiar phrase that describes liminal space is 'betwixt and between.' How often in life have you had this feeling? It illustrates the feeling that we are neither here nor there. We are not where we were nor are we yet where we want or hope to be. We are in a between space.

As elders we might experience any number of liminal spaces. Sometimes they are betwixt and between such as a partner suddenly becoming a care giver for a husband or wife. This might also be described as "between a rock and a hard place". This phrase dates to a Greek myth where Odysseus guides his ship between a rock on one side (with a death-defying whirlpool) and a people eating monster on the other side. There was no good choice for Odysseus. We know such points or thresholds we come to, caught between two unpleasant or unpromising possibilities.



Not all liminal time is defined by unpleasant possibilities, although this can be the case.

Betwixt and between, between a rock and a hard place, neither here nor there - each of these phrases describe liminal times and places. However, it is best we think of liminal or threshold time as a cross over space. In subsequent chapters of this resource, I will propose to you that the ages of 65 and 85 are potentially liminal times. I think of them as between spaces that are transitional from one stage of life to another. The age of 65 is often equated with life changes such as retirement. It is a transitional space between what we have known and the unknown, between what was and the not yet. The age of 85 I propose as also a threshold space that begins a stage of life that is the last stage and is very different from the transitions of 65. The age of 85 is not usually celebrated as a rite of passage age, but in the following pages I will propose it as an important threshold of our most senior years.

Writer and theologian Richard Rohr has written about liminal space and the importance of holding open the 'between' space. He sees liminality as transitional and transformative, as a space where something new can be created. Such liminal spaces are "essential for our own transformation and evolution as they shake us out of our habitual lives, draws us out of what we have known but does not allow us to know what is coming next."



God is particularly interested in these in-between spaces because they are times of vulnerability and therefore openness in which transformation may happen! The times in life when we are comfortable and secure are not often the times where God's transformative spirit is as obviously at work as in liminal times. Thinking about my own liminal spaces, I wrote the following:

Crossing over

but left something behind

***There's no going back for something to find
that would make crossing easier to take***

***I make the crossing for
my own future's sake***

Ambiguity assails me in this crossing over

I keep looking back

over my shoulder

Something pulls me ahead

I am not sure what it might be

***I will wait awhile in this crossing space
and seek the life movement
that brings me apace***

There are glimpses of wisdom

when I am not sure

And Hope breeds

the dream I need to endure

Liminal space

the cusp of something new

Just what new looks like

I don't know- that's true

In waiting, in crossing

new seeds are sown

Something incredible waits to be known.

Don R with thanks to Blaise Pascal

Chapter Six Part One

Our older adult years ought not be weary years. Rather they are years wherein reside thresholds of change, transition, and potential transformation. Let's envision our elder years as generative where life is transformed through a thoughtful recognition of liminal space.

Part One Generative Questions

1. Don opens with the image of the airport terminal as a liminal location. Have you had the privilege of travel to new places where you have experienced this liminality upon arrival? Perhaps you have travelled by bus or train or even car? Take a moment to recall a specific time, place, and feeling – and share this story with your study group. Or enjoy recalling the details in your journal.
2. Take a few moments of quiet contemplation or journaling to recall a time recently where you may have experienced the betwixt and between, or neither here nor there, in your life. To what degree did this have the quality of liminality? A time that was ripe for transformation. After reflection, please share your experience with members of your study group. As you listen to other's stories, what characteristics of age-related liminality emerge?
3. Blaise Pascal is loosely quoted in the last line of the poem above. "Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known." To what degree are you living your older adult years as if this were true? Or not?



LIMINAL SPACE IN OUR ELDER YEARS

Part Two: An Ark, and A Whale

God intrudes in liminal times.

A lot of life is lived in 'between' spaces where things happen that catch us by surprise. Last week I took my laundry down to the laundry room. In the time of waiting for the laundry to be done I met a man whose life story unfolded waiting time. Talking to this man in 'between times' and hearing a life story of intrigue and risk was certainly not what I went to the laundry room to do. Liminal space is more intentional and sustained than this laundry interlude.

What follows are two mythical biblical stories. Each of the stories are illustrative of liminal space. One is the story of Noah and the other is Jonah. You will note that the number 40 is common to each of these stories, in the Noah story it was 40 days of pouring rain and in Jonah it was 40 hours in the belly of the whale.

I love the stories of Noah and Jonah, even my version of them. For Noah one world was coming to an end and a new world was yet to be known. For Jonah it was a space between Tarsus and Nineveh, between running from and going to.

Both stories begin with a call from God. For Noah it was to build an ark, and for Jonah it was to go to Nineveh. Let's look in more detail at the Noah and Jonah stories to see what we might learn from each of them about liminal space and generative aging. In fact, why not put yourself as a senior inside each of these characters and ride with them into their 'between spaces'?

The Story of Noah **Genesis Chapters 5-9**

Early in the Book of Genesis we meet the family Adam and Eve in the perfectly groomed 'Garden of Eden'. The goodness and perfection of the family portrait does not last for long. The 'book of beginnings' begins with a blame game between Adam, Eve, and the serpent. From there things go downhill, so badly that God decides to send a flood to destroy the earth and have a "do-over."

God asks Noah to build an ark and provides him with specific building plans. Once the building job is complete, the Ark is loaded with two of every kind of species. After everyone and everything boards the Ark, Noah and company wait for the rain to come and come it did,

for 40 days and 40 nights. (How are you and Noah feeling about now?) For 150 days and nights the Ark floats aimlessly. Like being in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean with water everywhere, yet even the tallest mountain tops cannot be seen. (Can you tell us how you and Noah are doing?)

After 150 days of being tossed around on the flooded earth, the time came to risk sending out a trial balloon to see if there was any land – or future – out there. Noah sends out a dove to probe the possibilities for newness. (What does this do to your spirit?)

God's new world is waiting but Noah has no idea of just what he is looking for other than some dry land. Holding the dove in his hand he gently releases it. It flies out of sight. Waiting, wondering, hoping doubting! Soon the dove returns. The dove found no place to land. What to think? What to feel? More waiting. (What do YOU feel?)

Seven more days of waiting. Waiting is what you do when you want the flood to end and a new shape of the future to arrive. Hope is mixed-up in this time of in-between. With trembling hands, Noah sends out a second dove. The dove returns with a green twig from an Olive tree in its beak. What a sight for very sore eyes. Intimations of future. Green, the color of renewal. Hope is rising and still questions linger. Still water as far as the physical eye can see. (What did you say to yourself when you saw that green leaf?)

More waiting! Seven days later Noah's hand gently holds the dove and slowly he lets go trusting that beyond what he can see a new world awaits. The dove does not return. Hope gains energy for a future where life may be different, whatever that might be. The Dove has found a place to land. (Will you describe the threshold you are on when the dove does not return?)

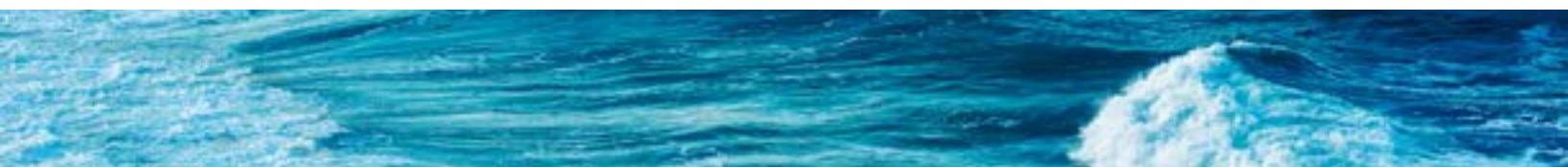
The Noah Story and Liminality

The Ark with Noah and the precious cargo is betwixt and between for 150 days. Think of the Ark as a threshold between an old, degraded world and a freshly created world. The ark is holding open a space that is between 'what was and the not yet.'

Noah built the ark and lived in the ark as an act of faith. (And you did too.) Neither you nor Noah had any idea of what the result of this project would be like. The known world was clearly left behind and an unknown world lay ahead.

We know virtually nothing about life on the ark except for one comment: "*the waters prevailed so mightily upon the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered.*" (That must have been a kind sinking feeling.) A characteristic of liminal space is that there are no landmarks to go by. It is an open space as if, indeed, in the Ark with Noah. We have already named examples which are 'Ark'-like where there are not even mountains to be seen, only water, water, water.

- The death of a partner



- A move from a house to an apartment or from anywhere into an assisted living or care facility.
- Retirement with the question of 'who am I now that I am not working the way I used to work?'
- A congregation that in the past was packed to the rafters with lots of kids and now just a few or none, and no land in sight.
- Dramatic changes or gradual changes in health and wellness and physical capacity

Any one of these threshold spaces are times devoid of familiar landmarks. Earlier we reflected on the green leaf the dove brought back. What a significant image of promise and hope. When we are in the space of betwixt and between, we nurture a hopeful, green leaf sense of the 'not yet.' Liminal space is here a hopeful space. Release the dove – or raven – and the dove comes back from the unknown, from the 'yet to be' with a green leaf.

When you or I are in this uncertain, not knowing, Ark space of liminality, it may be a good idea to find a green leaf and tuck it away as a reminder that liminal space is hopeful space.

What can be easily passed over in this story is the implicit trust that Noah had in God and in God's intention to renew the earth. From God's request to build an ark Noah expresses a steady trust that God is doing a new thing. In the ebbs and flows of our lives, we reach for that trust.

Much of the work of the biblical God and human destiny itself is to get people into liminal space and to keep them there as long as it takes to learn something essentially and genuinely new.

It is the ultimate teachable space.

Richard Rohr

In long times of bewilderment, we stand at a threshold that is the ark afloat between what was and what is not yet. Our eyes look to the edge of all that is; our soul turns within to imagine the dry land of new beginning. Alive on the threshold of the not yet! Waiting once... waiting twice... waiting the third time....

The Jonah Story

Jonah is another in-between story of not knowing, of darkness, and of disorientation. God says to Jonah: "Jonah, I want you go to the great city of Nineveh and preach repentance to the people there." "Nope, no way, ain't going." Jonah made a run for it! He hopped on a boat to get him away from the hot spot he was in. It didn't turn out too well for Jonah. A huge storm arose, the crew on the boat panicked and determined that Jonah and his God were the cause of this life-threatening situation. Jonah was caught between a rock and a hard place.

Jonah quickly realized that he was the reason for the ferocity of the storm and offered to become the sacrifice needed to appease God. At Jonah's urging, they threw him overboard.

The storm ceased. But for Jonah, not quite good news. He was quickly swallowed by a whale. Jonah is neither in Tarsus nor is he in Nineveh. He is not on the ship, and not in the sea either. In the belly of the whale there is clearly a tension between Jonah's Tarsus space and God's Nineveh space. Good enough reason for Jonah to offer some energetic repentance prayers. Three days, three nights, and a load of prayers later the whale vomited him up on the shore.

Jonah went to Nineveh where he had amazing success at getting the city to repent.

Jonah, however, soured on this instant repentance and complained to God. Jonah was provoked and sulky about (get this list!): God's grace, mercy, slowness to anger, abounding, and steadfast love and God's willingness to accept repentance... oh, Jonah.

The headline story is that God wanted life to become very different in Nineveh the largest city of the ancient world. God wanted Nineveh to repent of its evil. Once again the Creator is about re-creating and renewing.

The Jonah story and Liminality

Jonah is a personal story of life lived between a rock and a hard place. The whale belly becomes the space between 'running from' and 'going to.' This was a space that was not of Jonah's choosing. He was supposed to be in Tarsus. But Jonah knew exactly why he had been swallowed by this fish. It was time to face up to his running from God.

It was confession time, a time for Jonah to sit with his truth and for a serious conversation between creature and creator.

All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.

Martin Buber

The belly of a whale was liminal and transformational space. Jonah calls out from the belly to the Lord. Crying out becomes the threshold for what comes next. Jonah recognizes himself and acknowledges that he needs to get his life back on track. Enough running from what God.

Clearly, Jonah hit rock bottom. His choice to run was a choice that truly brought him down. Perhaps in such a space our first uttering is to the Holy One who is in all and through all and is making things new again.

Liminal space can be an in the belly-of-a-whale waiting space when we face a truth about ourselves. There are transformative times in our life when in the words of theologian Howard Thurman, *"One brings for review the purposes and dreams to which one's life is tied. This is the space where there is no pretense, no dishonesty, no adulteration. What passes over the threshold.... is what one really thinks and feels about one's own life."*

Truth grows gradually in us, like a musician who plays a piece again and again until suddenly he hears it for the first time.

Anne Michel Fugitive Pieces

I was talking to a friend, a much younger friend of 65 years. He finished his career and was now taking some time for discernment. "I want to discern what God

might have in mind for me now." How unusual and how timely. "I feel as if I am on the cusp of something new, something risky and different but it's a feeling and I need to take time to see just what it might be."

In further chapters I will explore with you the need to reflect on a repurposing of our lives in our elder years. Generative aging recognizes endings and embraces the waiting, reflective space that opens. Richard Rohr again enlightens: *"Liminal space is a space where we can finally let go of an approach, a way of being, a role, an identity, or a belief, so that something new can be created."*

In each of the Noah/Jonah stories the life that once was is left behind and a very different 'between' space is created. These mythical stories shake us loose from our accustomed life and invite us to embrace the space between what was and the not yet.

***between known and not known
between what was and not yet***

***I cry out I turn in
And learn new meaning
for the two
shall become
one***

***a waiting place
a space
I am learning
to claim***

Don R

Part Two: Generative Questions

1. Of the two biblical stories – Noah and Jonah – was there one you resonate with? Which one? Where does that story connect with your story?
2. Noah sends out the dove three times. Take some time now to write or contemplate this action, this waiting. What arises for you as significant about that act as part of liminal time?
3. What do these stories offer you about the importance of in-between spaces as part of generative aging?
4. Take a moment to identify, feel, and talk or write about the tension that Jonah is feeling between Tarsus and Nineveh – the running away in tension with the call toward something or somewhere.
5. Start with the phrases “between known and not known/ between what was and not yet” on a blank page and free write for three minutes. Perhaps a poem of your own experience of liminality will emerge!



LIMINAL SPACE IN OUR ELDER YEARS

Part Three: The Liminal Process in Three Acts

The experience of being in a liminal time can be defined by three movements, like a three-act play. Each act tells a different part of the story and requires our attention to live it well. How might we intentionally embrace these threshold years?

Act 1: Recognize and Acknowledge

Act 2: Keep Open

Act 3: Wait and Reflect

The First Act: Recognize and Acknowledge

I propose that we recognize and acknowledge age 65 as a rite of passage season in life. A liminal season where significant reflection, transition, endings, and transformation may be taking place. I encourage us to recognize and acknowledge age 85 as another season to celebrate as a rite of passage – a liminal time that marks significant life change. Each of these ages are thresholds where life takes on a different meaning and sometimes a different purpose than at earlier stages of life.

In many cultures, societies, or faith communities a rite of passage marks a change in status within the community, or within the self. A rite of passage often includes time set apart from the usual rhythms of work, life, study to prepare for a new identity within the community. The impact of the time apart is then ritually celebrated in the wider community. In the Christian community that may include retreat time for youth considering confirmation before the confirmation worship take place. Or an extended time special study and prayer for those considering a call to religious vocation and holy orders. In some indigenous nations a vision quest experience is part of the rite of passage from child or youth to adult. The individual enters a liminal time as part of the crossing over to a new role or identity in social or cultural community. Imagine if we honoured our 65- and 85-year-olds within our communities of faith in this way? Imagine acknowledging the liminality of these seasons with a community ritual of respect and celebration?

For a moment think back to the first chapters in this resource when I talked about ageism and the marginalizing of older people in society. I suggested that a first response to the degrading of seniors needs to come from within us as we embrace generative aging. This is the first act; to claim and affirm that as older adults we continue to grow and develop as authentic human beings.

My proposal recognizes part of Erik Erikson's developmental stages but differs from it as well! Erikson maintained that personality develops in a predetermined order through eight stages of psychosocial development, from infancy to adulthood. The last stage begins at 65 and is defined as 'integrity vs despair.' Erikson sees this last stage of life as primarily reflective. In this theory the years from 65 years on focus on looking back on one's life to determine whether it had lasting value. If yes – great. If not, then one is left in despair. My proposal is different. With a potential of 11,000 days to live beyond age 65, we, as Church and as Christians, need to recognize and acknowledge these years are generative and purposeful! These years will hold times of looking back in reflection but let's hope that's not the only important characteristic. These years will look and feel different than earlier years but can still hold for each of us the capacity for engagement, learning, development, transformation, discovery, and curiosity.

To keep our hearts open is probably the most urgent responsibility you have as you get older.

Leonard Cohen

Therefore, the first act in the liminal process is to recognize a particular time in life as a threshold. For a growing number of older adults, the age 65 begins what may add up to one third of our life. Rather than being the beginning of the end, the ages of 65 and 85 are transitional thresholds that call for a repurposing of life. "At this threshold, what now becomes the purpose of my life?" This is a deeply spiritual question that opens one's life up to the leading of God's spirit and a call for discerning of what God wants us to do and be.

The Second Act: Keep Open

The second steppingstone in this three-act story of liminality is to keep the space open long enough for transformation to take place. The space between an ending and beginning is an important space to understand and to explore. What takes place in that space determines the future of life as we know it.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Are you like I am and want to get wherever we are going as quickly as possible? 'Let's not waste time' western culture teaches us. Age 65 arrives we get on with having a birthday party because it's a 'big' one! I am a fan of parties – but not if age 65 comes and goes, with only a party thrown in, even if it's a great party. That just isn't life affirming and generative enough to recognize the threshold of this season of life. What might it look like to intentionally open and keep open the liminal space of 65 years? Is a birthday party enough for some intentional recognition, acknowledgement, reflection, re-purposing to take place? Keeping the space open creates space for something new to take place. How easy it would be to opt for an approach that allows the years to drift by and for external circumstance to control what life looks like and feels like. We need to keep that age 65 space open.



An Indigenous leader spoke of the discovery of hidden grave sites on the grounds of Residential schools, most of the sites being those of children. She was asked if these discoveries will become a turning point in relationships between

Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples? In response she wisely said that it depends how long we will be prepared to keep the space open, a space created by the discovery of these unmarked grave sites. Her concern is well founded. Settlers and those shaped by colonial culture may just want to get past this, not linger, and get on with their lives. For others staying open to think and learn and confront these truths is essential for growth, even if it is difficult.

The liminal time I am encouraging us to recognize, acknowledge, and linger in at 65 may not be comfortable. It may not be fun and celebrative. Or at least that may not be all that it is. How often I have heard people minimize their own age, "I'm turning 39 again!" Or ask people not to recognize their birthday in any public way. Or in 'fun' a birthday at 50 or 60 or 65 is marked as though it's a death – black balloons and condolence cards. Too bad you're now 50, 60, 65. Our western culture condones and even promotes shame about our actual age. So, an intentional rite of passage at 65 which encourages deep reflection, self-examination, and openness to transformation of identity can bring up difficult thoughts and feelings. AND the liminal space can allow for deep honouring of one's own life journey. Remembering the highlights, affirming values and decisions – celebrating the specificity of the years lived.

Our 65th birthday, and a call to intentional liminal space does not need to result in fleeing to Tarsus.

The intention to honour this stage of life could be a ‘transformative’ time. In addition to the party why not arrange a retreat? Or time with a spiritual director? Set up a study group? Make a book of your life so far as part of your rite of passage? Ask the minister in your community of faith to create a worship ritual to lift to God in prayer and song and story this threshold time.

Keep the space open long enough for new insights, for changes of attitudes, for laying hold of fresh purpose. This leads us to a third act in the generative aging liminal process.

The Third Act: Wait and Reflect

It is not by muscle, speed, or physical dexterity that great things are achieved but by reflection, force of character and judgement; in these qualities old age is usually not only not poorer, but is even richer.

Cicero

“What are you doing these days?” is the question often asked of people past the 65-year-old threshold. In response I often reach for my capacity to exaggerate and describe in detail a window box that I built for planting a bit of lettuce. Clearly, I can demonstrate a significant two-fold purpose, building a box and planting lettuce seeds. I am doing something; I matter. It is inbred in me that doing something, anything, is the socially acceptable response. There is no doubt, I am busy.

Do you remember Alan Watts, hybrid Christian and Zen Buddhist who was a guru for 1960’s psychedelic types (like me!)? My copy of a book of his falls open to a particular page in which Alan Watts addresses the “busyness criteria for good aging.” He writes: *As it is, we are merely bolting our lives-gulping down undigested experiences as fast as we can stuff them in – because ‘awareness’ of our own experience is so superficial and so narrow that nothing seems so boring than simple being.* *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (1966)

It is certainly not uncommon to hear people in our elder years to say something like “I have never been so busy. I just don’t know where the time is going;” In Alan Watts words, gulping down undigested experiences as fast as I can build another flower box or take another trip. It is time to put down the hammer and nails and set aside the upcoming cruise schedule and to spend time digesting life experiences. Clearly Alan Watts prefers being over doing. And so do I when I pause long enough from my busy days to reconnect to that intention.



I live on the 8th floor of an apartment building. The one elevator is not a speedy vehicle. Sometimes someone on the 4th floor gets the jump on me so the elevator goes to the 4th floor and back to the main and then, finally up to the 8th floor. I can track the elevator. I know exactly what floor it is on and whether it is heading my way. Watching that little floor tracker creates tension within me. I want to get where I am going whether to deliver the compost or go downtown. I notice that I mumble to myself when the elevator cuts out at the 4th floor, "Darn those people on the 4th floor." As I watch the floor tracker take the car away from me, I blame the contractor for not putting in two elevators.

How quickly I have forgotten the many Advent sermons I've given on the theme of "waiting." I led study groups and growth groups where I shared the importance of learning how to wait. About time I listened to my own sermons! A first step is to push the elevator button, close my eyes and practice waiting.

About waiting: There is a tension between waiting and wanting to get somewhere. For me often the urgency of wanting to get somewhere is usually in my head and of no immediate consequence. Liminality gives us pause to consider the transformative role that waiting can have in our life. Life change at 65 or thereabouts is like a bench on the street, strategically located between where I have come from and where I am going. It sits there as an invitation to sit, to wait.

Over my 36 years as a minister, I have given plenty of sermons. Usually inside my own head there was pressure to get it done so I could get on with other important things. What sometimes frustrated this goal was not being clear just what I was trying to say. But I wanted to get it done!! My temperature would rise as I pressed for the answer to come as if pressing the elevator button expecting the elevator door to immediately open.

Slow to learn, I have come to a point now where I practice waiting. I close my eyes, or put my feet up, or lie on the floor, let everything go for a while... simply providing empty, uncluttered space for the block, or pressure, or confusion, or anxiety to clear. In this liminal space, I let the subliminal have space to do its mystical work. This space between making something happen and letting something happen is liminal space. It is life lived on a threshold between what is known and what is not yet known. In that space we recognize that something is happening, but we are not making it happen. So, learning to wait is learning to let go of the destination, social expectation, busyness for its own sake – whatever is getting in the way of generative presence as older and elder adults.

What are we to do at such threshold moments? The ancient Celtic tradition provides a simple response. In moments of transition, we are simply to be.

We are to pause and acknowledge that a transition is taking place. Instead of seeking to abruptly pass through a threshold, we are to tarry.

Brandan J. Robertson, "On the Threshold of Tomorrow," "Liminal Space," *Oneing*, vol. 8, no. 1 (CAC Publishing: 2020)

The importance of waiting is that this space, this liminal space, is where change happens, transformation takes place, where roadblocks are lifted. Change and transformation in our lives does not take place running to catch the bus. It takes place while waiting for the bus.

Much of the work of God is to get people into this waiting/liminal space and leave them in that space for as long as it takes to learn a new way of living you come to know through God's knowing.

These three acts in the liminal process help us connect once again to our Soul. The seat of the divine guidance within – and to do so at the powerful transitional moments of turning 65, and again turning 85.



A visit to Soul is, I think, a good visit to make:

***Hello Soul, my long-lost friend
I have come to talk with you again.
My center, my innermost self,
The true "I" of who "I" am***

***What shall I say to you Soul,
it is so long since we talked,
So many things have taken hold of me
taking captive my mind, my body, myself.
So many worries, so much fretting
angle me away from you, my Soul.***

***What might I say to you
since we talked.
Will I know you when we meet?
Tell me, how will I recognize you?***

***Ah, there you are
through the mist
I sense your presence within
There you are Soul
my true self
knowing the good, the just, the right***

***There you are
the very image of God within
a spark of the divine***

Hello Soul my old friend

Don R



Part Three: Generative Questions

1. What part of this chapter most captures your curiosity? Spend some time reflecting on why that might be.
2. Don suggests that ages 65 and 85 are transitional ages and appropriate to be considered for some kind of rite of passage. Does this resonate with you? Does this bother you? Take some time to explore your responses to this idea.
3. Can you recall a time in your life when you intentionally kept open the 'space' for exploration, discernment, reflection on your life and life's purpose? Take time to write about that time or share the story of that time with your study group. What helped you stay in the liminal space? Was it comfortable, uncomfortable, another feeling?
4. In your journal, or brainstorming with your study group, create elements of a worship ritual that would honour, celebrate, and bless older adults as part of a rite of passage in your community of faith. Include songs, hymns, readings, ritual actions...have fun!





REVITALIZE PURPOSE AT 65 AND 85

Part One: Thresholds of Purpose

A threshold is something you step over to leave one space and enter another. It is a between space. In our reflection on aging, a threshold is the space between one life stage and another life stage. I believe that age 65 and 85 are thresholds marked by questions of purpose and meaning. Some interests will intensify, some activities will be dropped, some sense of who we are in our elder years will emerge.

“Liminal space relativizes our perspective” writes Richard Rohr, “When we embrace liminality, we choose hope over sleepwalking, denial, or despair. The world around us becomes again an enchanted universe, something we intuitively understood when we were young and somehow lost touch with as we grew older.”

The Threshold of 65

The age of 65 is not a destination. It is a threshold into a space where relationships to employment, children and grandchildren, church, faith, health, money and more may be in a state of flux, or about to be. It can be an uncertain, insecure space. There may be tremendous joy and satisfaction, there may be worries about security and survival. There may be all these things at the same time.

*The river runs and keeps on flowing
From where I stand I can't see where it's
going
It twists and turns with an ebb and flow
There's a river in me I want to know
I feel its life, its currents, its flow
To know the river is my truth to know*

Don R

Many people at about this age cross the threshold into a liminal space where questions of purpose arise. What am I up to now? What brings joy? How do I address worries? Where is God in this time? What am I meant to do and be now? Ideally this is time to listen, to reflect, and to anticipate a fresh purpose – a repurposing – that awaits us. It is a life engaging, life transforming adventure.

There may be experiences from the past season of life that now at 65 may need a response. This is a potent moment to audit how you are in life right now. What are you bringing along with you that needs attention?

- Feeling disenchanted? Be re-enchanted!
- by something like a magnet draws you beyond yourself, like falling in love again with life and all that it might hold for you.
- Feeling disoriented? You yearn for re-orientation! A fresh purpose, a renewed *raison d'être*, an imaginative reason for putting one foot in front of another.
- Identity lost? Your soul reaches out for re-identification with your true self as a person of worth, dignity and honour, along with a healthy dose of liberating acceptance for who you are now as the roles and expectations of the past season of life shift and change.
- Feeling disengaged? You can re-engage! This may be time to join, time to invite, time to share your thoughts and feelings in the world in a renewed way - in protest or kindness or encouragement.
- In a state of denial? Liberation will come with your acceptance of mortality! This is a threshold into the next 1/3 of life. With this recognition of the certainty of death we are, in the words of the Psalmist, "to count the days that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

The Threshold of 85

As we move into our older adult years, what of our desires, what of our yearnings? The experience of life at 85 is markedly different than at 65. At 65 people are often in relatively good health, are mobile, still able to drive, play sports, continue to work, and volunteer. At 85 life is quite a different story for most people. Life has changed and a new stage, the last stage, is suddenly upon us.

At 85 years of age am I useless?

**yes, - useless like the poet
who needs nothing and uses everything
for her rhyming**

**Where years of living are sifted
as a gold panner reveals nuggets
of insight**

**Where life reorients
to what I have come to know
Where life reorients around the truth
that has grown
gradually in me
like the violinist who plays a piece
over and over and over
and finally hears it for the first time
Where life reimagined is less doing.**

**Old age is not a problem to be solved.
It is a meaning to be lived.**

Don R.

Recall Andre Picard's book on the crisis in senior's care residences and the question "What value people do old people have?"

Do they/we have social value? A fundamental human need is to have a reason to live. In the months or years following our 85th birthday, the reason to live may become harder to find except for rather practical survival reasons. Perhaps the threshold of 85 is not really about purpose or reason. Perhaps this threshold is one where life is being distilled. And as the realities of age and mortality intrude in daily life, what truly matters becomes concentrated and intensified. At 65 we were dreaming of house exchanges and learning how to play golf, at 85, with few exceptions, life seems consumed with learning new skills for daily living and with facing the reality of time left. Some of us get to know our Physician and our Pharmacist very well indeed! Playwright Florida Scott-Maxwell writes in her published journal: *"Age puzzles me, I thought it was a quiet time. My 70's were interesting and fairly serene but my 80's are passionate. I grow more intense as I age."*

Many things may have ended or be ending at 85, however, love and passion are very present.

It's nice when things happen to you late.
Leonard Cohen

At 84 years of age, I am writing this resource on 'Generative Aging.' I admit that there were times when I felt I was overreaching my age. But I have a passion for exploring generativity in aging. I couldn't not write this resource!! I believe it is time for communal recognition and acknowledgement that age 85 is a second threshold in the elder years which begins a transformative space of renewed passion!

That's why I get excited about our church communities celebrating a rite of passage that helps to bless and recognize the spiritual aspect of these thresholds. Dr Atul Gawande outlines how our society is in denial about the impacts and realities of aging. *"A consequence ...is a society not wanting to think about it. Dealing with questions like how to make life meaningful when we are weak, frail and can't fend for ourselves."* I believe our churches can be places that buck this terrible societal trend. We can be communities where questions of life, its meaning, and our purpose and value are respected and blessed at all stages, including in our older adult years.





REVITALIZE PURPOSE AT 65 AND 85

Part Two: Ritual and Liturgy

The day was beautiful sunny and warm in Havana Cuba where friends and family came from all over the world to celebrate our granddaughter, Ella. It was her quinceañera! Ella was turning 15 and therefore ready for this rite of passage into adult womanhood. It was a grand occasion – a Cuban traditional ritual. I cannot think of an equivalent social ritual in Canada. We have birthday rituals, wedding rituals and some religious traditions have rituals that pertain to life events, but “we are” writes Alan Gopnik, “a society starved of ritual.” Quinceanera and quiceanero are cultural celebrations, with spiritual roots. These rite of passage events take place at 15 years of age – regardless of the level of maturity. Traditionally these celebrations provided a chance to mark the threshold of childhood to adulthood, to commit to God and or religious practice, to think about identity and purpose and in the presence of wider community. Although sometimes viewed as fancy birthday celebrations, they are more than this. Rites of passage triggered by the actual ages 65 and 85 could be more than birthday parties too. Such an event and liturgy could provide communal opportunity to witness and affirm thresholds of life stages related to older adulthood, just as the quinceanera does for youth at 15.

***We must choose to begin a new kind of life.
We must find it life giving ourselves. We
must be a gift to the world some way,
somehow, to someone.***

Joan Chittister

I can imagine the 65/85-year-old liturgies being powerful and tender – but they need to be preceded by an intentional time apart for reflection – a liminal time. The retreat would focus on exploring the particular meaning and the spiritual purposes of the post 65- or 85-year-old stage of life. The retreat space is the space where the deeper recognition and identification of the meaning of these thresholds take place. I intend to participate in such a retreat for my 85th!

As a reader of this resource, you may be part of a group who are already into the exploration of aging and generativity! Fantastic! For others, I encourage you to gather a group of people want to explore the purpose of aging at the beginning age of 65 and of age 85. I will do the same in time for my 85th birthday next year.

*There is no point to aging. Or is there?
65 begins a possible one quarter of life remaining to be lived
and there's no point and that's the point!
85 and not much time left so what's the point?
Liminal it is
where there is great potential for constructing life differently
There is no map,
only waiting space, fallow ground beginning with our endings
Don't call them dead endings
when they hide a fresh purposing.
Don R*

What follows are two liturgies for you to use to bless the thresholds of 65 and 85 years! These liturgies may be used within a regular worship service to bless people who are intentionally embracing a liminal season. Or who have recently attended a retreat with this focus on generative aging. Or use it in any other way that seems good to you!



Choose Life!

A Rite of Passage for those at age 65 or thereabouts

Welcome

Leader:

Today we gather to bless and recognize this group of adults who are embracing a time of change and transition. They are entering an intentional season of reflection on identity, purpose, and meaning as they mark a significant life stage shift. Friends, you have arrived at the age of 65 or thereabouts! - a threshold space between what you have known and what is not yet known; between what was and what is not yet.

Opening Prayer

Leader:

God of ages, and of all ages – Here we are.
 We gather at this time of transition and change in our lives
 and ask your continued blessing and presence.
 Holy one –
 We name these ones and lift them to your tender and powerful care
 as they navigate this threshold from life and all that has been,
 toward life and all that is yet to be revealed.
 Creator and Creating spirit,
 help each one of these listen well for your guidance in this liminal time.
 May they hear your wisdom in the wisdom of their teachers,
 their youngers, and their own souls.
 Open the way for each one of these that they may revitalize their sacred purpose
 in the season of life yet to come.
 For your presence in and through all things, thank you.
 Amen

Scripture

Reader: Deuteronomy 30: 19, 20 selected verses

*“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you
 life and death, blessings and curses.
 Choose life
 so that you and your descendants may live,
 loving God, obeying God, and holding fast;
 for that means life to you...”*

Litany on the Threshold

Leader: You are here to choose life!

All: *We stand at the edge of another season of life.
We recognize this is a time of significant life change.*

Leader: The government marks this year as the year you become old.
Society has ideas about what 'old' means.
What do you say?

All: *We declare that at age 65 we choose life!
We choose the path of growth, reflection, change, and a season of positivity.
That's what 'old' means to us!*

Leader: God is with you as you seek to clarify who you are becoming.

All: *God is with us as we let go of everything that prevents us
from aligning our lives with God's purpose for us at this time.*

Leader: God is with you as you grieve what is ended.
God is with you as you anticipate what may come.

All: *God is with us as we celebrate ending and beginning.*

Sing***Voices United #293 We Praise You Creator***

*We praise you Creator, in earth, sea, and sky:
Our ruler, our maker, our sovereign most high.
Each new generation lifts voices in praise;
How good your creation, how gracious your ways.*

*Each springtime the blossoms bloom fragrant once more;
Each summer and autumn brings forth its rich store.
With witness compelling our praise and our prayer,
Creation is telling of your faithful care.*

*Your wondrous works teach us, Creator, to trace
The limitless reaches of your love and grace.
Your grace dwells among us, your love goes before;
From eldest to youngest we praise and adore.*

Leader:

With clear intention, you recognize age 65 as an age of transition which is a step in bringing fresh purpose to life in your Elder years. You are choosing to create an unhurried threshold space and in that space be open to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. And, you have each other – a circle of companions who share in this crossing over time at 65. There is no prescription for this next stage of life.

But taking time to consider who you are and where you are,
taking time to grieve losses, time to let go of thoughts, feelings, experiences,
and ideas from the past that no longer serve,
time to speak and time to listen for the Holy Spirit's nudges –
these will be the ingredients of a threshold full of potential
for the renewal of purpose as you continue to become yourself in another stage of life.

All:

*We commit to open ourselves to God's Spirit,
to invite time where we embrace not knowing, uncertainty,
and curiosity about the future.*

We are here in the present, and we are in a space between

We choose life! And we wait with patience and trust for all that is yet to be!

Leader:

We rejoice and celebrate this rite of passage in your lives. You have resisted drifting from one birthday to the next. You have resisted the deprecating definitions society gives older adults.

Bless each of you as you seek to bring vital purpose to your days of aging.

May you continue to open your lives up to God's Holy Spirit
and to the way of Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.

Peace be with you! And from each of us who travel with you an excited

AMEN AND AMEN!

Choose Life!

A Rite of Passage for those at age 85 or thereabouts

Welcome

Leader: Today we gather to bless and recognize this group of adults who are embracing a time of change and transition. They are entering an intentional season of reflection on identity, purpose, and meaning as they mark a significant life stage shift.

Friends, you have arrived at the age of 85 or thereabouts! – a threshold space between most of life and the rest of life; between what was and what is not yet. Joan Chittister said “We must choose to begin a new kind of life. We must find it life giving ourselves. We must be a gift to the world some way, somehow, to someone.” May it be so for all of us, and especially today for those of us on the edge of the latter part of our lives.

Opening Prayer

Leader:

God of ages, and of all ages – Here we are.

We gather at this time of transition and change in our lives and
ask your continued blessing and presence.

Holy one –

We name these ones and lift them to your tender and powerful care
as they navigate this threshold from life and all that has been,
toward life and all that is yet to be revealed.

God bless [name] as they listen for your presence

God bless [name] as they listen for your presence (etc.)

Creator and Creating spirit, accompany each one in this liminal time.

May they hear your wisdom in the wisdom of their companions,
their youngers, and their own souls.

Open the way for each one of these elders that your wisdom and grace may flow
through them in all their living and being.

For your presence in and through all things, thank you.

Amen

Scripture

Reader: Acts 2:17

*In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your children shall prophesy,
and your young ones shall see visions,
and your old ones shall dream dreams.*

Proverbs 4:7,8

The beginning of wisdom is this:

Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight.

Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;

she will honour you if you embrace her.

She will place on your head a fair garland;

she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

Litany at the Threshold of 85

Leader: God is with you as you choose life!

All: *We stand at the edge of another season of life.*

We recognize this is a time of significant life change.

Leader: Will you embrace all that God has in store for you?

All: *We declare that in these elder years we choose life!*

Leader: You have lived more of your life than you have left to live. Will you treasure the grace and beauty of what has been?

All: *We thank you God, for all that has been.*

Leader: You have lived more of your life than you have left to live. Sometimes attachment to the past keeps us from embracing the treasures of the present.

Will you let go of all that prevents you from being present to God and creation now?

All: *With the Spirit's help we will let the past be the past.*

We choose the path of presence, reflection, curiosity, wonder and humility.

Leader: God is with you as you continue to choose life.

All: *God is with us as we align our lives with God's purpose for us at this time.*

Leader: God is with you as you grieve what is ended.

All: *God is with us in and through all that we may experience in our elder years:*

Pains and losses, surprises and joys, confusion and clarity, loneliness and companionship, hope and trust.

Leader: There is nothing that can separate you from God's love. Nothing.

God is with you in all that is to come.

All: *God is with us as we celebrate ending and beginning.*

Sing: Thank You O God, For the Time That is Now

The Red Hymn Book #205

**Thank you, O God, for the time that is now,
for all the newness your minutes allow,
make us alert with your presence of mind
to fears and longings that move humankind.**

**Thank you, O God, for the time that is past,
for all the values and thoughts that will last.
May we all stagnant tradition ignore,
leaving behind things that matter no more.**

**Thank you for hopes of the day that will come,
for all the change that will happen in time;
God for the future our spirits prepare
hallow our doubts and redeem us from fear.**

Leader:

With clear intention, you recognize this transition into your elder years as a time ripe with potential to connect deeply with your identity as God's beloved, and your identity as a senior in our faith community. May this time be one of unhurried space open to the leading of God's Holy Spirit. You have each other – a circle of elder companions who share in this threshold.

There is no prescription for this next stage of life.

We bless you into a time to speak and time to listen for the Holy

As you continue to become yourself in the next part of life.

All:

**We commit to open ourselves to God's Spirit,
to invite time where we embrace not knowing, uncertainty,
and curiosity about the future.**

We choose life! And we wait with patience and trust for all that is yet to be!

Leader:

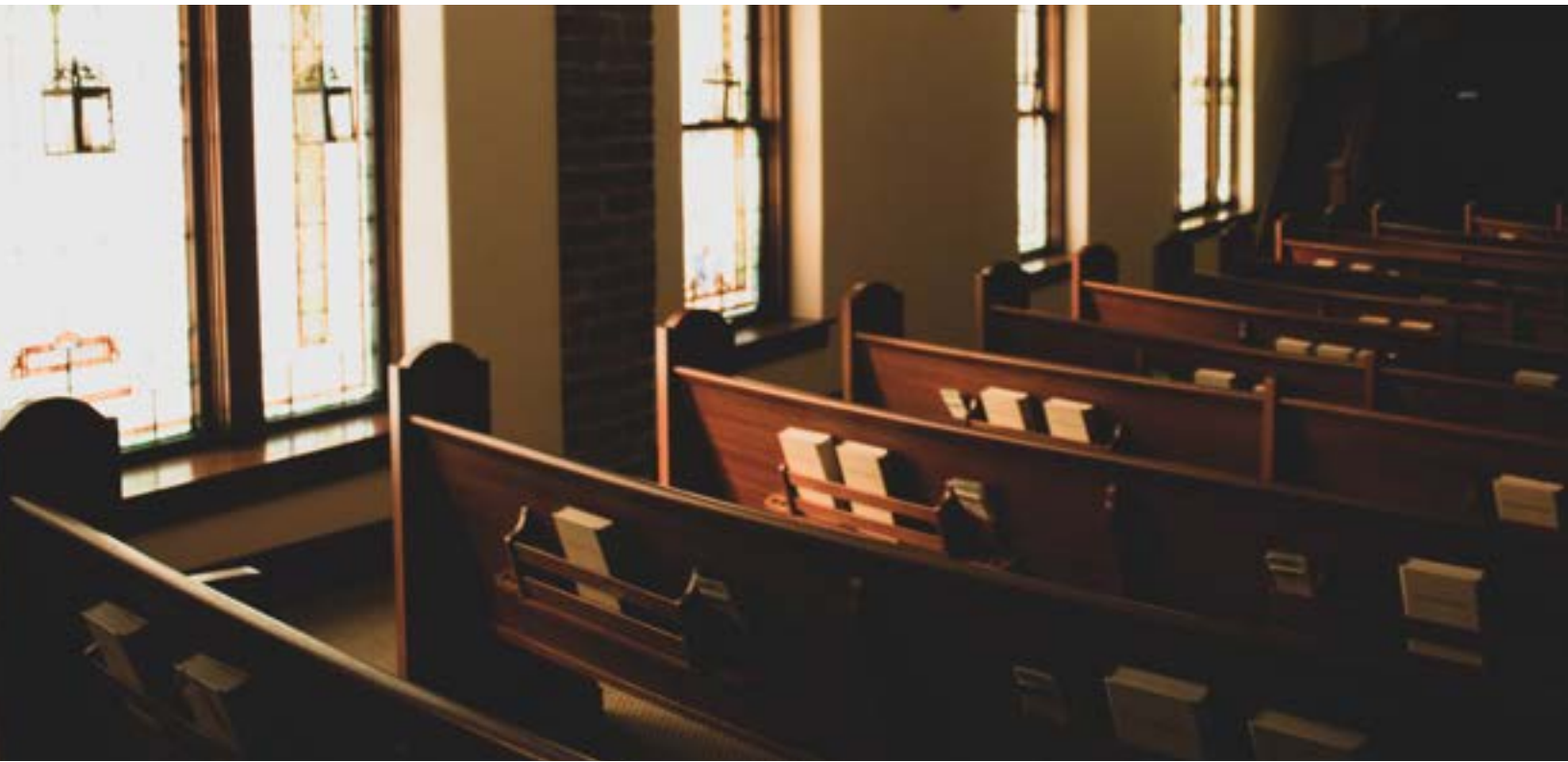
We rejoice and celebrate this rite of passage in your lives.
You have resisted drifting from one birthday to the next.
You have resisted the deprecating definitions society gives older adults.

Bless each of you as you seek to bring vital purpose to your days of aging.
May you continue to open your lives to walk the way of Jesus.
Peace be with you! And from each of us who travel with you an excited
AMEN AND AMEN!



GENERATIVE QUESTIONS

1. “Why don’t we take that one-third and create new stories, new rituals, new mythologies for people as they age?” (Alan Gopnik)
What is your answer to Alan Gopnik’s question? You may want to write about this in your journal or talk with a group. What are the obstacles and what are the opportunities?
2. Don vigorously advocates for the community of faith to lift the importance of the 65 and 85 years as threshold years by creating liturgy or ritual for these times. What do you think and feel about such liturgies on the threshold of 65 and 85? What attracts you? Gives you pause? Is not appealing? Would you like to participate in such a ritual? Yes or no – what are the reasons?!
3. In addition to how Don describes the experience of ages 65 and 85, what would you add from your own experience? What is important? What is different from other phases of your life? How would you describe your experience of the Holy at this time?
4. If you are part of a small group using this resource, we encourage you to use the liturgies included. Improve them, tailor them to your situation, recommend them to your worship committee and minister. And after using it, take some time to write in your journal about how that felt. What did it mean for you to participate in a public celebration and blessing such as this?



Chapter Eight



LAST CALL

***The last of life
for which the first was made.***

Robert Browning

It is the fastest growing community in the United States. “It’s a Pretty Special Place” the ad begins for a retirement community in Florida called The Villages. “It is a collection of quaint retirement neighborhoods located in the heart of Florida nestled between two beautiful coastlines, ports of travel and theme parks.” The ad continues, “all the lifestyle is here for you to enjoy and is just a golf cart away.”

Some Kind of Heaven is the title of a documentary on life in The Villages. The film poses the question, “What does it mean to grow old?” The answer given is to defeat growing old by keeping busy and by returning to the days of one’s youth. The documentary identifies that for many residents in The Villages the last chapter of life involves a grasp for what was lost through participation in acting classes, singles nights, cheerleading classes, and more! “You never stop becoming” states the documentary “and becoming old at The Villages means to become young again.”

There is a lot about feeling youthful that is great! It is, a recent study states, good for your health. In June 2023 in an outdoor 3-hour concert, singer Joni Mitchell sang to the awe of the crowd. Because of illness, she had not performed in concert for 29 years. She sang songs stretching back in time, songs like “Both Sides Now.” Her voice could not hit the high notes of younger years. “It was lower and grainier,” wrote one reviewer, “but at close to 80, she sang with emotional wisdom.”

Joni Mitchell sang material from her younger years but through the truth of her actual age in years and in wisdom. When we overvalue the days of our youth in comparison to our elder years we deny the gifts, the responsibilities and the joy of being an older adult. It is our true age that is the gift. However, this is a tough sell in a society where ageism is rampant. It is a tough sell when we feel the physical and mental and spiritual challenges that come with aging. There are reasons why The Villages is said to be the fastest growing community in the United States – it appears that the pains and challenges of true aging are erased.

As in The Villages, we see in our own communities Senior's Activity Centers where a great variety of activity-based programs are offered as a response to aging. To be clear, I have nothing against seniors playing pickleball! But for me pickleball three times a week and bridge in the evening without other engagement misses the generative work of aging: expressing life that is original and creative, and which generates deepened meaning and purpose.

I recall the essence of a lecture I heard given by a naturalist who talked about the two primary root systems. One has a system that sends roots out in every possible direction. The other system is the taproot. The taproot is one primary root sent down into the soil, anchoring the plant or tree and deep enough to find water. In fact, some desert plants have taproots 75 feet deep to find the nourishment needed for life.

As Seniors who are Christian, growing old is neither about a recovery of our youth nor a quest to keep busy with activities. Rather, it is to go deep into the reality of God or what theologian Paul Tillich called the very "ground of our being." It is to pray and think and reflect and search our way deep into the days of our aging and then to listen for what God calls us to be and do.

Going deep as the taproot brings us into connection with our community of elders who ask the same question, "What does it mean to grow old?" In this Eldering Circle, the response is not a golf cart

away but is found in holding the biblical story in one hand and the quest for deepened purpose in the other.

An Elder Circle might live the question "what does it mean to grow old" and then listen together in the days of our aging to such words as spoken by the Biblical prophet Micah 6:8:

***What does the Lord require of you but
To seek justice
To love mercy
To walk humbly with God***

Or perhaps set into the circle are words of our biblical elder Moses. Seeing on the distant horizon a possible new home for the wandering people of Israel, he said to them and now to us:

***I set before you this day
life and death
blessing and curse
Choose life that you and your children and
grandchildren and great grandchildren may
live!***

Or maybe it is the words of resistance spoken by the Apostle Paul that are wrestled with in the Eldering Circle:

***Don't let the world around you squeeze
you into its mold (ageism?)
But be transformed by the renewing of
your minds that you may live out
in your (aging years)
what is the good, perfect and acceptable
will of the Creator.***

Or maybe in the Eldering Circle there is a shared sense of God's call to seek wisdom as in the ancient words from the book of Proverbs, the book of wisdom:

The first step in becoming wise is to look for wisdom, so use everything you have to get understanding. Love wisdom and she will make you great. Hold on to wisdom and she will bring you honour. (Proverbs 4:7-8)

Or maybe there is a neighborhood call of God hidden in these paraphrased words of Jesus:

Love your neighbor as you need to love yourself and do some good to those neighbors that are a little difficult to have as neighbors. And then to live the question "Who is my neighbor?"

While we seek to go deep, it is imperative to recognize that the aging terrain is difficult and often the circumstances of life are all consuming. We know losses and endings a plenty. We may have a partner who is ill, or we find ourselves waiting for that all important hip operation. In our older adult years, we might feel that each day there is set before us blessing and curse. We need support and conversation to help us to discern what it means for us to choose life so that those who come after us may live.

A mentor of mine, Dr Browne Barr, once wrote that we can learn from 'high flying geese.' Geese know that it is better to fly in formation than to fly alone and thus to feel the uplift of the goose flying ahead. Plus, all the honking from behind that geese do is the sound of encouragement for the long migration flights of hundreds of miles. We oldsters need that 'honking from behind' and the encouragement and accompaniment that can come from a circle of elder friends. In such a circle the call of God can be heard afresh in our elder years. How about beginning an "Eldering Circle" where you live or in your congregation?

***Thank you, O God, for the time that is now,
For all the newness your minutes allow***

Fred Kaan

What does it mean to grow old? The pages of this resource are an invitation to live that question! I propose that at the age of 65 or thereabouts, we recognize ourselves to be on a threshold opening onto an aging landscape that is between what was and what is yet to be. On this threshold we wait with anticipation, we listen for the call of the deep, the call of God. On this threshold we tap into passion and gratitude in the time that is now.



Milk delivered to Don's childhood home

Suggestions for Using this Resource

1. Weekly Group with a host

Gather a small group to meet weekly. Provide a print or digital copy of the resource to each participant and request that they read the relevant section prior to gathering with the group.

Each session could be focused on a section of the resource. Some chapters have sub-sections which could easily be a session unto themselves. Review the content for yourself and decide on a schedule that allows time for lots of reflective, creative, and conversational engagement with your group. At a minimum each session would be 1.5 hours.

If the group is going to meet in an online video meeting, the maximum time should be 1.5 hours, with the group size limited to 8 participants. This allows for all faces to show easily on the screen. In this case along with the host please find a person who can be the technical support for the gathering, ensuring that comments in the chat and other digital/technical support is available to smooth the way for meaningful dialogue.

Either way, use the generative questions and process suggestions provided for each section of the resource to help deepen and support your engagement.

2. Conversation Partners

It may be that gathering a group in your community, neighbourhood, or church congregation is not viable. In that case you could ask one or two friends to meet for coffee and conversation using the resources as a focus. You might agree to read a chapter and gather to share insights over coffee and muffins – maybe at your local café or library or in the place where you live. Or like a book club, you might read the whole resource on your own, and then gather to reflect on it, perhaps pulling some of the generative questions and suggestions to support the process.

*Chapter Nine***3. Retreat with facilitator/host**

The resource would fit well into a weekend, or two-day retreat for members of your community of faith. A retreat might include a trip away to a special retreat location, or a commitment to gather at the church for a Friday evening, Saturday all day. Review the content and decide on a flow of the chapters and sections that could fit into your retreat schedule. Use the provided generative questions and process suggestions. In this retreat style setting which is more intensive than the other options, it is important to select some of the quieter personal reflection options, as well as some of the group style conversation questions. It would be very tiring for participants to have the whole retreat format using only one method of engagement (group conversation).

4. Eldering Circle

One hope is that regardless of how you engage this resource that it may lead to the development of an ongoing circle of people who want to continue this process of Generative Aging together. This Eldering Circle might take on other books, movies, resources as sources of learning. The Eldering Circle might offer mutual support, prayer, encouragement as the aging journey continues.

5. Seniors Independent Living/Retirement Complex/ Assisted Living Setting

If you live in a Seniors residence of any type you might consider hosting a discussion series for folk with whom you share living space. Contact the activities or program coordinator in your building to explore the idea.

6. Independent Reflection

The resource can be engaged entirely as a solo process. In the Generative Questions section there are invitations particularly suited to individual reflective work. Or, if you are thinking about hosting a group using this resource it could be beneficial to go through the resource first as an individual to create a good foundation for hosting others.

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks to Treena Duncan, Marc Coulombe, Deb Bowman, and all regional ministry staff who affirmed the value of this resource and offered their support, insights and skills to complete the work.

What a personal treat it was to work with editor Allison Rennie who worked with me on everything from content structure and flow, to copy editing, and final design.

Huge thanks to Jes Beckerley who designed the graphic layout of this resource.

The “Fourth Quarter Group” has been consistently encouraging and sponsored the production and distribution of this material.

There were other people who read the manuscript in its varied stages and shared thoughts and encouragement to me to “keep on keeping on.” I must especially mention the following people: Ariel Creighton, Jeannie and Ross White, Colleen Blair, Dr. Eldon Ernst, Joy Ernst, The Rt. Rev. Dr. Robert Smith, Dr. David Dodson, Janet Gear, Ellen Smith, Joan Burrows, Don and Marg Waldon.

Produced on the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples:
xʷməθkʷə́yəm, Skwxwú7mesh, and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwítlh

Edited, Designed and Produced through by *The Fourth Quarter* and
the Ministry Personnel Support Team of
The Pacific Mountain Regional Council.

**Permission to copy for congregational and personal use only. For other use please
contact leadershift@united-church.ca**

Copyright 2023 Don Robertson