

Practising the Vocation of Ageing

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It is said that everyone wants to live a long life, but that no one wants to grow old. Why is that? Well, here's a perspective that helps explain it – an excerpt from the ancient book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 12.

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; before the sun and ... moon and ... stars are darkened ...; on the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, ... and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, ... and all the daughters of song are brought low; when one is afraid of heights and terrors are in the road; [when]... the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; ... before the silver cord is snapped ... and the pitcher is broken at the fountain ... and the dust returns to the earth ... Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 12)

It's a pretty a cheery picture, isn't it!! Is that it? Is ageing just a story about decline and desolation, a long enduring of the loss of youth? It's tempting at times to think so – not only because we live in a culture obsessed with youthfulness but because there are significant threats and challenges associated with ageing.

We began reflecting seriously on this when we were working as chaplains in aged care. In the facilities where we worked, there was joy and laughter, lots of it. And, on most days we were also confronted by what we

can only describe as the ravages of old age – people crippled with arthritis and confined to bed, people burdened with loss or confused by dementia.

“It is possible that the process of ageing and dying is the richest and deepest of life’s unfoldings”, writes Zen priest Norman Fischer (2011, 221). That’s an encouraging thought, and a nice counter to the sentiment in Ecclesiastes. But what does it mean, not only for those pictured on billboards advertising the latest state-of-the-art retirement complexes—smiling couples with perfect teeth, trim physiques and endless years of golf ahead of them—but also for those who are frail, whose bodies are broken and whose minds are failing. What of Fischer’s vision, if anything, is possible for them?

The affirmation that there are gifts and tasks associated with age is important and relatively widespread these days—gifts of wisdom and a role in mentoring others, so-called ‘sage-ing’ (Kantor et al, 2006), are regularly mentioned—yet for all their promise these notions often remain vague and ungrounded, and so in danger of becoming romantic and glib. And again, how do they relate to those for whom possibilities of living actively and generatively are fading?

We do believe there is a vocational dimension to ageing, and that this matters, not only for the elderly and those caring for them but for all of us who are seeking to live with integrity. If we’re going to a talk about this truthfully, however, it must speak to the full spectrum of experiences of ageing.

So to begin, we’re going to say a little about this idea of a ‘vocation’ of ageing and what it might mean to *grow* old and not just get old. We’ll draw from the theology of the Christian tradition, which we believe offers resources to engage our journey of ageing as a journey of transformation. Then, in the light of this, we’ll suggest practices that enable and support this journey.

The Vocation of Ageing

We conceive the vocation of ageing essentially as a vocation to be and become more truly ourselves. This is not to be confused with narcissism or self-centredness, for the more I become myself and live out my true personhood, the more I participate authentically and creatively in the life and well-being of the whole world. Nor is “becoming myself” reducible to some self-chosen project for fulfilment. In Christian understanding, human beings are created to be in the image and likeness of God – which means being radically responsive to and transformed by the Trinitarian communion of love. This, of course, is a vocation for the whole of life, not just for old age. What is noteworthy about this stage, however, is that it crystallises the deepest dynamics of this human vocation – time is running out.

A few hours of pastoral visiting in a nursing home or in the community makes plain that the process of ageing almost inevitably entails a degree of what Simone Weil (1973, 117) calls “affliction”, experiences of suffering and marginalisation that threaten to eclipse long held frames of identity and that challenge glib notions of vocation in this stage of life.¹ Many are feeling the effects of curtailed independence, social networks and significance. They are grieving the death of spouses and friends; and physically they are experiencing a decline in energy, mobility and health. A number are losing access to their cognitive capacities. These are compound losses, which can stir unresolved grief from the past. Together with these losses, the prospect of their own death looms ever nearer.

It is not difficult, then, to understand why anxiety, resentment, loneliness and depression are widespread among the elderly. Their situation is

¹ What we describe here is particularly pertinent to cultures where a growing percentage of elderly people are in care. Those in cultures where the elderly remain in extended family households and continue to have an honoured role may not experience marginalization to the same degree. Nevertheless, old age invariably brings experiences of diminishment and suffering.

not helped by the fact that many have poorly developed resources for dealing with such affronting and dislocating experiences. One writer refers to this as “spiritual risk” (Fitchett, 1999), a situation of high spiritual need and low spiritual resource.

Concurrent movements

In this context, it seems to us that engaging the vocation of ageing is best begun early in life. Such engagement must encompass two fundamental movements. The first is the movement towards what French author Marie de Hennezel (2008) describes as “self-completion”. This is a process of coming to terms with the whole story of our lives. “A life completed is a life at peace”, de Hennezel says (2008, 92), which is why it is “so important to put our lives in order and to take stock before we leave the world’s stage”. In a similar vein, theologian Rowan Williams (2012, 245) suggests that if “you have a picture of human life as a story that needs pondering, retelling, organizing ... it will be natural to hope for time to do this work”, a work he describes as “the making of the soul”.

This can be a richly rewarding process, an ongoing opportunity to distil our own wisdom and perspective on life and celebrate its gifts (Lamb and Thomson, 2001, 63). It can also be painful and difficult at times – as we uncover repressed emotions, unresolved conflicts, regrets and disappointments. In such a perspective, says Williams (2012, 245), “it is not an exaggeration to say that ... growing old will make the greatest creative demands of your life”. By this stage of life, as de Hennezel (2008, 92) notes: “no further compromise is possible between what we would like to be and experience and what existence has given us”. Facing and accepting the truth of our selves and our lives requires courage, but it’s precisely through this work that real ripening, fulfilment and celebration become possible.

This process, however, raises a significant question. If the journey of becoming fully ourselves is understood solely as a process of self-completion and self-realisation, then how are we to understand devastating and seemingly disintegrating conditions such as dementia, conditions that appear to compromise the self in its very essence? Are these *disorders* simply tragic codas to an otherwise completed life, do they make nonsense of any talk of *growing* old, or do they, like the process of dying, offer possibilities for the fulfilment of our life's vocation?

This leads us to name a second, seemingly counter-movement in the vocation of ageing. Where self-completion affirms the importance of gathering our lives, this second movement is about letting go. Poet David Whyte (2013) describes this as “apprenticing yourself to your own disappearance”. Here the process of self-realisation continues, paradoxically, through relinquishment. It is a movement that feels like dissolution, but which comes to fruition in what is sometimes called “self-transcendence” (Mackinlay, 2001).

To recognise this movement as intrinsic to realised personhood and so to the vocation of growing old involves two related understandings. First, our selves are and always were relationally constituted. In our middle years, some of us can maintain the illusion that we make our own lives. We feel competent, purposeful, powerful and useful—and that, we assume, is who we are. When in older age our powers diminish or disappear, we are thrown at some level into crisis. We become aware of our waning capacity to act and contribute as we used to. Eventually, we may lose the capacity to control even our own bodies and know our own minds: “old age little by little robbing us of ourselves and pushing us on towards the end”, in the words of Teilhard de Chardin (1964, 82). This can feel as though something has gone terribly wrong and that our lives, far from culminating in completion, are being cruelly

undone. The reality is, however, that we never were wholly self-sufficient individuals, but always part of a larger web of gifts and relationships that sustained, and indeed, constituted us in essential ways. Experiences of intensifying dependence in older age simply make this truth increasingly plain.

Second, it is by letting go attachment to the limited achievements and securities of this illusory self-sufficiency that we experience ourselves as part of a larger existence—the self-in-communion. In the Christian tradition, this dynamic is revealed paradigmatically in the story of Jesus who gives himself over to death and is raised to new life in God. This is a dynamic we undergo throughout our lives, when through the little deaths of broken-heartedness and loss, failure and despair, we are divested of a limited self and way of being, and yet in time find ourselves somehow enlarged, more capable of living authentically. I imagine you've all got your own stories to tell about this. The basic pattern of conversion and transformation in the great spiritual and mythic traditions involves going down, letting go, and receiving new life as gift, “being unmade to be remade” (Williams, 1991, 18).

Because investment in the identity of the self-sufficient self has for most of us been so heavy, however, the process of being dispossessed is usually profoundly disorienting, painful, and frightening. And though it is all very well to wax lyrical about the essentially relational self and life on the other side of death, it seems an entirely different matter to lose your driver's license and your home, to need strangers to shower you and wipe your backside and even, as your mind falters, to remember who you are. This *is* a form of dying, a journey that can lead through dark places before it opens into light. Even so, the Christian tradition proclaims that the failure of our constructed self-hood, the revelation of the fragility of all attempts at self-justification, is “good news”. In the end, we cannot sustain our own identities and do not have to.

So the vocation of ageing involves self-completion and integration—reconciling who we are and have been, what we have done and experienced in a long life. And it involves letting go, realising that I am not the source and ultimate sustainer of my life’s meaning. These movements belong to the spiritual journey at any stage of life. For this reason, the vocation of ageing is continuous with the vocation of all life that would be truly human. Yet, we can now see more clearly how the process of ageing crystallises and intensifies our engagement with this vocation. As I draw towards the end of life, the call to make sense of the whole, including my death, grows stronger; as I experience more starkly the limits of my capacity to “make” myself, the necessity to entrust myself also grows. Paradoxically, these concurrent movements of completion and relinquishment find their consummation in each other. The more completely our life is realised, the more we are able to let it go; and the ultimate completion of our life lies in its final surrender.

The Practice of Growing Old

What does all this mean for daily life? What practices might enable us to age gracefully as well as to nurture others in this journey.

There’s a growing literature on “ageing well” which focuses on themes such as generativity, reminiscence, forgiveness and even blessing (e.g. Chittister, 2008; Fischer, 1998; Luke, 2010; Mackinlay and Trevitt, 2006). All these are important and helpful in the work of completion and relinquishment. Today, we want to highlight two further practices that are often overlooked: practices of lament, and what we call, undergoing.

Lament

To lament is to protest, to grieve and to be angry, to complain about suffering. Such complaining can be adjudged depressing and detrimental to well-being, and yet in the Hebrew Scriptures lament functions personally and corporately

as a means for coming to terms with (accepting rather than bitterly resisting) loss, regret and dispossession. The purposeful *practice* of lament differs from diffuse and chronic negativity, which brings no real release but rather keeps us stuck in resistance, bitterness and victimhood. There's a cleansing, cathartic power in true lament.

Cultural taboos and personal anxiety can discourage this practice. There can be a rawness to lament that people find discomfiting. Certain religious communities even condemn it as evincing lack of faith. However, as Joanna Macy (cited in O'Connor, 2002, 108) observes, "the refusal to acknowledge despair produces emotional and sensory deprivation, psychic numbing, and impedes our capacity fully to respond to others". Macy encourages us to "do our 'despair work', because despair cannot be banished by simple injections of optimism or sermons on 'positive thinking'". True lament refuses to avoid the truth of suffering. It takes us into, and eventually through, the vulnerable space between the stifling states of committed victimhood and unhappiness on the one hand, and avoidance and false acceptance on the other.

The way we lament will vary from person to person; it can be written, spoken or enacted, spontaneous or planned. In seasons of trauma and crisis, such as those precipitated by major loss and change, lament may well become a long-term and regular practice. When 78 year-old Morrie Schwartz suffered the onset of ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), an aggressive terminal disease of the neurological system, he spoke of allowing himself a time each day to "mourn the slow insidious way in which I'm dying" (Abom 1997, 57). If you've read *Tuesdays with Morrie*, you'll know that this period of lament wasn't the whole of his experience but it was an important part.

In a faith context, lament is understood to be an act of worship and prayer, which calls on God, complains and pleads for intervention (O'Connor,

2002, 124). It need not be devoid of gratitude or hope, but sometimes is. Either way to struggle with anger, resentment, fear and despair to the point where resistance is finally spent and the broken heart opens more deeply and compassionately, is crucial in the journey of completion and relinquishment.

In the context of aged care, this suggests that opportunities for both personal and corporate lament, including the use of ritual forms are to be encouraged. There is a danger, for example, that both chaplains and so-called “Lifestyle Officers” (and even family members and friends) understand their role primarily in terms of cheering and distracting those who are down hearted, making them “feel” better. Perceiving sadness or depression as always negative indicators of personal and spiritual well-being, and referring to the work of Lifestyle Officers as “diversional” rather than “recreational” (recreational), may be systemic symptoms of a lack of appreciation of the healing significance of lament and function to hinder rather than help engagement with the vocation of ageing.

Undergoing

The literature on ageing often speaks of the movement in older age from doing to being, and the need to source our worth increasingly not in what we do or accomplish but in who we are (e.g. Mackinlay 2001, 133-135). It is understandable that the experience of diminished agency is framed in these terms, but it seems unnecessarily dualistic. Doing and being are not two separate stages of life: all our doing is refracted through the quality of our being, and being is itself a form of doing. We can “be” in a way, for example, that resists or denies what is befalling us; our anxiety, avoidance, ingratitude, pride and resentment stifling our growth and oppressing, manipulating and repelling those around us.

The practice of what we call *undergoing* refers to a particular way of being in the world when our capacity for autonomous action is limited. It is a practice of intentional yielding, which in the Christian tradition is encapsulated in the term “passion”, from “*passio*” – meaning to suffer in the sense of allowing and being “done unto”. Importantly, this is a letting go, not a giving up, and although this seems a subtle difference, it makes all the difference in the world.

To undergo what is befalling us intentionally involves trust, consent, and courage, vulnerability and patience. It means leaning into the reality that increasingly as we age we are becoming patients, undergoers of life. It has to do with our willingness to consent to what is coming towards us, knowing there may come a point where even our capacity to consent is lost, and we simply are in the place of *passio* — our whole selves handed over to others and to the outworking of our frailty and mortality.

In the New Testament gospel accounts, the handing over of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane marks a significant transition in his life and in the fulfilling of his vocation. In Mark’s gospel, for example, the verbs used of Jesus prior to this incident are almost exclusively in the active tense with Jesus as the subject. However, from the moment that Jesus is handed over in the Garden, he is rarely the *subject* of action but rather is the *object* of what is happening, the recipient of the action of others: he is the “undergoer”, the one “done unto”, and this is his passion (Vanstone, 2006, 17-33).

Significantly, as we reflect on what it means to age well, this is the necessary and final movement in the journey of Jesus’ life, encompassing the twin movements of self-completion and self-transcendence. On the night before he died, as the story of Jesus is told, he had to choose whether to give himself freely into the hands of others and over to death or resist. It was an agonising choice—“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet,

not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22.42). But by the time the soldiers came for him, he was ready. For Jesus, submitting to his vocation to “suffer” at the hands of others was not the same thing as resigning himself to the inevitable. In his consent to undergo what was yet to come, there dwelt the seeds of new life for him and for others.

What does consenting to this undergoing, as a *practice*, look like? In the first instance, it involves acknowledging that this is where we are and how things will increasingly be for us. If we are to choose our status as patients rather than be victims of our situation, then we must learn *patience*. Every time I press a buzzer I must wait on another for response, the tenor of which (insensitive or kind) I cannot control. In this season of life we have to wait for almost everything — for meals, for medication, for visits, for dressing and even for toileting. And every time I feel humiliated or patronised I must practise an even more costly patience, recognising this way of being as itself part of my vocation.

In his classic work on “the stature of waiting”, Vanstone observes (2006, 66):

Either this dependence and limitation must be a source of increasing resentment and frustration and even self-contempt; or there must be a rediscovery of the dignity which belongs to [the person] as patient, as object, as one who waits upon the world and receives that which is done to [them].

This does not mean condoning neglect and abuse. Nor does this stance of patient receptivity preclude us from asking and hoping for good things, kindness and times of enjoyment. But we will have to learn to accept a degree of less than ideal responses from others and our increasing vulnerability to them.

Meditation or contemplative prayer is a discipline that can accustom, form and sustain us in this way of being. For set periods each day we let go our thoughts, plans and expectations, practising silence and stillness. Meditation is different to simply sitting vacantly for long periods, which in a nursing home is more likely a sign of alienation and isolation. In meditation we are deliberate, we adopt a stance of alertness and maintain an object of focus. Meditation can also be practiced alone and in community. The fruit of this practice is a deepening capacity to be present to our experience, all of it, and yet paradoxically, less attached and tossed about by it.

In all its expressions and little deaths, this practice of undergoing teaches us to say with Christ, “into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23.46). It is an entrusting of self to others and to God, which comes to completion in the surrender of our lives to bodily death in faith and hope.

Conclusion

Writer George Vaillant (2002, 3) has said: ‘To know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom’. We have focussed on the more difficult and painful dimensions of the journey of ageing - not because we want to be overly negative or pessimistic but because it’s our capacity to engage these experiences truthfully and open-heartedly that ultimately bears fruit in our lives as wisdom, as compassion, as love. It’s what gives those who are growing old authority and something deep to teach us about what it means to be fully human, fully alive.

Contemplation is intrinsic to this vocation. In meditation, we practise simply being with our present experience, we let go thoughts, plans and expectations and we receive ourselves, and our lives, as gift. And, if we truly want to *grow* old and not just get old, to make of the whole of our lives an offering in and to love, then the sooner we start practising this the better!

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