

Seminar Notes on Spirituality and Aging

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What is God's desire for us?

Jesus's words to Peter remind us:

In all truth I tell you when you were younger
you dressed yourself and went where you wanted;
but when you are old you will stretch out your hands
and someone else will dress you
and lead you where you do not want to go Jn. 21: 18

And then Jesus said, Follow me, reminding us that our Call is always ongoing.

What, then, does God desire for us?

I have come that you may have life
and have it to the full

Wisdom Documents of Congregations

Quotation:

Aging is the turning of the wheel, the gradual fulfilment of the life cycle....

Aging does not need to be hidden or denied, but can be understood, affirmed, and
experienced as a process of growth by which the mystery of life is slowly revealed to us

[Henri Nouwen / Walter J. Gaffney, *Aging*]

NATURALLY EVOLVING PROCESS [fulfilment of the life-cycle]

CONTINUING PROCESS OF GROWTH [consciously entered into]

MYSTERY OF LIFE REVEALED

Some important considerations:

We already possess all we need - God never leaves us wanting

We possess 100% Energy throughout our lives. It is the energy of LOVE that keeps us
fully engaged with LIFE! we grow older the energy available to us on the physical level
gradually diminishes and becomes available in a way that turns us inward and enables us to
become more deeply reflective and content to enjoy our inner resources. We gradually shift
from ministry as our main focus into a more contemplative stance, continuing to reach out
to others from the deep well of inner richness. It is an energy that is creative – the energy of
LOVE. This is the source of our connection with ourselves, our mission, our God, our world.

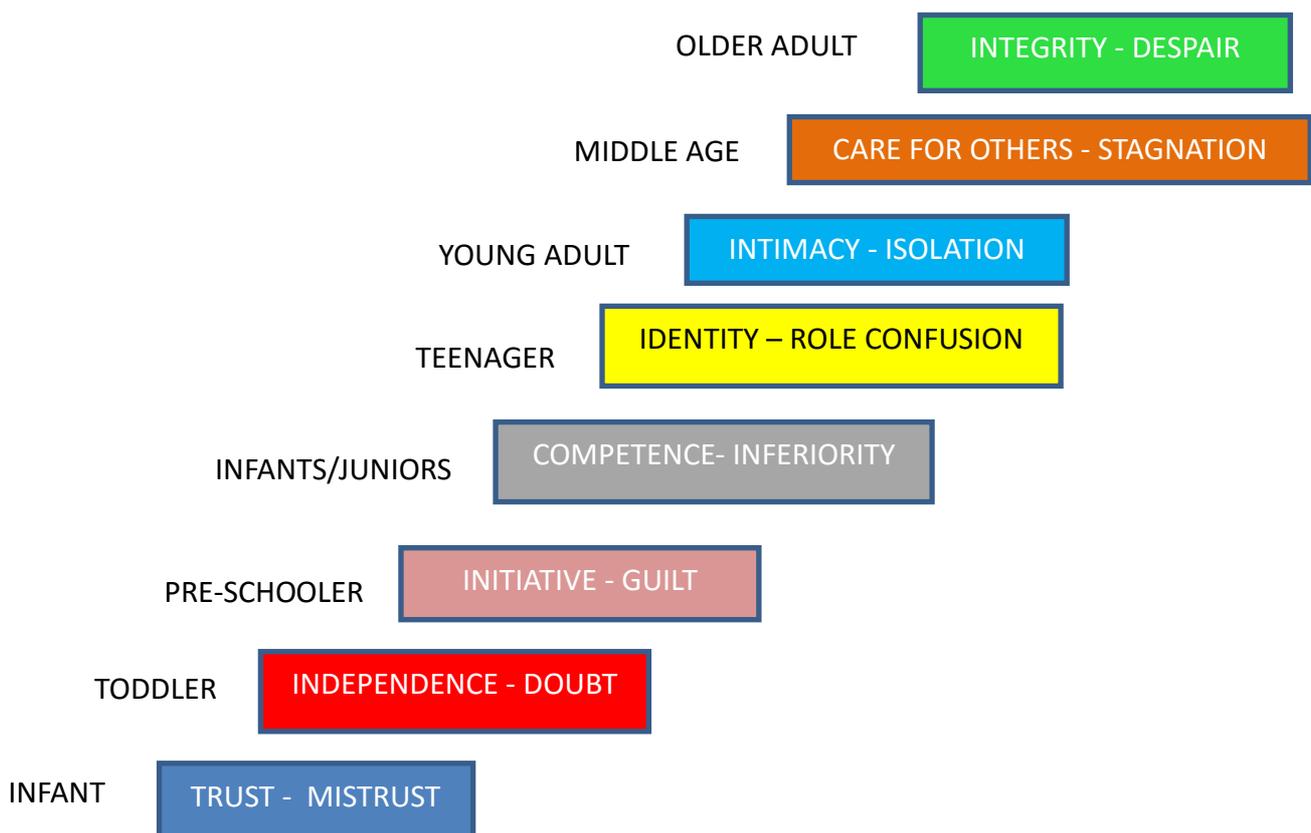
Tasks of Aging

Joan and Eric Erikson

Psychosocial Stages of Development

Erik Erikson and his wife, Joan, lived the stages of life as they developed the psychological model of how we evolve and grow from one stage to the next, until we achieve the final stage. At each stage of development, there is a particular skill to be learnt, experienced as a challenge or conflict. We negotiate these steps more or less adequately. Difficulties arise if we miss stages or are prevented from experiencing them.

At any stage of life new experiences can offer us the opportunity to re-visit the stages of development and come to terms with the skill or virtue to be learnt. For example, after bereavement, or retirement, or new role in life, we will naturally re-visit the earlier stage of growth and deepen our inner strengths. This can be a very useful reflection as we grow older: Erikson claims that our later life is occupied with integrating our past experiences.



Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

Eighth Stage of Development

Integrity vs. Despair:

Am I content with the life I have lived?

Integrity

Coming to terms with one's life

Coming to terms with one's death

Reflective Looking Back: remember, reassess, reconcile, reunite

Integration of Life's Experiences

Life was worth living as it happened

Contentment & Acceptance

New Interests

WISDOM

This involves coming to terms with one's life and one's death. When we do, we experience ourselves as whole, complete, and satisfied with all that has happened to us – achievements, disappointments, failures, regrets.

[Older] Age is the moment we come to terms with ourselves.

We begin to look inside ourselves.

We begin to find more strength in the spirit than in the flesh.

[Joan Chittister *The Gift of Years*]

Gradually we accept life as it has been lived, and able to look forward in hope of what may come. We also have renewed energy to pursue new interests. The gift that typifies older age is Wisdom. When this is not achieved, our lives are characterised by:

Despair

Regret and Remorse

Time is running out – it's too late!

Inordinate Fear of Death

Bitterness – Hopelessness

[anger, contempt, sarcasm, blame]

Unhealthy Preoccupations

[Preoccupation with the past]

Despair is the negative outcome of this stage. It occurs when we feel we have made many wrong decisions and have many regrets, yet time is too short to put things right. With not much time left, we find it hard to accept that death – that finality - is near. We can be overwhelmed with bitterness, defeat, and hopelessness. According to Erikson, these attitudes are often expressed as anger and contempt for others, which disguise contempt for oneself. We can be fault-finding, argumentative and tend to blame others for our own personal short-comings and failures. Rather than deal with these issues we can focus on ourselves and develop unhealthy preoccupations with our health, become overly anxious over ordinary things; we can become preoccupied with the past that we experience as unfulfilled.

Pause: Where are you on the Journey?

Reflection:

In God's presence, look back over my life:
let the events arise naturally...

Notice: Signs of peace, joy, growth...
Difficult moments...

Hold them in God's creative presence and let
gratitude, healing, etc. take place

Reflection Questions that can help the process:**Looking back:**

- What have I done best and enjoyed most in my life and ministry?
- What have I liked most and least about the ministries I have done in the past?
- What have the difficult times and failures taught or given me?

In the present:

- What sustains or nourishes me? What gives me energy? What drains my energy?
- What gifts or qualities am I most frequently praised for?
- What do people ask me to help them with or do for them?
- What does my community/world most need? What do I contribute?

Looking to the future:

- What would I want as my epitaph?
- How would I spend my time if I had six months to live? What would I change?
- What values or legacy do I want to leave behind?

What could retirement and older age look like?

- Increased opportunity to enter more deeply into the Mystery of life and love of God..
- Occasion to let go of busyness and enjoy less demanding ways of being of service
- Opportunity to learn to accept our frailty and loss of independence
- Opportunity to explore and enjoy new ways of using one's creative gifts
- Time to allow deeper self-awareness to move us into greater inner freedom
- To continue to deepen our call to.....
- Opportunity to bring into One our past, our present and our future with Gratitude
- Commit to pray for the congregation, the church and the needs of our world

TRANSFORMATION: LOSS AND CHANGE

When something happens to us that upsets our equilibrium – death, loss of job, death of friend/loved one, loss of physical or mental capacities – we react on every level of our being. This is a normal, natural part of life.

The life we knew in the Loss circle above is gone, completely disrupted. We enter the in-between stage – NOW – of loss, grief, sadness, disorientation, unable to experience the familiar things of life in the same, familiar way. We find it difficult to envision what the

future will be like – but if the process is worked through well, it will result in hope and new energy - the right-hand circle. This is the Grieving Process.

DIAGRAM:

Model of Transition and Change [based on work by Richard Rohr]



Endings

The loss of someone/something I value

Characteristics: Shock, Numbness, Sadness, Anger, Anxiety/Fear, Confusion, Disorientation, Depression/Loneliness - all Uncomfortable Feelings

Reflection: What loss are you grieving?
 Where in your body do you feel it?

Feelings

Feelings are neutral – they provide information about what is going on within

Feelings around loss cannot be avoided

These feelings may reawaken past endings and awaken memories of hurt, separation and/or abandonment

Opportunity to come to terms with incomplete endings of the past

Opportunity for growth and renewed life and energy

What do we do with uncomfortable feelings?

[unconscious responses]

Bury them in the body:

sleep disorders, headaches, backaches, ulcers, stomach disturbances, skin rashes, eating disturbances **LISTEN TO YOUR BODY - YOUR BODY NEVER LIES**

Privatise and hold them in:

withdrawal, depression, addictions

Mask them:

acting-out your feelings, putting things off, inefficiency, forgetfulness, dawdling, irresponsibility, gossip, joking

Give them a voice: [conscious choice]

express feelings to someone, crying to God in prayer, ritualising and memorialising

In Between Time

We are between the old and the new. We notice changes in ourselves

Death – Resurrection: we discover new aspects of ourselves:
the disowned parts of our personality
the hidden beauty of who are

We are learning to let die what needs to die

Quotation:

We feel supported when someone is fully present, open, non-judgemental, available, caring and silently attentive.

The silence that contains the fullness of presence is quite beautiful.

Just having another sitting next to you in this way makes you feel supported.

This is how you must treat yourself in order to have a caring relationship with your pain.

Be non-judgemental, silent and fully present, not trying to control your pain, force your mind, or judge your pain. [Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche]

During life, we incur hurts and losses: bereavement, retirement, separation, divorce, loss of employment, etc. we do not always take the time or find the tools to deal with these moments of pain. There are also times when we may be unable to forgive a wrong done and carry resentment and unforgiveness throughout our lives. All these undealt-with times of pain prevent us from living fully and freely with the energy and life God has given us. In older age, the awareness of these blocks to our inner freedom become more apparent. They are like an invitation from God to try to understand the processes and allow ourselves to be healed and set free so that we may fully love and live. As we age, we become increasingly aware of loss: physical diminishment, death of family, friends; not having a job to go to, not knowing what to do with free time, loneliness, etc. All of this affects our relationships.

The Wise Must Travel Light

Youth can carry a heavy load day after day
Without noticing the damaging effects,
But the wise must lay down the burden.
Resentments, regrets, injuries, slights,
Grudges and disappointments,
Are much too cumbersome
For a person of wisdom and contentment.
The wise must travel light.
There is a travel pack in the mind
Which over the years has become
Filled with rock and stones.
You do not have to carry them anymore.
You can empty your pack
And carry only compassion from one day to the next.

William Martin

The Ongoing Call

The call of Jesus is central to our lives, and it is a Call that is renewed throughout all the changes and stages of our lives. It is a call to relationship with him: Abide in my love and bear much fruit.

In older age, when physical energy wanes, we often feel that we are useless now that we can't do a 'job' anymore, contribute to the congregation's mission, etc.

Our call is to be in relationship with the Lord, which bears fruit in our ministry activity. When we cannot continue in physical activity, the relationship continues; we continue to live out the charism – we are still members of the congregation and are still part of its mission. HOW we live that charism changes over our lives. In older age, we live out the charism in a way different from the past.

Julian of Norwich [1343-1416] as Anchorite might be another inspiration for our lives of contemplation-Ministry

The life of an anchorite involved remaining in one place for life. There are two windows in the anchorhold: one looking onto the sanctuary of the church through which the anchorite could participate in the sacraments. The other window looks out onto the outside world, and to this window people in need of prayer, counsel, guidance or comfort could come. The anchorite vocation is thus summed up in two windows: one looking into the heart of God and the deeper mysteries; the other reaching out and being present in love to people in need.

Quotation:

*The anchorite listens to the tales
of sin and sadness and brokenness...
helping the person to find
a path to healing*

*Such a ministry requires inner quietness,
humility and discipline*

*The anchorite's heart is
the place where
the love of God patiently
takes to itself the pain of the
world and brings lasting healing*

Community may be our main mission field as we grow deeper into the aging process – this is where our time is mostly spent. 'Abide in my love and Love one Another' is the Gospel mandate. Who is the person who needs 'help' at any given moment? It is the one beside me experiencing suffering, experiencing joy, in need of a listening ear, feeling depressed, etc.