CHURCH HOME CHICAGO

THE SPIRITUALITY OF AGING: FINDING MEANING & PURPOSE AS AN OLDER ADULT

Church Home Chicago
Small-Group Study Guide

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Church Home Chicago | 2025
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EDITOR'S NOTE

There are a handful of popular genres in the "books on aging" market. On one shelf are the practical guides, which have their place: how to manage one's blood sugar or update one's will. On another are the aggressively cheerful tomes, which insist that old age doesn't *have* to be complicated, and might just in fact be the best time of all of our lives. Below those are piles upon piles of self-deprecating humor books. But how many jokes about forgetfulness or prostate exams does the world really need?

The Spirituality of Aging strives to etch out a new genre, one that will invite readers to reflect on their own lives and see their stories as part of a larger narrative. Though religion plays a significant role in many people's spiritual sense of self, "spirituality" is not necessarily religious; rather, it describes the natural human urge to make meaning out of our experiences, including the experience of aging. Since we are best at making meaning in community, this collection is organized into six sessions for group conversation. In each session/chapter, you'll find a poem, an essay, and a series of discussion questions, for use by secular and religious communities alike. For those whose spiritual expression includes the Bible, there is an appendix of suggested Biblical passages for discussion.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The arc of the sessions is as follows:

- **IDENTITY:** "To tell me my old age doesn't exist is to tell me I don't exist," writes Ursula K. Le Guin, embracing the reality of aging. "Erase my age, you erase my life—me."
- **CONNECTION:** Former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy argues that loneliness is "the defining public health crisis of our time" and offers a prescription for the way forward.
- **PURPOSE:** Parker J. Palmer asks, "Does my life have meaning?" and then wonders whether he is even wrestling with the right question.
- **LOSS:** Mark Epstein writes, "Trauma is an ineradicable aspect of life. We are human as a result of it, not in spite of it," and gently invites us to draw meaning from our grief.
- **CHANGE:** We change as we age, of course, but aging itself is also changing. Atul Gawande warns us that our modern, Western "reverence for independence" has its limits.
- **JOY:** Anne Lamott celebrates the simple joys in life, and finally having the time and slower pace to appreciate them: "Appreciation and surprise bloom many mornings: Yay — I like it here."

EDITOR'S NOTE

Whether you are reading this collection by yourself or discussing every page in a lively group, I hope it will be a valuable toolkit as you explore meaning and purpose in this stage of your own life. Let our authors be your guides on the journey toward ever greater compassion toward both yourself and others.

Yours,
Catherine Healy
Church Home Chicago
2025

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE v

Welcome to *The Spirituality of Aging*! This study series is intended as a toolkit to help you foster meaningful conversations about growing older. We hope you will make use of the tools that best suit your context. Here, we have included some questions, suggestions, and guidelines from past facilitators to help make your group a success.

PREPARATION

Will you use the assigned poems? Some groups will enjoy discussing poetry; for others, it might be appropriate to read the poem aloud without discussion to open or close the gathering. You may also decide to omit the poems altogether.

Will you use the Bible study resources in the appendix? If so, you may wish to extend your group's meeting length to accommodate additional conversation.

Are your group members likely to read the assigned essay in advance? If not, you may wish to designate sections of the essay for reading aloud during the meeting.

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE vi

How large is your group? A group size of 6-12 people is ideal. If your group will be larger than 12 members, consider adding a second facilitator and dividing participants into subgroups for conversation.

How long are your sessions? Sessions may run anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. When planning your session, begin by deciding what the most important part will be for your group—the check-in time? Bible study? discussion of the essay?—and how much time you hope to spend on that segment of the gathering.

SAMPLE AGENDA (90 minutes)

Gathering (20 minutes): Participants take turns sharing joys and concerns and answering the assigned "Reflect before this session" question. During the first session, the group should discuss shared norms for their time together. The gathering time may also include an opening prayer or meditation.

Bible study (15 minutes): Read the Bible passage (or another passage from your spiritual tradition) aloud and give participants a few minutes to reflect in silence before sharing initial responses and discussing the assigned questions.

Essay discussion (30 minutes): Read a short passage from the essay aloud and invite participants to share initial responses, then discuss the assigned questions. For most groups, this will be the heart of the session.

Poem discussion (15 minutes): Read the poem aloud and invite participants to share initial responses, then discuss the assigned question.

Closing (10 minutes): Guide the discussion to a close. Remind the group of the next session date and the required reading. The gathering time may also include a closing prayer or meditation.

TIPS & TRICKS FROM OUR FACILITATION TEAM

Ask hard-of-hearing individuals what will help them best participate. They may wish to sit next to the facilitator or request that group members face them directly when speaking.

Bring extra copies of the reading material to each session.

Provide name tags for each session (even if you think everyone knows each other's names!).

Consider lighting a candle in the center of the circle to set a calm atmosphere in the room.

Share the session agenda with the group and explain how you will use the shared time.

Don't be afraid to probe deeper with follow-up questions: "Why do you think that happened?" "What was most fulfilling about that experience?" "You mentioned that friends helped you when you were grieving. What do you remember as most helpful?"

If one individual is dominating the conversation, redirect to one of the written discussion questions: "I'm going to pause you so that we can talk about the next question on the page …" It may also be helpful to pull that person aside later and ask for their help in drawing out the quieter members of the group.

Remember that there is no such thing as a "perfect" small-group discussion. If everyone in the room has a chance to share and reflect, the gathering is a success.

ESTABLISHING GROUP NORMS

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Discuss these questions within your group. Take note of the answers to establish your group norms.

Confidentiality

Does what is spoken here stay here, or may it be shared with others?

Attendance

How important is it for each of us to attend every meeting?

Advice

Do we offer advice only when asked, or at other times when we think it might be helpful?

Feedback

How will we give and receive feedback, especially when we are offended or hurt?

Hospitality

How will we extend hospitality to one another?

Respect

How can we show each other respect in our words and actions?

GROUP NORMS

x

01

SESSION 1 | IDENTITY

Read before this session:

- “The Oven Bird,” Robert Frost
- “The Diminished Thing,” Ursula K. Le Guin

Reflect before this session:

- What are the various ways you have identified yourself over the years? Have you identified with a family role or a certain vocation? Come prepared to share some identity words that describe you, independent of family and work.

IDENTITY | POEM 02

The Oven Bird
Robert Frost

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.

He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all.

The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

IDENTITY | ESSAY 03

THE DIMINISHED THING (URSULA K. LE GUIN)

Not wanting to know much about getting old (I don't mean older, I mean *old*: late seventies, eighties, beyond) is probably a human survival characteristic. What's the use of knowing anything about it ahead of time? You'll find out enough when you get there.

One of the things people often find when they get there is that younger people don't want to hear about it. So honest conversation concerning geezerhood takes place mostly among geezers.

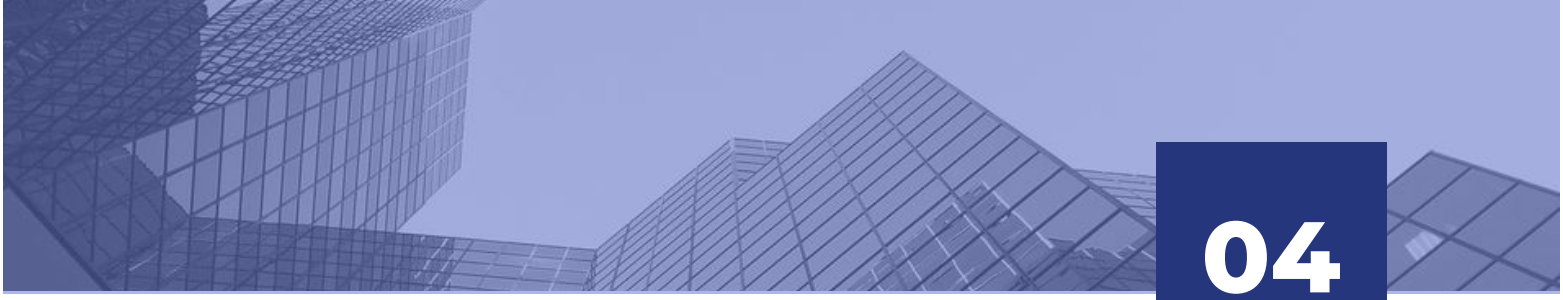
And when younger people tell old people what old age is, the geezers may not agree but seldom argue.

I want to argue, just a little.

Robert Frost's oven bird asked the operative question: "What to make of a diminished thing?"

Americans believe strongly in positive thinking. Positive thinking is great. It works best when based on a realistic assessment and acceptance of the actual situation. Positive thinking founded on denial may not be so great.

Everybody who gets old has to assess their ever-changing but seldom improving situation and make of it what they can. I think most old people accept the fact that



THE DIMINISHED THING (2 OF 8)

they're old—I've never heard anybody over eighty say "I'm not old." And they make the best of it. As the saying goes, consider the alternative!

A lot of younger people, seeing the reality of old age as entirely negative, see acceptance of age as negative. Wanting to deal with old people in a positive spirit, they're led to deny old people their reality.

With all good intentions, people say to me, "Oh, you're not old!"

And the pope isn't Catholic.

"You're only as old as you think you are!"

Now, you don't honestly think having lived eighty-three years is a matter of opinion.

"My uncle's ninety and he walks eight miles a day."

Lucky Unk. I hope he never meets that old bully Arthur Ritis or his mean wife Sciatica.

"My grandmother lives all by herself and she's still driving her car at ninety-nine!"

Well, hey for Granny, she's got good genes. She's a great example—but not one most people are able to imitate.

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THE DIMINISHED THING (3 OF 8)

Old age isn't a state of mind. It's an existential situation.

Would you say to a person paralyzed from the waist down, "Oh, you aren't a cripple! You're only as paralyzed as you think you are! My cousin broke her back once but she got right over it and now she's in training for the marathon!"

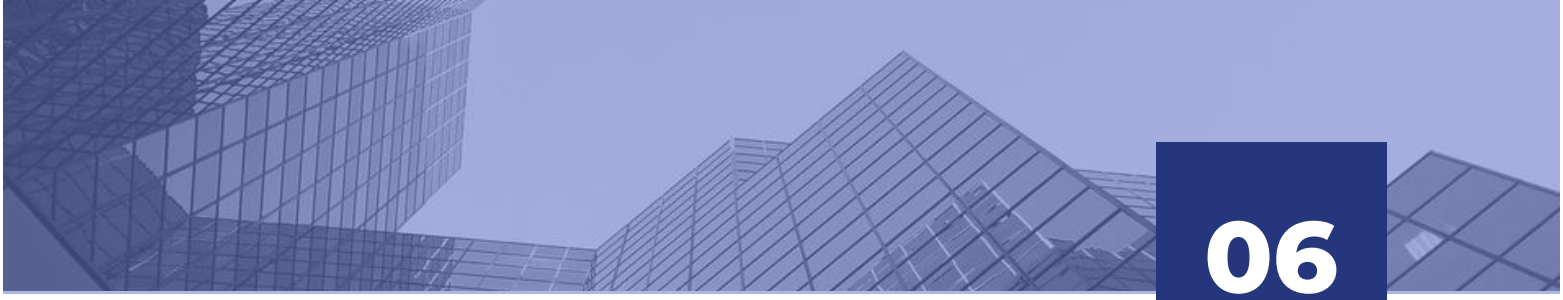
Encouragement by denial, however well-meaning, backfires. Fear is seldom wise and never kind. Who is it you're cheering up, anyhow? Is it really the geezer?

To tell me my old age doesn't exist is to tell me I don't exist.

Erase my age, you erase my life—me.

Of course, that's what a lot of *really* young people inevitably do. Kids who haven't lived with geezers don't know what they are. So it is that old men come to learn the invisibility women learned twenty or thirty years earlier. The kids on the street don't see you. If they have to see you, it's often with the indifference, distrust, or animosity animals feel for animals of a different species.

Animals have instinctive codes of etiquette for avoiding or defusing this mindless fear and hostility.



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THE DIMINISHED THING (4 OF 8)

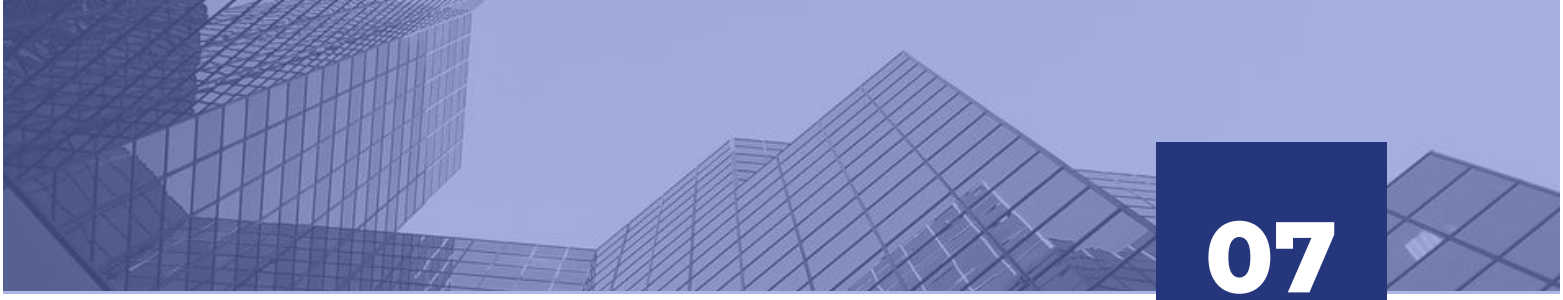
Human societies provide us with various more elaborate devices. One of the most effective is respect. You don't like the stranger, but your carefully respectful behavior to him elicits the same from him, thus avoiding the sterile expense of time and blood on aggression and defense.

In less change-oriented societies than ours, a great part of the culture's useful information, including the rules of behavior, is taught by the elders to the young. One of those rules is, unsurprisingly, a tradition of respect for age.

In our increasingly unstable, future-oriented, technology-driven society, the young are often the ones who show the way, who teach their elders what to do. So who respects whom for what? The geezers are damned if they're going to kowtow to the twerps—and vice versa.

When there's no social pressure behind it, respectful behavior becomes a decision, an individual choice. Americans, even when they pay pious lip service to Judeo-Christian rules of moral behavior, tend to regard moral behavior as a personal decision, above rules, and often above laws.

This is morally problematic when personal *decision* is



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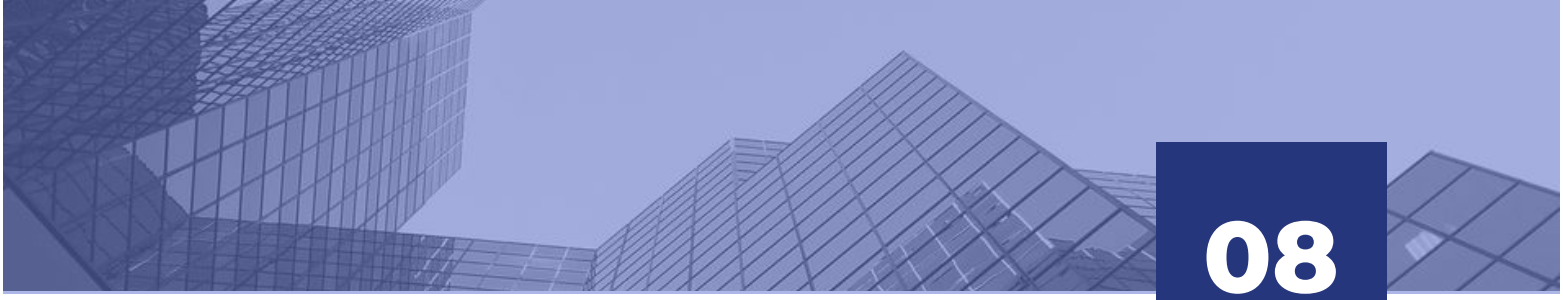
THE DIMINISHED THING (5 OF 8)

confused with personal *opinion*. A decision worthy of the name is based on observation, factual information, intellectual and ethical judgment. Opinion—that darling of the press, the politician, and the poll—may be based on no information at all. At worst, unchecked by either judgment or moral tradition, personal opinion may reflect nothing but ignorance, jealousy, and fear.

So if I "decide"—if my opinion is—that living a long time just means getting ugly, weak, useless, and in the way, I waste no respect on old people, just as if my opinion is that all young people are scary, insolent, unreliable, and unteachable, I waste no respect on them.

Respect has often been overenforced and almost universally misplaced (the poor must respect the rich, all women must respect all men, etc.). But when applied in moderation and with judgment, the social requirement of respectful behavior to others, by repressing aggression and requiring self-control, makes room for understanding. It creates a space where appreciation and affection can grow.

Opinion all too often leaves no room for anything but itself.



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THE DIMINISHED THING (6 OF 8)

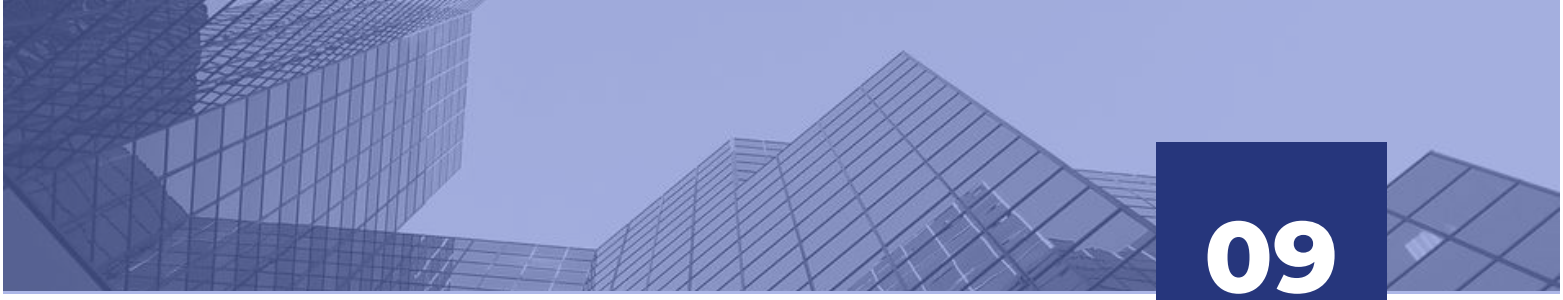
People whose society doesn't teach them respect for childhood are lucky if they learn to understand, or value, or even like their own children. Children who aren't taught respect for old age are likely to fear it, and to discover understanding and affection for old people only by luck, by chance.

I think the tradition of respecting age in itself has some justification. Just coping with daily life, doing stuff that was always so easy you didn't notice it, gets harder in old age, till it may take real courage to do it at all. Old age generally involves pain and danger and inevitably ends in death. The acceptance of that takes courage. Courage deserves respect.

So much for respect. Back to the diminished thing.

Childhood is when you keep gaining, old age is when you keep losing. The Golden Years the PR people keep gloating at us about are golden because that's the color of the light at sunset.

Of course, diminishment isn't all there is to aging. Far from it. Life out of the rat race, but still in the comfort zone, can give the chance to be in the moment, and bring real peace of mind.



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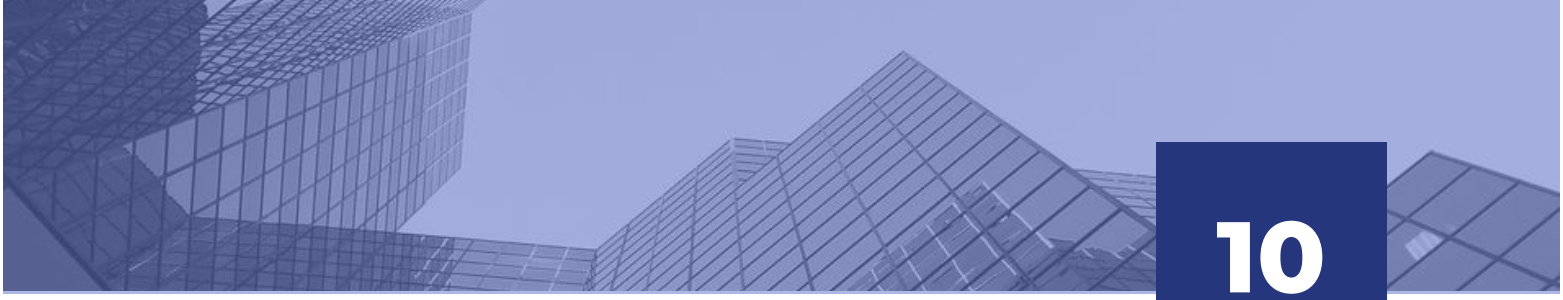
THE DIMINISHED THING (7 OF 8)

If memory remains sound and the thinking mind retains its vigor, an old intelligence may have extraordinary breadth and depth of understanding. It's had more time to gather knowledge and more practice in comparison and judgment. No matter if the knowledge is intellectual or practical or emotional, if it concerns alpine ecosystems or the Buddha nature or how to reassure a frightened child: when you meet an old person with that kind of knowledge, if you have the sense of a bean sprout you know you're in a rare and irreproducible presence.

Same goes for old people who keep their skill at any craft or art they've worked at for all those years. Practice does make perfect. They *know how*, they know it all, and beauty flows effortlessly from what they do.

But all such existential enlargements brought by living long are under threat from the lessening of strength and stamina. However well compensated for by intelligent coping mechanisms, small or large breakdowns in one bit of the body or another begin to restrict activity, while the memory is dealing with overload and slippage.



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THE DIMINISHED THING (8 OF 8)

Existence in old age is progressively diminished by each of these losses and restrictions. It's no use saying it isn't so, because it is so.

It's no use making a fuss about it, or being afraid of it, either, because nobody can change it.

I recommend studying the oven bird's question long and seriously.

There are many answers to it. A lot can be made of a diminished thing, if you work at it. A lot of people (young and old) are working at it.

All I'm asking people who aren't yet really old is to think about the oven bird's question too—and try not to diminish old age itself. Let age be age. Let your old relative or old friend be who they are. Denial serves nothing, no one, no purpose.

Please understand, I'm speaking for myself, for my own crabby old age. I may get told off for it by hordes of enraged octogenarians who like being told they're "spry" and "feisty." I don't begrudge the fairy tale to those who want to believe it—and if I live longer than I think I want to, maybe I'll even come to want to hear it: *You're not old! Nobody's old. We're all living happily ever after.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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What emotions does Frost's poem evoke? What is the "diminished thing"? Why does Le Guin use this metaphor to explore meaning in old age?

Do you agree with Le Guin's argument that "to tell me my old age doesn't exist is to tell me I don't exist"? Why or why not?

With wry humor, Le Guin variously refers to herself as an "old person," an "octogenarian," and a "geezer." What language do you prefer to use in describing yourself and your age? What language do you resist?

Have you claimed new identity roles (e.g., grandparent or retiree) as you age? Are there other roles you have let go? Is old age a part of your identity? Why or why not?

NOTES

SESSION 2 | CONNECTION

Read before this session:

- “Today I Shall Listen to the News,” Brian Bilston
- “Loneliness Is at Heart of Growing Mental Health Crisis,” Vivek H. Murthy

Reflect before this session:

- Who are your most important sources of human connection?
- When in your life have you felt the most connected to others? The least connected?

CONNECTION | POEM 14

Today I Shall Listen to the News
Brian Bilston

Today I shall listen to the news and the football scores
and the tally of the dead. Intermittently, I shall pick
at the crossword and the biscuit tin, and stare out
of my back window at a squirrel as he scurries along
my fence. Later, there may be a film to watch. But for now
I shall listen to the prospects for a Liverpool team

looking to bounce back from a disappointing midweek defeat,
the rising unemployment figures, and the tally of the dead,
while attempting to make inroads with the north-west quadrant.
It is thought likely for there to be some changes made
to the side which started on Wednesday evening. I shall
be brought team news from all the featured grounds today

amid continued concerns over travel this Christmas, and
the failings of Test and Trace.* It is regretted that in the present
circumstances, my newspaper is unable to process
crossword prize entries. Tomorrow, I shall buy some
more biscuits and possibly a pint of milk, and listen
to the news and the football scores and the tally of the dead.

**NHS Test and Trace was a government-funded service in England, established in 2020 to track the spread of COVID-19.*

CONNECTION | ESSAY 15

LONELINESS IS AT HEART OF GROWING MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS (VIVEK H. MURTHY)

Mental health is the defining public health crisis of our time, and for many Americans, loneliness is at the heart of that crisis. At any given moment, about one out of every two of our fellow citizens is experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. It is not something we talk about or easily see: Loneliness is a condition that is hidden in the shadows.

More than just a bad feeling, loneliness is a corrosive condition with grave consequences. Social disconnection puts us at increased risk for depression, anxiety and suicide, as well as heightening our risk for stress-related physical ailments like heart disease, stroke and dementia. Its impact on our risk of premature death is on par with smoking 15 cigarettes daily.

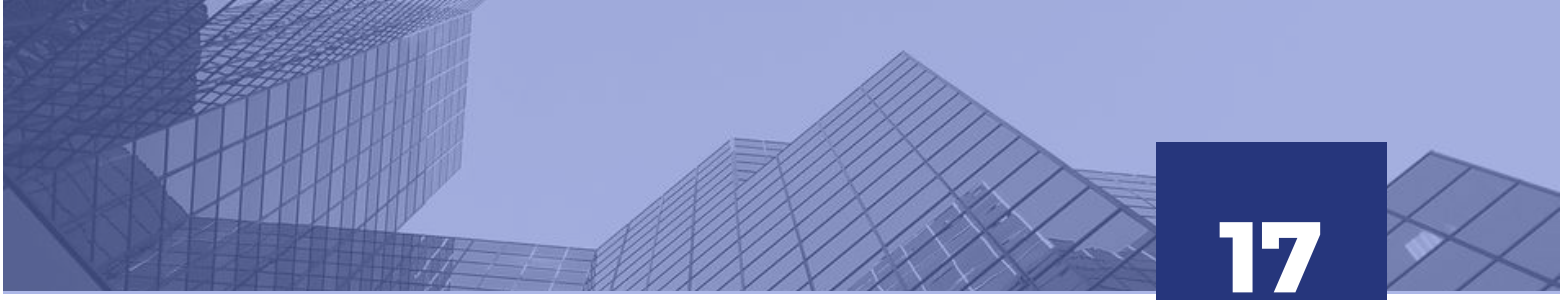
Why is this so? It is because we evolved to live in community. As hunter-gatherers, we found safety in togetherness. Being isolated from the group put the individual at elevated risk — from predators, from starvation, from exposure — and that created stress. Our survival depended on being a part of something larger than just ourselves.

LONELINESS (2 OF 5)

As much as our circumstances are very different today than they were in our hunter-gatherer days, that basic truth remains: We are hardwired to live in community. Connection is the essential glue of our lives. It is what brings us happiness and fulfillment. We need social connection for our survival and collective well-being.

This epidemic of loneliness has been building over many years. The pandemic made it worse, to be sure, but it is a crisis that has been evolving for a half-century or more. During that time, there has been declining participation in communal life. Fewer people belong to churches or synagogues or other religious institutions or are engaged with civic organizations. We, as a society, move around more. We change jobs more frequently. We don't put down roots in the same ways as our parents and grandparents.

Too often, we imagine loneliness as a condition of the elderly living in isolation with no one to support them. While that can be true, loneliness in the United States is not limited to older Americans. There are people in marriages who are lonely, CEOs of major companies who are lonely, seemingly



LONELINESS (3 OF 5)

happy people posting pictures of their fabulous vacations on social media who are lonely. And far too many young people who are lonely. From the outside, everything looks fine. But inside, they are struggling.

Addressing this national crisis is a profound challenge. We all want to be seen and understood. Sometimes all we need is acknowledgment of our worth and value. This is something we can do for each other — and for ourselves. Taking just 15 minutes a day to reach out to someone you care about can make a huge difference in how connected we feel.

There is nothing more fundamental to the health and well-being of people in our country than ensuring that we are building a moral and spiritual foundation that guides how we interact with each other. Toward that goal, service is one of the greatest antidotes to loneliness. When we help somebody else, two things happen. One is we forge a connection with them. The second is that we remind ourselves that we have value, and that can help us in times of our own loneliness. The less worthy we feel, the harder it is to reach out to other people.

LONELINESS (4 OF 5)

I know this from my own experience. When my first stint as Surgeon General ended abruptly in 2017, I felt profoundly lonely. During my time as Surgeon General, I threw myself into the job at the expense of my friendships. When the job ended, I was left without those relationships that had sustained me before. I was lonely, and also ashamed. I believed it was my fault because I had neglected those relationships. It was a choice I had made, and I felt embarrassed to call my friends and say, “Hey, I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you for the last two-and-a-half years.” It took the urging of my wife, who recognized what was happening to me and that I was withdrawing more and more, to reach out to reconnect.

One of the best definitions of a friend that I ever heard was when I was in college: A friend is somebody who reminds you of who you are when you forget. And we all do forget from time to time. We all go through periods in our life when we feel unworthy or that we fall short. That is when we need our friends to step in. That is why I think that at a time such as we are now experiencing, when as a community we are struggling so much with our mental health, we need

these connections in our lives.

Yes, we do need more psychiatrists and better access to psychiatric care to address the mental health crisis that confronts our country. Yes, we do need more psychologists. Yes, we need the technology to bring the care that is needed to people in their homes.

But we also need each other. We need to turn our attention to reinforcing the caring, supportive institutions, communities and relationships that give our lives purpose and meaning. We need to come up with ways to tip the balance toward love and away from fear, to rebuild the public square so that we can once again speak rationally with each other. To address this crisis of loneliness, we need to return to the core values of kindness, generosity and friendship that are so essential to the social fabric of our communities.

Ultimately, it comes down to one thing: Embrace love. It has the extraordinary capacity to heal and is the force we need to reach for each and every day in our lives. Love is our oldest medicine.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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What emotions does Bilston's poem evoke? What time period is he referencing? Why does he repeat the phrase "the tally of the dead"?

Have you had times in your life where, like Murthy, you threw yourself into work or family responsibilities at the expense of friendships? What was that experience like?

During your lifetime, have you witnessed the "declining participation in communal life" that Murthy describes? Do you think it is likely true that more people feel lonely now than they did fifty years ago?

What would you say if you could speak to the narrator of Bilston's poem? What is one step you can take in your own life to embrace love and foster connection?

SESSION 3 | PURPOSE

Read before this session:

- “Late Ripeness,” Czesław Milosz
- “Does My Life Have Meaning?”, Parker J. Palmer

Reflect before this session:

- What comes to mind when you hear the word “purpose”?
- How have you understood your purpose in each decade of your life?

PURPOSE | POEM 22

Late Ripeness (1 of 2)
Czesław Milosz

Not soon, as late as the approach of my ninetieth year,
I felt a door opening in me and I entered
the clarity of early morning.

One after another my former lives were departing,
like ships, together with their sorrow.

And the countries, cities, gardens, the bays of seas
assigned to my brush came closer,
ready now to be described better than they were before.

I was not separated from people,
grief and pity joined us.
We forget—I kept saying—that we are all children of the King.

For where we come from there is no division
into Yes and No, into is, was, and will be.

Late Ripeness (2 of 2)
Czesław Milosz

(continued from previous page)

We were miserable, we used no more than a hundredth part
of the gift we received for our long journey.

Moments from yesterday and from centuries ago—
a sword blow, the painting of eyelashes before a mirror
of polished metal, a lethal musket shot, a caravel
staving its hull against a reef—they dwell in us,
waiting for a fulfillment.

I knew, always, that I would be a worker in the vineyard,
as are all men and women living at the same time,
whether they are aware of it or not.

PURPOSE | ESSAY 24

DOES MY LIFE HAVE MEANING? (PARKER J. PALMER)

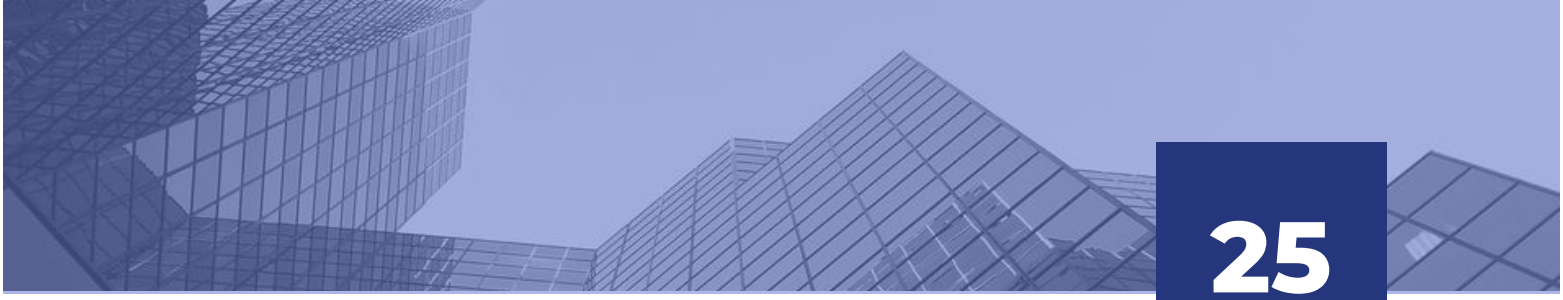
… *all that I have written seems like straw to me.*

Those are the words of Thomas Aquinas—*Saint* Thomas Aquinas to Catholics—one of the Western world's most influential theologians and philosophers. He spoke them three months before he died in 1274.

Aquinas was wrestling with a question that dogs people of all sorts, from parents to plumbers to professors, people like you and me who will never achieve anything like Aquinas's fame or historical impact. It's a question asked by adults of all ages, but perhaps most urgently by elders who wonder if all those years add up to anything worthwhile: Does my life have meaning?

As I go deeper into elderhood, that question rises in me more often than it did when I was young. Sometimes, I'm able to affirm that I've made meaningful contributions in at least parts of my private and public lives. At other times, everything I've done seems as flimsy and flammable as straw.

If you've ever been downcast about the meaning of your life, you know that reassurance from others, no matter how generous, doesn't do the trick. The



DOES MY LIFE HAVE MEANING? (2 OF 6)

question of meaning is one all of us must answer for ourselves—or so I thought until 5:15 a.m. on Thursday, May 12, 2016. I was starting my day as I often do, with coffee and poetry, when I ran across a poem on the nature of love. As I read and reread it, I began to see that brooding on the question "Does my life have meaning?" is a road to nowhere. There's a flaw at the heart of the question, created by my old nemesis, the overweening ego.

Here's the poem that opened my eyes, by the Nobel Prize–winning Polish poet Czesław Milosz:

Love

Love means to learn
to look at yourself

The way one looks
at distant things

For you are only one thing
among many.

And whoever sees that way
heals his heart,

Without knowing it,
from various ills.

A bird and a tree say to him:
Friend.

Then he wants to use
himself and things

So that they stand in the
glow of ripeness.

It doesn't matter whether
he knows what he serves:

Who serves best
doesn't always understand.

DOES MY LIFE HAVE MEANING? (3 OF 6)

There's truth and liberation in those last two lines. No matter how clear my goals may be, the truth is that I often don't know whom or what I will end up serving.

I remember a talk I gave a long time ago. My intent was to blow the audience away, but they were not impressed, as indicated by a brief and tepid round of obligatory applause. I was young, and it took weeks to get the bitter taste of failure out of my mouth. Years later, by rare chance, I met a person who'd been in that audience. "I'm glad to meet you," he said. "I've wanted to tell you how your talk changed the way I approach teaching, and how good that change has been for me and my students."

His words were a powerful reminder that I don't and can't know the meaning of my life, let alone dictate or control it. As Milosz says, "It doesn't matter whether he [she] knows what he [she] serves." All I can control are my own intentions, and my willingness to give myself to them: may they always be to serve rather than show off.

The poet goes on to say, "Who serves best doesn't always understand." Those words are liberating because there's so much about life that's triple-wrapped in

DOES MY LIFE HAVE MEANING? (4 OF 6)

mystery. When I'm sure I know exactly what I'm doing and why—so sure that I miss vital clues about what's actually needed and what I have to offer—it's a sign that my ego's in charge, and that's dangerous. My best offerings come from a deeper, more intuitive place that I can only call my soul. Embracing the fact that there's no way to know with precision whom or what I'm serving helps free my words and actions from the ego's dominion.

Speaking of the ego, the first few lines of Milosz's poem are a direct challenge to its lust for center stage: "Love means to learn to look at yourself / The way one looks at distant things / For you are only one thing among many." Ah, yes, now I remember: I'm not the sun at the center of anyone's solar system. If I keep trying to put myself there, insisting that I am special and my life must have some sort of special meaning, I'll die in despair or in delusion.

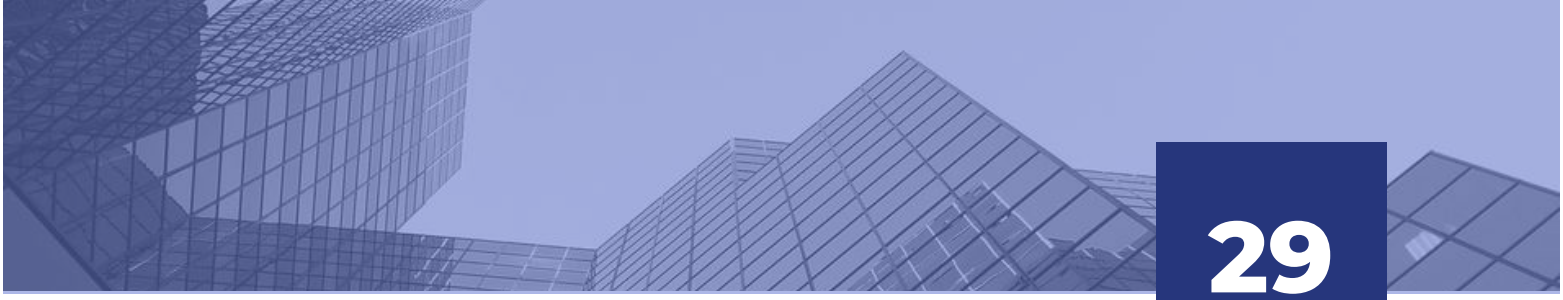
Peace comes when I understand that I am "only one thing among many," no more and no less important than the bird and the tree Milosz writes about. There's much I don't know about birds and trees, but this I know for sure: they don't

DOES MY LIFE HAVE MEANING? (5 OF 6)

wonder or worry about whether their lives have meaning. They simply be what they be. In the process, they befriend people like me who are elevated simply by taking time to appreciate the gifts so freely given by the natural world.

Milosz says, “whoever sees that way heals his heart, / Without knowing it, from various ills.” Time and again, that’s been my experience. There’s nothing like a walk in the woods, into the mountains, alongside the ocean, or out in the desert to put my life in perspective and help me take heart again. In places like that, the things of nature befriend me —just as Milosz says they will — as I settle into the comforting knowledge that I am “only one thing among many.”

Then there are Milosz’s beautiful words about allowing one’s self and the things of the world to “stand in the glow of ripeness.” Please don’t ask me exactly what that means, because I don’t know. But I do know this: once I understand that I’m not the sun, I can get out of the sun’s way and stop casting shadows. I can step aside to let the true sun shine on everyone and everything, making all things ripe with the glow of life.



DOES MY LIFE HAVE MEANING? (6 OF 6)

This, it seems, is Milosz's ultimate definition of love, and it works for me.

At the moment, I rest easy with the notion that I don't need to ask or answer the question "Does my life have meaning?" All I need do is to keep living as one among many as well as I can, hoping to help myself and others grow ripe with life and love as we stand under the sun.

If the Big Question returns to me over the next few days or weeks, and I find myself struggling to come up with a "Yes" or dodge a "No," I won't be surprised. When it comes to jailbreaks like the one Milosz's poem gave me, I'm a lifelong recidivist.

It's not easy to subdue the overweening ego in order to free the adventuresome soul. But whenever we manage to do so, it saves us grief and serves the world well. So if you see me on the street one day, quietly muttering "only one thing among many, only one thing among many," you'll know I'm still working on it. Or it's still working on me.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

30

What emotions does “Late Ripeness” evoke? What does Milosz mean when he says that he “felt a door opening in [himself] and entered / the clarity of early morning”?

Have you ever asked yourself, “Does my life have meaning?” Do you agree with Palmer’s argument that we “don’t and can’t know the meaning of [our lives]”?

Do you see common threads between Milosz’s poems, “Late Ripeness” and “Love”? What do you think he means by “ripeness” in each? How are you experiencing ripeness in this stage of your life?

Have you ever had an experience like Palmer’s chance meeting with a past audience member, when you learned only much later that you had positively impacted someone’s life?

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SESSION 4 | LOSS

Read before this session:

- “Sonnet 73,” William Shakespeare
- “The Trauma of Being Alive,” Mark Epstein

Reflect before this session:

- What losses have you experienced in your life? These may include losing loved ones, but also losing opportunities, abilities, or something else.
- How have you made meaning out of these experiences of loss?

LOSS | POEM 32

Sonnet 73
William Shakespeare

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

THE TRAUMA OF BEING ALIVE (MARK EPSTEIN)

Talking with my 88-year-old mother, four and a half years after my father died from a brain tumor, I was surprised to hear her questioning herself. “You’d think I would be over it by now,” she said, speaking of the pain of losing my father, her husband of almost 60 years. “It’s been more than four years, and I’m still upset.”

I’m not sure if I became a psychiatrist because my mother liked to talk to me in this way when I was young or if she talks to me this way now because I became a psychiatrist, but I was pleased to have this conversation with her. Grief needs to be talked about. When it is held too privately, it tends to eat away at its own support.

“Trauma never goes away completely,” I responded. “It changes perhaps, softens some with time, but never completely goes away. What makes you think you should be completely over it? I don’t think it works that way.”

There was a palpable sense of relief as my mother considered my opinion.

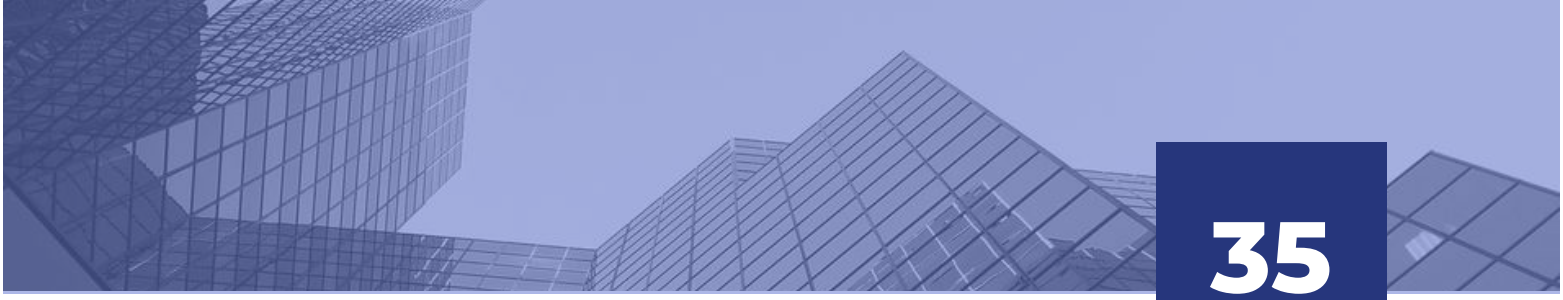
“I don’t have to feel guilty that I’m not over it?” she asked. “It took 10 years after my first husband died,” she remembered suddenly, thinking back to her college

THE TRAUMA OF BEING ALIVE (2 OF 7)

sweetheart, to his sudden death from a heart condition when she was in her mid-20s, a few years before she met my father. “I guess I could give myself a break.”

I never knew about my mother’s first husband until I was playing Scrabble one day when I was 10 or 11 and opened her weather-beaten copy of Webster’s Dictionary to look up a word. There, on the inside of the front cover, in her handwriting, was her name inscribed in black ink. Only it wasn’t her current name (and it wasn’t her maiden name). It was another, unfamiliar name, not Sherrie Epstein but Sherrie Steinbach: an alternative version of my mother at once entirely familiar (in her distinctive hand) and utterly alien.

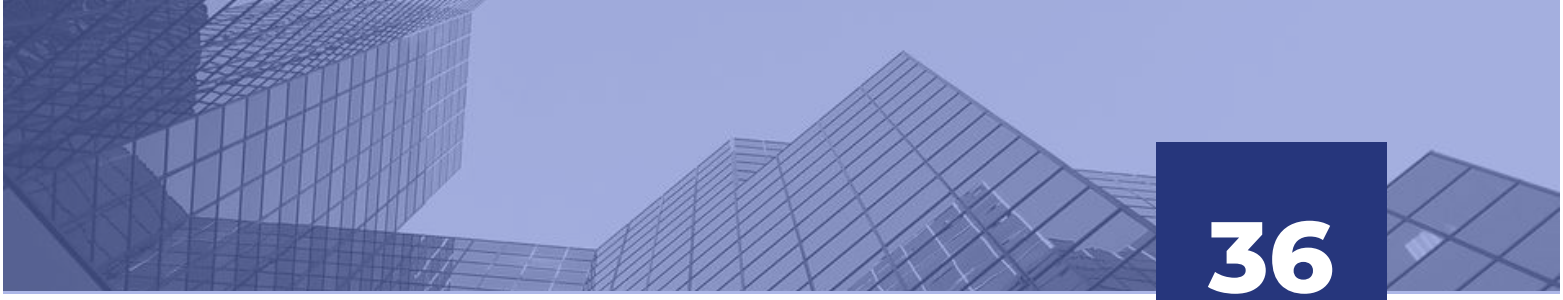
“What’s this?” I remember asking her, holding up the faded blue dictionary, and the story came tumbling out. It was rarely spoken of thereafter, at least until my father died half a century later, at which point my mother began to bring it up, this time of her own volition. I’m not sure that the trauma of her first husband’s death had ever completely disappeared; it seemed to be surfacing again in the context of my father’s death.



THE TRAUMA OF BEING ALIVE (3 OF 7)

Trauma is not just the result of major disasters. It does not happen to only some people. An undercurrent of trauma runs through ordinary life, shot through as it is with the poignancy of impermanence. I like to say that if we are not suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, we are suffering from pre-traumatic stress disorder. There is no way to be alive without being conscious of the potential for disaster. One way or another, death (and its cousins: old age, illness, accidents, separation and loss) hangs over all of us. Nobody is immune. Our world is unstable and unpredictable, and operates, to a great degree and despite incredible scientific advancement, outside our ability to control it.

My response to my mother — that trauma never goes away completely — points to something I have learned through my years as a psychiatrist. In resisting trauma and in defending ourselves from feeling its full impact, we deprive ourselves of its truth. As a therapist, I can testify to how difficult it can be to acknowledge one's distress and to admit one's vulnerability. My mother's knee-jerk reaction, "Shouldn't I be over this by now?", is very common. There is a rush to normal in



THE TRAUMA OF BEING ALIVE (4 OF 7)

many of us that closes us off, not only to the depth of our own suffering but also, as a consequence, to the suffering of others.

When disasters strike, we may have an immediate empathic response, but underneath we are often conditioned to believe that "normal" is where we all should be. The victims of the Boston Marathon bombings will take years to recover. Soldiers returning from war carry their battlefield experiences within. Can we, as a community, keep these people in our hearts for years? Or will we move on, expecting them to move on, the way the father of one of my friends expected his 4-year-old son — my friend — to move on after his mother killed herself, telling him one morning that she was gone and never mentioning her again?

IN 1969, after working with terminally ill patients, the Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross brought the trauma of death out of the closet with the publication of her groundbreaking work, "On Death and Dying." She outlined a five-stage model of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Her work was radical at the time. It made death a normal topic of conversation, but had the

THE TRAUMA OF BEING ALIVE (5 OF 7)

inadvertent effect of making people feel, as my mother did, that grief was something to do right.

Mourning, however, has no timetable. Grief is not the same for everyone. And it does not always go away. The closest one can find to a consensus about it among today's therapists is the conviction that the healthiest way to deal with trauma is to lean into it, rather than try to keep it at bay. The reflexive rush to normal is counterproductive. In the attempt to fit in, to be normal, the traumatized person (and this is most of us) feels estranged.

While we are accustomed to thinking of trauma as the inevitable result of a major cataclysm, daily life is filled with endless little traumas. Things break. People hurt our feelings. Ticks carry Lyme disease. Pets die. Friends get sick and even die.

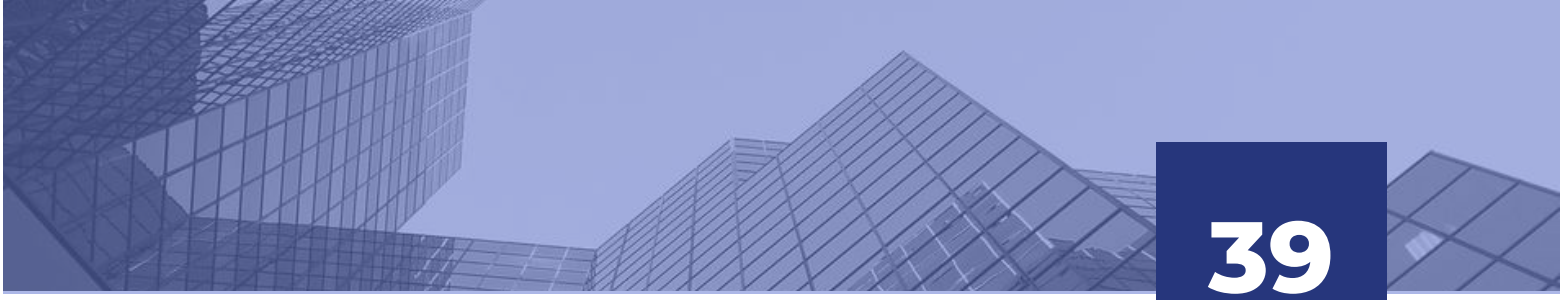
"They're shooting at our regiment now," a 60-year-old friend said the other day as he recounted the various illnesses of his closest acquaintances. "We're the ones coming over the hill." He was right, but the traumatic underpinnings of life are not specific to any generation. The first day of school and the first day in an

THE TRAUMA OF BEING ALIVE (6 OF 7)

assisted-living facility are remarkably similar. Separation and loss touch everyone.

I was surprised when my mother mentioned that it had taken her 10 years to recover from her first husband's death. That would have made me 6 or 7, I thought to myself, by the time she began to feel better. My father, while a compassionate physician, had not wanted to deal with that aspect of my mother's history. When she married him, she gave her previous wedding's photographs to her sister to hold for her. I never knew about them or thought to ask about them, but after my father died, my mother was suddenly very open about this hidden period in her life. It had been lying in wait, rarely spoken of, for 60 years.

My mother was putting herself under the same pressure in dealing with my father's death as she had when her first husband died. The earlier trauma was conditioning the later one, and the difficulties were only getting compounded. I was glad to be a psychiatrist and grateful for my Buddhist inclinations when speaking with her. I could offer her something beyond the blandishments of the rush to normal.



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THE TRAUMA OF BEING ALIVE (7 OF 7)

The willingness to face traumas — be they large, small, primitive or fresh — is the key to healing from them. They may never disappear in the way we think they should, but maybe they don't need to. Trauma is an ineradicable aspect of life. We are human as a result of it, not in spite of it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

40

What emotions does Shakespeare's poem evoke? Of the many images of aging in the sonnet, is any among them particularly resonant for you?

Do you see your own experience reflected in that of Mark Epstein's mother? Why or why not?

Have you felt guilt, shame, or embarrassment for being unable to "get over" a loss? Have you experienced the "rush to normal" that Epstein describes, in which we "believe that 'normal' is where we all should be"?

What has been most helpful for you in the aftermath of your own greatest losses? What has been least helpful? What would you want to tell someone who has just experienced a terrible loss for the first time?

SESSION 5 | CHANGE

Read before this session:

- “Monet Refuses the Operation,” Lisel Mueller
- “The Independent Self,” Atul Gawande

Reflect before this session:

- What are the most surprising turns your life has taken?
- What is your general attitude towards change? Is your first instinct to embrace it or avoid it?

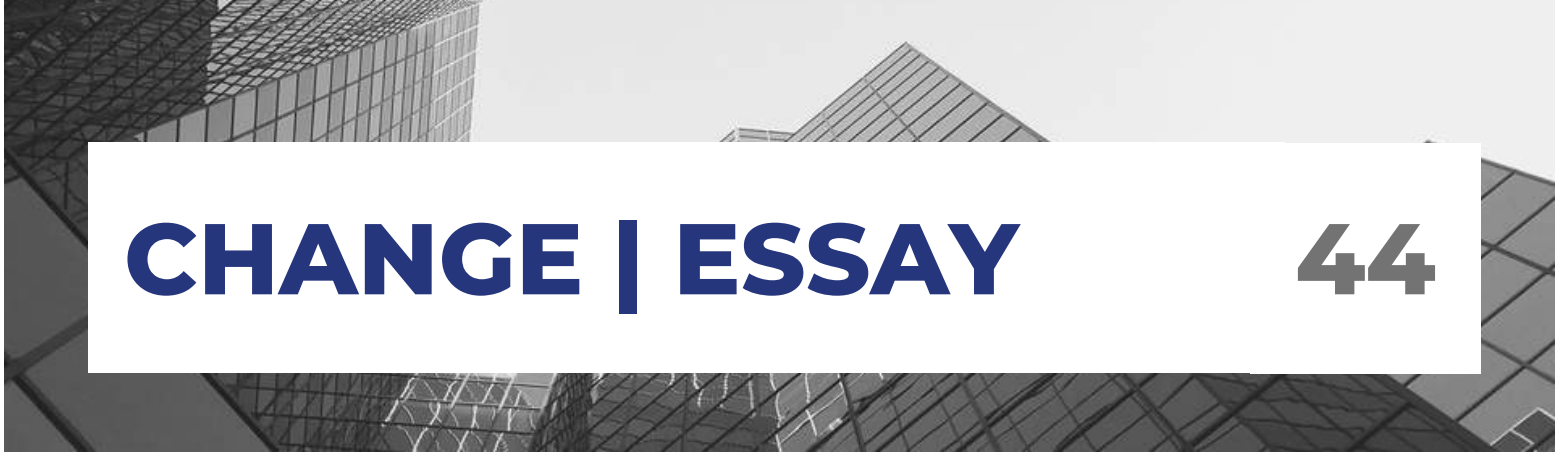
Monet Refuses the Operation
Lisel Mueller

Doctor, you say there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.
Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,
wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you
the Houses of Parliament dissolve
night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?

Monet Refuses the Operation (2 of 2)

Lisel Mueller

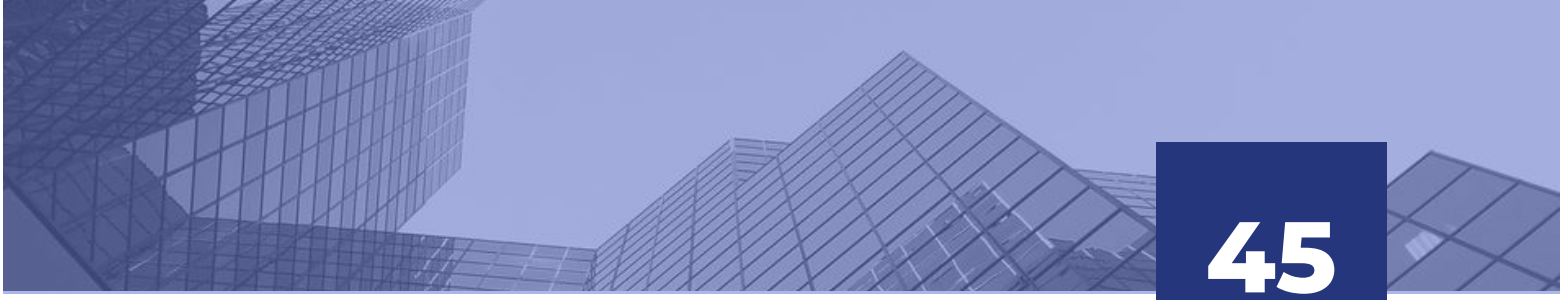
I will not return to a universe
of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.
To paint the speed of light!
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and change our bones, skin, clothes
to gases. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.



CHANGE | ESSAY 44

FROM THE INDEPENDENT SELF (ATUL GAWANDE)

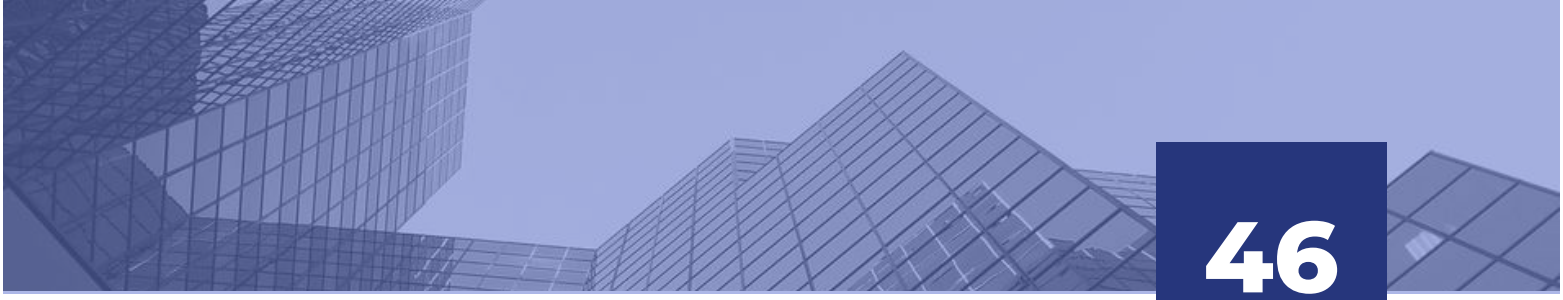
My father's father had the kind of traditional old age that, from a Western perspective, seems idyllic. Sitaram Gawande was a farmer in a village called Uti, some three hundred miles inland from Mumbai, where our ancestors had cultivated land for centuries. I remember visiting him with my parents and sister when he was more than a hundred years old. He was, by far, the oldest person I'd ever known. He walked with a cane, stooped like a bent stalk of wheat. He was so hard of hearing that people had to shout in his ear through a rubber tube. He was weak and sometimes needed help getting up from sitting. But he was a dignified man, with a tightly wrapped white turban, a pressed, brown argyle cardigan, and a pair of old-fashioned, thick-lensed, Malcolm X-style spectacles. He was surrounded and supported by family at all times, and he was revered—not in spite of his age but because of it. He was consulted on all important matters—marriages, land disputes, business decisions—and occupied a place of high honor in the family. When we ate, we served him first. When young people came into his home, they bowed and touched his feet in supplication.



THE INDEPENDENT SELF (2 OF 10)

In America, he would almost certainly have been placed in a nursing home. Health professionals have a formal classification system for the level of function a person has. If you cannot, without assistance, use the toilet, eat, dress, bathe, groom, get out of bed, get out of a chair, and walk—the eight "Activities of Daily Living"—then you lack the capacity for basic physical independence. If you cannot shop for yourself, prepare your own food, maintain your housekeeping, do your laundry, manage your medications, make phone calls, travel on your own, and handle your finances—the eight "Independent Activities of Daily Living"—then you lack the capacity to live safely on your own.

My grandfather could perform only some of the basic measures of independence, and few of the more complex ones. But in India, this was not of any dire consequence. His situation prompted no family crisis meeting, no anguished debates over what to do with him. It was clear that the family would ensure my grandfather could continue to live as he desired. One of my uncles and his family lived with him, and with a small herd of children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews nearby, he never lacked for help.

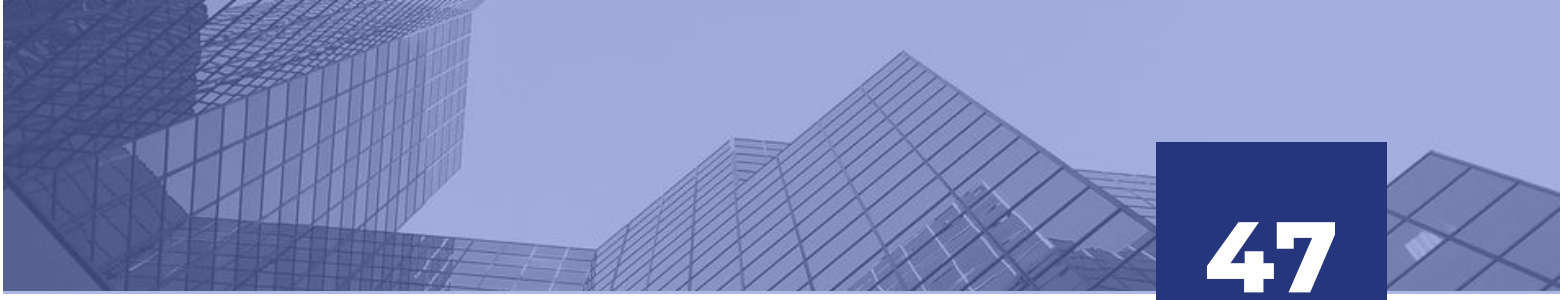


THE INDEPENDENT SELF (3 OF 10)

The arrangement allowed him to maintain a way of life that few elderly people in modern societies can count on. The family made it possible, for instance, for him to continue to own and manage his farm. Throughout his life, he awoke before sunrise and did not go to bed until he'd done a nighttime inspection of every acre of his fields by horse. Even when he was a hundred he would insist on doing this. My uncles were worried he'd fall—he was weak and unsteady—but they knew it was important to him. So they got him a smaller horse and made sure that someone always accompanied him. He made the rounds of his fields right up to the year he died.

Had he lived in the West, this would have seemed absurd. It isn't safe, his doctor would say. If he persisted, then fell, and went to an emergency room with a broken hip, the hospital would not let him return home. They'd insist that he go to a nursing home. But in my grandfather's premodern world, how he wanted to live was his choice, and the family's role was to make it possible.

My grandfather finally died at the age of almost a hundred and ten. It happened after he hit his



head falling off a bus. He was going to the courthouse in a nearby town on business, which itself seems crazy, but it was a priority to him. The bus began to move while he was getting off and, although he was accompanied by family, he fell. Most probably, he developed a subdural hematoma—bleeding inside his skull. My uncle got him home, and over the next couple of days he faded away. He got to live the way he wished and with his family around him right to the end.

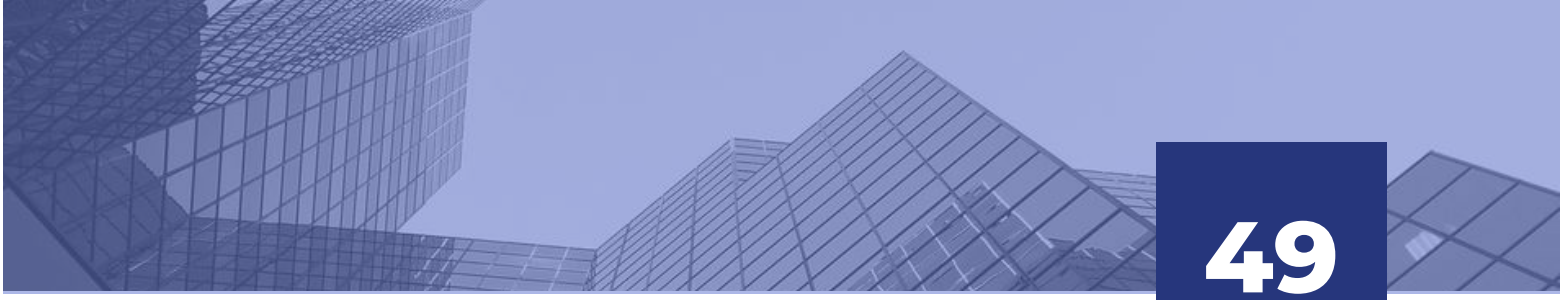
For most of human history, for those few people who actually survived to old age, Sitaram Gawande's experience was the norm. Elders were cared for in multigenerational systems, often with three generations living under one roof. Even when the nuclear family replaced the extended family (as it did in northern Europe several centuries ago), the elderly were not left to cope with the infirmities of age on their own. Children typically left home as soon as they were old enough to start families of their own. But one child usually remained, often the youngest daughter, if the parents survived into senescence.

As different as this family model seems from that of

THE INDEPENDENT SELF (5 OF 10)

Sitaram Gawande's in India, both relied on systems that shared the advantage of easily resolving the question of care for the elderly. There was no need to save up for a spot in a nursing home or arrange for meals-on-wheels. It was understood that parents would just keep living in their home, assisted by one or more of the children they'd raised. In contemporary societies, by contrast, old age and infirmity have gone from being a shared, multi-generational responsibility to a more or less private state—something experienced largely alone or with the aid of doctors and institutions.

How did this happen? One answer is that old age itself has changed. In the past, surviving into old age was uncommon, and those who did survive served a special purpose as guardians of tradition, knowledge, and history. They tended to maintain their status and authority as heads of the household until death. In many societies, elders not only commanded respect and obedience but also led sacred rites and wielded political power. So much respect accrued to the elderly that people used to pretend to be older than they were, not younger. The dignity of old age was something to which everyone aspired.



THE INDEPENDENT SELF (6 OF 10)

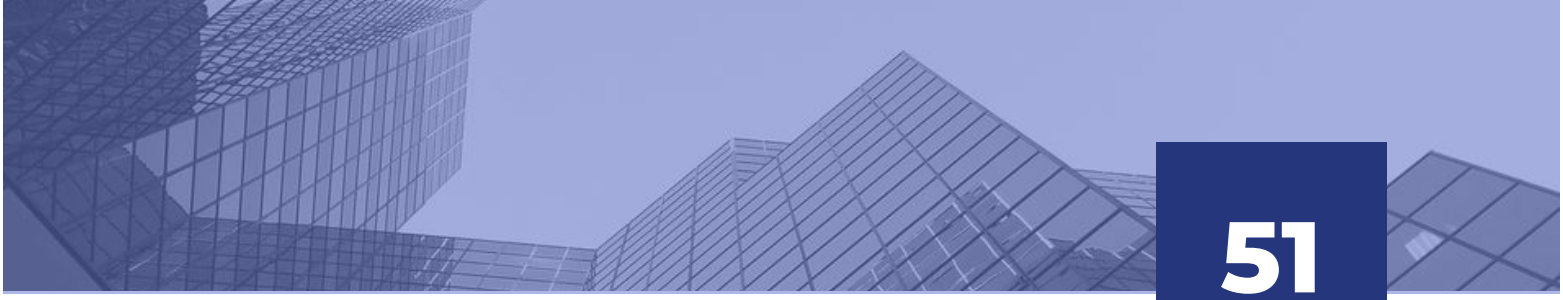
But age no longer has the value of rarity. As for the exclusive hold that elders once had on knowledge and wisdom, that, too, has eroded, thanks to technologies of communication—starting with writing itself and extending to the Internet and beyond. New technology also creates new occupations and requires new expertise, which further undermines the value of long experience and seasoned judgment. At one time, we might have turned to an old-timer to explain the world. Now we consult Google, and if we have any trouble with the computer we ask a teenager.

Perhaps most important of all, increased longevity has brought about a shift in the relationship between the young and the old. Traditionally, surviving parents provided a source of much-needed stability, advice, and economic protection for young families seeking pathways to security. And because landowners also tended to hold on to their property until death, the child who sacrificed everything to care for the parents could expect to inherit the whole homestead, or at least a larger portion than a child who moved away. But once parents were living markedly longer lives, tension emerged.

THE INDEPENDENT SELF (7 OF 10)

For young people, the traditional family system became less a source of security than a struggle for control—over property, finances, and even the most basic decisions about how they could live.

And indeed, in my grandfather Sitaram's traditional household, generational tension was never far away. You can imagine how my uncles felt as their father turned a hundred and they entered old age themselves, still waiting to inherit land and gain economic independence. I learned of bitter battles in village families between elders and adult children over land and money. In the final year of my grandfather's life, an angry dispute erupted between him and my uncle with whom he lived. The original cause was unclear: perhaps my uncle had made a business decision without my grandfather; maybe my grandfather wanted to go out and no one in the family would go with him; maybe he liked to sleep with the window open and they liked to sleep with the window closed. Whatever the reason, the argument culminated (depending on who told the story) in Sitaram's either storming out of the house in the dead of night or being locked out. He somehow



made it miles away to another relative's house and refused to return for two months.

Global economic development has changed opportunities for the young dramatically. The prosperity of whole countries depends on their willingness to escape the shackles of family expectation and follow their own path—to seek out jobs wherever they might be, do whatever work they want, marry whom they desire. So it was with my father's path from Uti to Athens, Ohio. He left the village first for university in Nagpur and then for professional opportunity in the States. As he became successful, he sent ever larger amounts of money home, helping to build new houses for his father and siblings, bring clean water and telephones to the village, and install irrigation systems that ensured harvests when the rainy seasons were bad. He even built a rural college nearby that he named for his mother. But there was no denying that he had left, and he wasn't going back.

Disturbed though my father was by the way America treated its elderly, the more traditional old age that my grandfather was able to maintain was possible only because my father's siblings

THE INDEPENDENT SELF (9 OF 10)

had not left home as he had. We think, nostalgically, that we want the kind of old age my grandfather had. But the reason we do not have it is that, in the end, we do not actually want it. The historical pattern is clear: as soon as people got the resources and opportunity to abandon that way of life, they were gone.

The fascinating thing is that, over time, it doesn't seem that the elderly have been especially sorry to see the children go. Historians find that the elderly of the industrial era did not suffer economically and were not unhappy to be left on their own. Instead, with growing economies, a shift in the pattern of property ownership occurred. As children departed home for opportunities elsewhere, parents who lived long lives found they could rent or even sell their land instead of handing it down. Rising incomes, and then pension systems, enabled more and more people to accumulate savings and property, allowing them to maintain economic control of their lives in old age and freeing them from the need to work until death or total disability. The radical concept of "retirement" started to take shape ...

THE INDEPENDENT SELF (10 OF 10)

It became acceptable and feasible for elders to remain in their own homes, living as they wanted to live, autonomously. That fact remains something to celebrate. There is arguably no better time in history to be old. The lines of power between the generations have been renegotiated, and not in the way it is sometimes believed. The aged did not lose status and control so much as share it. Modernization did not demote the elderly. It demoted the family. It gave people—the young and the old—a way of life with more liberty and control, including the liberty to be less beholden to other generations. The veneration of elders may be gone, but not because it has been replaced by veneration of youth. It's been replaced by veneration of the independent self.

There remains one problem with this way of living. Our reverence for independence takes no account of the reality of what happens in life: sooner or later, independence will become impossible. Serious illness or infirmity will strike. It is as inevitable as sunset. And then a new question arises: If independence is what we live for, what do we do when it can no longer be sustained?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

54

What emotions does Mueller's poem evoke? Why does the poet envision a scene where Monet refuses an operation to correct his vision?

What do you remember about the lives of your grandparents? How has your experience of aging been similar to theirs? How has it been different?

Have you witnessed or experienced the kinds of intergenerational tension that Gawande describes? What factors contribute to this tension?

Mueller's poem is about a painter embracing a personal change that comes with aging, while Gawande's essay is about the changes in society's relationship to aging. Do you see connections between the two?

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SESSION 6 | JOY

Read before this session:

- “The Orange,” Wendy Cope
- “Gentle Is the Joy That Comes With Age,” Anne Lamott

Reflect before this session:

- What have been your greatest joys in each season of your life? What are your greatest joys now?
- Where do you intend to seek (or expect to find) joy in the season to come?

JOY | POEM 56

The Orange
Wendy Cope

At lunchtime I bought a huge orange—
The size of it made us all laugh.
I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave—
They got quarters and I had a half.

And that orange, it made me so happy,
As ordinary things often do
Just lately. The shopping. A walk in the park.
This is peace and contentment. It's new.

The rest of the day was quite easy.
I did all the jobs on my list
And enjoyed them and had some time over.
I love you. I'm glad I exist.

GENTLE IS THE JOY THAT COMES WITH AGE (ANNE LAMOTT)

Some of my much older friends have 10 doctors or more, like an overeducated friend community. I have only six so far. But time lurches on, and the reality is that, before too long, I will have 10 as well. Until then, the point of life is gratitude, modest miseries aside. And gratitude is joy.

Wendell Berry wrote, “Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.” Yes, yes, but/and older-age joy is different.

To a great degree, in older age, ambition falls away. Such a relief. Appreciation and surprise bloom many mornings: Yay — I like it here.

We more easily accept the world as is, even as we doggedly keep trying to save it, like aging Smurfs. A man who got sober with me in 1986 said he had come into recovery a big shot, but the guys had helped him work his way up to servant, and he had finally found happiness.

We take it slower, and thus can be amused by the foibles of humanity around us, even as we are alarmed by how quickly the days we have speed by: Kitty Carlisle’s mother said that the best thing about being older is that, every 15 minutes or so, it’s time for breakfast again.

GENTLE IS THE JOY THAT COMES WITH AGE (2 OF 6)

I'm not loving the cognitive decline, which can be so scary at the time but (for me, in the early throes) still ends up being sort of funny.

For instance, yesterday, I needed to pack up some shoes that I'd been auditioning. Even with the custom orthotics provided by my most recent boyfriend, my podiatrist, they just didn't work out. So I printed out the return label and set about wrapping them for the post.

Much of this effort went into sneak attacks by the packing-tape dispenser; each strip I pulled out tried to return to the mother ship. Each time, this required at least five minutes of crotchety scraping to get it restarted, turning me into Andy Rooney. ("What is it about packing-tape dispensers?") I finally got the shoes all packaged, with the label taped on, and realized I had left my orthotics in the shoes. So I opened the bottom of the box, fished them out and taped the box back up. All this took at least half an hour. I then started out jauntily for the post office and five minutes later realized I had left the shoebox at home.

A good story, and it makes everyone I tell it to feel better about their own condition. Stories are joy.

GENTLE IS THE JOY THAT COMES WITH AGE (3 OF 6)

(P.S. It can be quite time-consuming to be older.)

We also don't love how simultaneously dried out and leaky we become. An older person must never, ever leave home without Kleenex, and laughing too hard without a squeezy kind of prep can be a setback. But the older people I know laugh and laugh at themselves, because we know things.

We know the truth of and beauty of cycles.

Thistles for younger people are to be avoided at all costs, for obvious reasons, but when you have slowed down, they can be enjoyed, because you won't be running into or leaping over them. There is beauty in old stalks, even when they are us: It's tough and lovely to be alive. Thistles in the spring are so pretty. I love their springiness, the power of the breezy, soft purple fibers, and then in the summer the kind of Elizabethan glory of those ruffs around their necks. In autumn, the wind blows away all the fluff — the seed pods — leaving the spikes and stalks, which dry up and fall over, as will we all.

But in the meantime?

Older joy is not so much about chasing down things,

GENTLE IS THE JOY THAT COMES WITH AGE (4 OF 6)

as it is about what seizes the eye, out the window or on a walk. Older joy is less caffeinated. When you are younger, joy is photographable, for display on the curated Facebook life. Younger joy means endorphins. Older joy feels more like contentment. Someone at my church once said that peace is joy at rest, and joy is peace on its feet.

Older age can be a balancing act — how much to put out, how hard to try, how much to let go. And if things aren't working, how to accept that with grace.

There can be a lot of joy in all that still works with our bodies and minds. The miracle is not high dives and Segways but appreciation, and knowing the great miracle: decades of love and loyalty.

Even someone such as me, who has since birth been more anxious than the average bear, can be less alarmist. By this point, we've lived through wars and political crises, earthquakes and droughts, sorrow and way too much death. But almost all the deaths I've seen have been gentle. One of my pastors said that death is like falling asleep on the living room floor and waking up in your own bed. Those last weeks are often so

GENTLE IS THE JOY THAT COMES WITH AGE (5 OF 6)

sweet, if messy, and filled with grace.

We finally realize we can't save or fix or rescue anyone, even and especially those we most love. We stop rushing to people's sides like arthritic St. Bernards with kegs of brandy strapped around our necks. We've learned that we cannot reshape their lives, get in there swinging and carry their pain for them. Now? We mostly listen. Sometimes, we lay some money on them. We are lighter than we've ever been.

I think a lot less about what other people think of me. Sure, I want to look good, and be charming. But it doesn't mean that much in the bigger scheme of things. When I'm home alone, or with my husband or son, best friends, reading my book, watching TV, eating my snacks, being kind of a slob, who cares? I've arrived.

Now, I'm in it for the deep soul love, where maybe one person is impossible, shut down, annoying or neurotic, but they're yours, your person, or perhaps they are you, and along with the sun, moon and stars, this love is the light of the world.

I have always been lifted by the bulbs we planted in winter's cold, rocky soil, breaking through hilariously

GENTLE IS THE JOY THAT COMES WITH AGE (6 OF 6)

bright and fresh. But I'm so moved now by aged trees, like some nearby old English walnuts. They do their thing for a couple of glorious months a year, loaded with white blossoms, made to make seeds to make more trees. Then they've had it. They get old — no need to put makeup on those wrinkled petals any longer. They fade and fall to the ground for the year. But oh, the beauty of old beings, old trees and old us. We made it through. We did our work. And if I'm here in the joy of next spring, I'll love them again.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What emotions does Cope's poem evoke? Why do you think she wrote a poem capturing the details of such an ordinary day?

Do you see your own experience of aging reflected in Lamott's? Why or why not?

Lamott writes, "Older age can be a balancing act ... how hard to try, how much to let go. And if things aren't working, how to accept that with grace." Where in your own life have you found joy in letting go?

What are your greatest sources of joy in this season of your life? What would you tell a younger person about the secret(s) to growing older with joy?

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- Image (page i): “Portrait of an Elderly Man Looking Straight at the Camera,” Ivan Radic, 2016.

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SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

- Image: “Codex Sassoon,” Eric Helgas for the *New York Times*.
- All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 2021).

DESIGN TEMPLATE

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BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES

The passages and discussion questions that follow are companion resources to each of the six sessions.

Resources for each session:

- **Identity:** Psalm 73 (The strength of my heart)
- **Connection:** Ruth 1 (Ruth and Naomi)
- **Purpose:** Jeremiah 29 (Plans for your welfare)
- **Loss:** Psalm 22 (God, why have you forsaken me?)
- **Change:** Isaiah 43 (I am about to do a new thing)
- **Joy:** 1 Samuel 2 (The song of Hannah)

IDENTITY | BIBLE STUDY 68

Psalm 73: 1-5, 13-14, 23-26

Truly God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
my steps had nearly slipped.

For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not plagued like other people.

All in vain I have kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
For all day long I have been plagued,
and am punished every morning.

Nevertheless I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honor.

Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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Have you had the psalmist's experience of seeing "the prosperity of the wicked … [who] are not plagued like other people"? How have you dealt with feelings of envy or the sense that life is unfair?

In your life, when have you felt God holding your hand or guiding you with divine counsel?

The last line is intended as a message of comfort: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." How do you respond to this verse? Do you find it comforting? Why or why not?

How does your sense of faith shape your identity?

CONNECTION | BIBLE STUDY 70

Ruth 1:8-17

After the death of her husband and sons, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.”

Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.”

But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? … Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.”

Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So Naomi said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the most meaningful relationships in your life? Have any of them come from unlikely places?

In her grief, Naomi says, “The hand of the Lord has turned against me.” Have you ever felt this way?

After the death of her husband and sons, Orpah sadly leaves Naomi, but Ruth stays by her side. In the wake of a major loss, have you experienced some relationships fading away? Have you experienced others getting stronger?

Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah to return to their families of origin so that they may “find security.” What kind of security is she talking about? What are the forces keeping Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah from building a home together as widows? Do any of these forces affect our lives today?

PURPOSE | BIBLE STUDY 72

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Jeremiah writes this letter to share a message from God to the Jewish community exiled in Babylon. At a time when they are trapped in a holding pattern, waiting for God to restore them to their homeland, God tells them to stop waiting around and start building a life in this strange new place. Have you ever had a moment when your life's plans underwent a radical shift? How did you start building a new life?

God warns against "prophets and diviners" who may try to deceive the reader. Have you encountered people who tried to lead you off-course, or made predictions about your life that turned out not to be correct?

Jeremiah 29:11 ("Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord") is a verse often cited to suggest that God has a unique plan and purpose for every person. Do you believe that God has given you a purpose in life, or is purpose something you define for yourself?

LOSS | BIBLE STUDY 74

Psalm 22:1-2, 9-11, 19, 22-24

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me,
from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
Do not be far from me, for trouble is near,
and there is no one to help.

But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the Lord, praise him!

For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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Have you had times in your life when you felt forsaken by God? How did you cope with them?

Have you had times in your life when you felt God's comfort in times of trouble? What helped you feel consoled instead of forsaken?

In 1557, John Calvin wrote of the psalms: "I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, An Anatomy of the Soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror." How many different emotions does the speaker describe in this passage? Do you see any of your own emotions reflected in the speaker's experience?

CHANGE | BIBLE STUDY 76

Isaiah 43:1-3, 8-9, 18-21

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes,
who are deaf, yet have ears!
Let all the nations gather together,
and let the peoples assemble.

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

When in your life have you experienced God doing a positive “new thing”? How did the change make you feel—were your emotions wholly positive, or were they mixed?

What do you think Isaiah means by “the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears”?

God’s promises of protection suggest that the reader will have to walk through fire and navigate dangerous waters. Why do you think this section precedes the statement, “I am about to do a new thing”? Have you ever had to navigate dangerous or frightening circumstances on the cusp of a major change?

JOY | BIBLE STUDY 78

1 Samuel 2:1-2, 7-10

My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in your victory.

There is no holy one like the LORD, no one besides you;
there is no rock like our God.

The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low; he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap
to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,
and on them he has set the world.

He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked will perish in darkness,
for not by might does one prevail.
The LORD! His adversaries will be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
He will give strength to his king
and exalt the power of his anointed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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Hannah sings this song to rejoice as she dedicates her son Samuel, a “miracle baby” born after years of infertility, to the service of God. When has God brought you surprising joy?

Have you had times in your life when you were suffering and God “raised you up from the dust”?

In *Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier*, Arthur C. Brooks notes that psychologists define joy as a feeling of excited happiness that is “highly pleasurable but fleeting, [making] it very different from the way a lot of religious thinkers define joy, which is more of a lasting inner contentment because of one’s relationship with God.” How do you define joy in your own life?

NOTES


THE
CHURCH
HOME