



The MAST Journal

The Spirituality of Aging

A Special Call

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Dear Sisters, Associates, Companions and Friends of Mercy,

In this issue on the Spirituality of Aging, I am grateful to MAST Journal's Editorial Board members who invited writers and also made contributions.

Sister Anita Iddings wrote "A Special Call," a personal account of moving into old age as a conscious choice. She develops an answer to her question, "What can I do now that I could not do when in the active ministry?" Sister Marilyn King, who invited her, knew Sister Anita's long experience as a nurse with experience caring for senior sisters at Mercy Retirement and Care Center in Oakland, California. Sister Anita's rich life models what possibilities exist in our senior years.

Sister Sharon Kerrigan, also a member of the Editorial Board, asks, "Is There a Ministry for the Elderly in the Future of Religious Life?" She surveys the biblical accounts of women counted as prophetesses-- Deborah, Hulda, Anna, and Elizabeth. Senior sisters might describe their ministry as of one of prayer, of being a visible presence to others, or of being a listening ear to the younger generation. Sister Sharon suggests that prophets were agents of change for a more just society, and opens the imagination of senior sisters to this way of seeing their presence.

Jane Thibault, Ph.D., emerita professor of geriatrics, offers a provocative title to her article, "May You Live To Be 120: Searching for Models of Spiritual Transformation in Later Life." At Sister Marilyn King's invitation, Jane describes her earlier research effort to show that sisters who lived a long time also had transformative spiritual experience like Teresa of Avila. She couldn't establish this connection. Instead, she tells a story of a 94-year-old woman who, despite being bedridden, extends love and gratitude to all around her—her caretakers, her dog and cats, the people she hears about, the world itself. This is what spiritual transformation means.

Dr. Kathleen Carey who teaches at St. Xavier University in Chicago, interviewed 12 Mercy Sisters 85 years or older in assisted living in Chicago. In "Habits of Mercy Sisters Regarding Mind, Body and Spirit," she uses quotes from her interviews and lays out a profile of healthy aging. This includes sisters' various strengths: being energized by new ideas, setting short-term goals, maintaining positive social ties, accepting loss, managing change, making a meaningful contribution to the community, and being at peace with the world and with oneself.

Sister Katherine Doyle reflects on the prophetic aspect of aging. "In the Footsteps of Anna," she links the aging of women religious with the inspiring role of elders in all cultures--those who have "the hope, the humor and the vision of the many who have grown old gracefully and carefully." She provides anecdotes of some sisters who adopted social justice causes in their senior years. She weaves her reflection around a number of writers who affirm elders as those who contribute "wisdom, balanced judgment and enduring values."

Sister Patricia Talone, also of the Editorial Board, writes as an ethicist for Catholic Health Association in "End of Life: One Chapter in Life's Story." She learned a vital lesson from a priest, Monsignor H., who had lost a dear friend. How to comfort him? He compared the experience of outliving his friends to the childhood memory of being the last one to get off the trolley line on the ride from school. Then, alone, he walked home full of anticipation of his family's warmth, laughter and welcome. She counsels attention to the individual life story of each ailing person. We respect each sister's dignity by asking, "What do I need to know about you as a person to give you the best care possible?"

This volume closes with a look to Dr. Margaret "Peggy" Thompson of Syracuse University, whose main scholarly work concerns women religious. She reviews Sister Mary Jeremy Daigler's book, "Incompatible with God's Design: A History of the Women's Ordination Movement in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church." Mary Jeremy, also of the Editorial Board, presented portions of this publication, when it was forthcoming, at the annual MAST meeting.

I am grateful to our writers, and to the substantive contribution of Editorial Board members to this volume, as well as to Ellen Smith, R.S.M. who has done lay-out of this issue.

MAST Journal anticipates going on-line soon, and making the archive of our past issues available on our website, which is under construction. We go forward with your support and interest.

Yours,

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.
Editor, *The MAST Journal*

A Special Call

Mary Anita Iddings, R.S.M.

Old age is a special call and not everyone gets it. Who receives this special call is not for us to decide. But our part is to prepare for the call, accept it, and live it in its fullness. Remember old age is a part of life. It is up to each person to prepare and decide how she will answer that call. You don't want to be like the lady who died at age 40 yrs. but wasn't buried until she was 80 yrs. *Old age is meant to be lived.*

When the day came that I noticed I had less energy and my "body parts" began to demand more attention, I knew I needed to make a decision about my ministry. I remembered learning in my early days that a Sister of Mercy was both active and contemplative. Retirement for me then was not about going into Prayer Ministry because I could no longer do anything else but rather changing my FOCUS as a Sister of Mercy.

I had been interested in retirement needs for our senior Sisters for many years and had read extensively about retirement, aging and grieving. For two years, I had the privilege of caring for our Sisters in our Skilled Nursing Facility, Marian Care, and five years as nurse in Mercy Retirement Care Center. With this knowledge and experience, I tried to prepare myself to answer this call. My first question to myself was "What can I do now that I could not do when in the active ministry?" The answer gave me some idea of how I wanted to live in retirement. This was the beginning of planning for my retirement.

It is important that one not just "fall" into retirement but plan for it. When we think back to our school years we know that we had to plan and prepare for the high school, college and work we wanted to do. When it came time for retirement (another part of life), where are the plans?

One of the most important things in preparing

is to learn how to process losses in our life. Sometimes we don't recognize them as losses. When I talk about losses, I am not limiting it to a death in the family or friends. Rather, we experience losses throughout our life, for example, a change of job, relocation or illness. We may just ignore the incident. However, the feelings attached to that loss stay with you. Often rather than dealing with those feelings of anger or depression, they are projected onto someone or something else. Only by learning how to recognize and process losses will the negative feelings associated

with loss be converted to the positive realization that *every loss is the offering of a gift.* The challenge is to learn to look for the gift.

When is it time to begin to think of retirement planning? Given the importance of processing the losses that come with retirement, now is the time to learn that tool. The quality of a retirement will

depend in larger part on our ability to process loss. When people talk about retirement planning the first on the list is usually financial. That is important, however, no amount of gold will take the place of doing one's own interior work. A good question to ask is, "Who is responsible for my happiness?" The answer: Look in the mirror. We all can and must make our own choices of how we will respond to our old age.

I have learned that losses do not go away in retirement. This is an important reason to learn how to process losses. I once thought the hardest loss to process was the loss of my lifelong ministry. I was wrong. It is the losses associated with an aging body. These are irreversible. As the wear and tear on parts of my body lessen my control over the functioning of the body it offers me a gift. What greater gift can I offer God in my Vow of Poverty than the control I once had?

I think it is important to focus away from

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aches and pains and reach out to others. The computer has been a window for me. I respond to requests for prayers and send cards to Sisters who have lost family members, read and respond to information from WMW and the Institute, have computer pals, and of course play some games to help my brain from going completely asleep! Joan Chittister has a yearlong course on the computer, which I am taking. I enjoy frequent visitors, have a monthly prayer group who have been meeting since 2004, a wonderful Franciscan Sister Prayer Partner and I love to read.

I believe a Sister of Mercy is both active and contemplative. In retiring, all I did was change my focus from activity to contemplation, and so I feel that I am living in the fullness of a Sister of Mercy. Consequently, when I retired I asked my Community President to mission me to the ministry of prayer and *presence* and I think presence can be healing or otherwise. Retirement is simply a change of focus. Some Sisters said they were sorry I was suffering so much. Actually, I do have constant pain but it is not "intolerable." Yet, I am not "suffering." Suffering is in the mind and I want no part of it. What I have is just pain. I have deep love for Our Sorrowful Mother and when I think of her pain walking with Christ on the way through life and at Calvary, how can I compare?

Old age is a gift, a calling and still very much part of life. How blessed I am to have received this special call. ♦

Listen for the call.

Plan for new life.

Look for the gifts and

Live new life in God.

The Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology publishes *THE MAST JOURNAL*, begun in 1990, three times a year. Members of the Editorial Board are: Sisters Eloise Rosenblatt, Editor (West Midwest), Patricia Talone (Mid-Atlantic), Marilyn King (West Midwest), Aline Paris (Northeast), Kathleen McAlpin (Mid-Atlantic), Marie Michele Donnelly (Mid-Atlantic), Sharon Kerrigan (West Midwest), Mary Jeremy Daigler (South Central) and Mary-Paula Cancienne (Mid-Atlantic). Subscriptions and correspondence to Julia Upton, R.S.M., Office of the President, St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Parkway, Jamaica, NY 11439. E-mail uptonj@stjohns.edu.

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AGING GRACEFULLY INTO OUR FUTURE TOGETHER

Maureen Sinnott, O.S.F.

- Supporting and enhancing our wisdom leaders' quality of life through promoting independence and self-sufficiency.
- Assessing their physical, emotional and spiritual needs with them and responding in a timely way.
- Creating an advisory group of our sisters and associates with a background in health care to oversee the quality of care our sisters are receiving.
- Giving the advisory group the ability to give input into the hiring, evaluating, terminating and rewarding of staff in consultation with the sisters being served.
- Encouraging aging in place when appropriate.
- Offering alternative life-giving choices when a move is necessary to assure safety and health.
- Inviting them to the ministry of story-telling by sharing their life story with sisters and associates as a gift to us and future generations.
- Availing ourselves of the latest research and expertise on aging, Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.
- Providing levels of care, especially memory care, so that we can age gracefully into our future together.

Is There a Ministry for the Elderly in the Future of Religious Life?

Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M.

The hierarchical church believes religious life is vanishing, while Sandra Schneiders argues the demise of religious life is exaggerated. She maintains religious life will continue but will look different. According to Schneiders, congregations will be smaller and older. These factors will force religious to face the future the way their earliest forerunners did.¹

Like our founders, Schneiders insists today's religious are called to be prophets. Religious are compelled to identify injustices in society and move toward reform.² If Schneiders' theory is correct, what will this mean for our aging congregations? More specifically, will there be a ministry for elderly women?

This article will explore a few Biblical stories of prophetesses in order to identify some potential ministries for religious. Prior to analyzing these stories, I will investigate an American perception of the older generation.

America's Perception of our Elders

Most cultures reverence their elders. In some societies, the elderly serve as leaders. They are responsible for guiding everyone's future because they have more life experiences.³ Unlike other cultures, Americans regard anyone over 65 as useless and unproductive. However, surveys indicate people between 50 and 75 are at the height of their careers, and those individuals between 75 and 84 are relatively independent.⁴

Given this reality, Joan Chittister proclaims a great need for the wisdom of our elders. They have the authority to speak, she says, because of their vast experience. For example, Nelson Mandela established a council of wise men at 89. The council includes former presidents and international leaders who meet twice a year to discuss a variety of world issues.⁵

Mandela's group offers experience and guidance to current leaders and political figures. Chittister thinks generativity is the gift of the

elderly to the world.⁶ Examples of generativity are also visible within the prophetic stories of scripture.

Biblical Prophets

Prophecy in Israel was viewed as a gift of the spirit given to both men and women. The Biblical prophetesses included: Deborah (Jgs 4-5), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14-18), Anna (Lk 1:36-38) and Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-45). Using various approaches, each of these women spoke against the established way of life. I will initially examine the Old Testament and then the New Testament prophetesses.

Old Testament Prophetesses: Deborah and Huldah

The first prophetess to be analyzed is Deborah. The *Book of Judges* (12th century BCE) provides the backdrop for the story. The text recalls periods of peace and captivity as well as people turning toward and away from God. During this era, charismatic leaders emerged and Deborah was one of them.⁷

Deborah was a prophetess, judge and military leader (Jgs 4:1-5). She often sat under a palm tree where people came to her for advice. As judge, she held the highest leadership position before the kingdoms of Saul and David. Deborah dispensed justice and decided cases brought before her.⁸

In addition to her role as judge, Deborah led the Israelite army to victory against Sisera's troops. Her victory song revealed Israel's struggle against a foreign king who abused women (Jgs 5).⁹ Deborah's task was to seek justice for Israel but especially for women.

A second prophetess of Israel was Huldah. She was a court consultant for state matters during Josiah's reign (7th century BCE). Josiah was deemed one of the last rulers who worked to abolish idolatry. He instituted social change and

restored the temple.¹⁰ During the temple restoration, workers discovered a scroll (2 Kgs 22:11-4). The text claimed the Israelites were burning incenses before false gods.

Fearing God's vengeance, Josiah sent five of his leaders to Huldah to determine the authenticity of the document. Huldah confirmed the message, supported Josiah's reforms and predicted divine wrath against idolatrous worship of other gods (2 Kgs 22:15-20).¹¹

Learning of Huldah's decisions, Josiah made a covenant with God. He vowed to obey the commandments and committed the entire nation to do the same. Thus, Huldah at age 93 was able to bring about a religious revitalization.¹²

Huldah and Deborah were two women who pointed out the injustices within their communities. People came to them because they spoke the truth, and their actions brought about change. These women provide us with models for New Testament prophetesses.

The New Testament Prophetesses: Anna and Elizabeth

The stories of Anna and Elizabeth are told within Luke's infancy narrative. A focal point of these legends was the presentation of Jesus in the temple. The temple scene renders the background for the manifestations of Simeon and Anna. Both figures represented holiness in a period of deadness.¹³

Simeon was described as a righteous man seeking the consolation of Israel and was promised by God that he would not die until he saw the Lord. Seeing Jesus, Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph. He then announced that their child was set for the fall and rise of Israel (Lk 2:33-5). Simeon's words echo Isaiah's prophecy that a new day will dawn with the coming of the Messiah. The promised one will comfort and liberate his people (Is 40:1; 61:1-3).

A second witness to the coming of the Lord was Anna (Lk 2:36-38). She was a widow for 84 years and spent her days in prayer and fasting waiting for the Lord. Unlike Simeon, Anna did

not belong to the tribe of Judah. Anna was a member of the Asher Tribe from Northern Israel.

Richard Bauckham postulates the Asher Tribe originated in the hills of Galilee, but they were deported at the time of the Assyrian conquest. The Asherites may have been part of the Kingdom of Judah by the end of the Monarchical Period. By the second century BCE, they probably belonged to the Jewish community in Judea. Anna's ancestors were thought to be among them.¹⁴

Anna's name would support Bauckham's hypothesis. The Jews of Jerusalem tended to name their children after famous women rather than biblical figures. The name Anna doesn't appear among Palestinians until the fourth century CE. However, diaspora Jews gave their children biblical names.¹⁵ Anna's Hebrew name is translated Hannah. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Hannah was the mother of Samuel (1 Sam 1:1-28). Like Samuel, Anna spent her days in the service of the Lord.

Unlike Samuel, Anna was a centenarian. She married at 14. Anna's husband died after 7 years of marriage leaving her a widow for 84 years. Luke calculates Anna's age to be 105, which was the age of another prophetess, Judith (Jdt 16:23-24). Both women were centenarians with status and influence in the community.¹⁶ Anna used her influence to spread the word about the Messiah's arrival (Lk 1:38).

Simeon and Anna symbolized holiness in the midst of clerical and political corruption. Both prophets prayed for the coming of the Lord. Anna and Simeon both recognized Jesus as the promised one. Their stories are interconnected with another couple---Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk 1:5-18).

Zechariah, a priest, and Elizabeth were an elderly couple without an heir. Elizabeth prayed for a son and her prayers were answered. Her story parallels that of Hannah (1 Sam 1-2). Both women prayed for a son, and both sons were called by the Lord to serve as prophets (Lk 1:15-16; 1 Sam 3:19-20).

Elizabeth's pregnancy also connects her to her cousin, Mary. Upon hearing of Elizabeth's pregnancy, Mary went to visit her. When Elizabeth greeted Mary, the child leaped in her

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womb. A similar tale was told of Rebekah (Gen 25:22-5). Rebekah became pregnant with twins who jostled with each other. Being concerned, Rebekah consulted the Lord who responded: "Two nations are in your womb, two nations are quarreling while still within you; but one shall surpass the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23).

A similar prediction took place during Mary's visit. Elizabeth's son leaped in his mother's womb in the presence of his younger cousin (Lk 1:44). Like Rebekah's older son, John was destined to prepare the way for his cousin. Thus, Jesus would surpass John because his mission embraced the Jews as well as the Gentiles (Lk 3:3-19). The stories of Elizabeth and Mary are also the stories of John and Jesus.

Mary's visit ends with the singing of the "Magnificat" which celebrates her being chosen as God's agent (Lk 1:46-50), and the "Magnificat" links Mary with other singers of salvation. Hymns of praise and thanksgiving that benefit the singer and community were attributed to Deborah (Jgs 5), Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10) and Judith (Jth 16:1-17).¹⁷ Unlike the other women, Mary was the vessel of salvation.

Prophets in the New Testament were considered a gift from Christ. Anna and Elizabeth were elderly prophetesses who acknowledged the presence of the Lord in their midst. Mary is the constant thread running through the infancy narratives because it was her "yes" that made their prayers a reality. Each of these women provides contemporary religious with a prophetic model of ministry.

Contemporary Prophetesses

Like the Biblical prophetesses, today's elderly religious have a considerable amount to render the world. They are called to be prophetesses whose ministry is one "of enlightenment, wisdom and discerning of the spirits."¹⁸ Reflecting upon this

hypothesis, I decided to test it out with a few sisters between the ages of 80 and 92.

I gathered the sisters together and asked them to describe their current ministry. Several of them saw their primary ministry as one of prayer, while

other sisters saw their roles in a slightly different way. One sister said she tries to be a visible presence to others. Another sister says she provides a listening ear to a younger generation. Each of these ministries was duplicated by other elderly religious in a recent film, "Band of Sisters."

Throughout the movie, two Sisters of Mercy were highlighted. These sisters

lobby state officials to allow ministerial visits to undocumented prisoners.¹⁹

Like the Biblical prophetesses, each of these sisters heard her call to bring about change. Some sisters chose a path of discerning the spirits like Anna. A few sisters assumed the responsibility of leaders like Deborah and Huldah. Still other religious continue to serve as wisdom figures like Elizabeth, Huldah and Deborah. Despite their different approaches, all of these women endeavor to create a more just society.

Summary and Conclusion

We live in a world that allows injustices to prevail. Like the Biblical world, we are in need of prophetic voices. "Prophecy represents the power of freedom and newness of life in which God's word breaks in to speak in judgment on established modes of life and to open up new possibilities."²⁰ Sandra Schneiders believes this is the role of contemporary religious,²¹ while Joan Chittister says our elders must bring their wisdom to the decision-making table.²²

Biblical texts present us with several examples of elderly prophetesses such as Deborah, Huldah, Anna and Elizabeth. Each of these women found a way to bring about reform. Like the Biblical prophetesses, there is a ministry

"Prophecy represents the power of freedom and newness of life in which God's word breaks in to speak in judgment on established modes of life and to open up new possibilities."²⁰

for our elderly women in the future of religious life. Some of our religious have already assumed their new roles.

The challenge for each of us is to accept our prophetic call and find our own path in seeking justice for our world. ♦

NOTES

¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Prophetic Future Ahead for Women Religious," Conference at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana, 2011.

² Ibid.

³ Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years* (New York: Blue Bridge Press, 2008), 34.

⁴ Schneiders, Conference at St. Mary's, 2011.

⁵ Chittister, *Gift*, 36.

⁶ Ibid., 199.

⁷ Sara Buswell, *The Challenge of Old Testament Women* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House, 1986), 112-113.

⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 176; Denise Lardner Carmody, Biblical Women (New York: Crossroads, 1989), 27-29.

⁹ Richard Bauckham footnotes R. A. Horsey's idea that foreign kings abused women. See *Gospel Women* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 48.

¹⁰ Buswell, *Challenge*, 126-128.

¹¹ Ruether, *Womanguides*, 177.

¹² Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *2Kings* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1988), 283.

¹³ Alfred Plummer ed., *A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh, New York: 1964), 65; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981), 426-429.

¹⁴ Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 79-81.

¹⁵ Ibid., 92-93.

¹⁶ J. K. Elliott, "Anna's Age," *Novum Testamentum*, xxx no.2 (1988):100-102.

¹⁷ Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 54.

¹⁸ Chittister, *Gift*, 123.

¹⁹ Carol Schieck Schieber, "Film Delivers a Loving but Incomplete Portrait," *Horizon*, 37 no.4 (2012):37-38.

²⁰ Ruether, *Womanguides*, 175.

²¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Ministerial Religious Life into the Future," "Mercy Conference in Detroit, Michigan, 2012.

²² Chittister, *Gift*, 126.



May You Live To Be 120: Searching for Models of Spiritual Transformation in Later Life

Jane M. Thibault, Ph.D., OCDS

“May you live to be 120!” is an old, Jewish birthday blessing referring to Genesis 6:3, which states, “Then the Lord said, ‘My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be 120 years.’” The saying refers as well to Moses’ age at his death. If, on your next birthday, someone wished you 120 years of life, would you consider it a birthday blessing or a curse?

This is not a hypothetical question, for within the past twenty years, scientists have discovered that the biological lifespan of human beings—the number of years our cells are ‘programmed’ to continue dividing—to be around 120 years. We more often speak of longevity in terms of average life expectancy, which differs according to the group studied. This lifespan has been on the increase in this country since the early 1900’s. Biological lifespan, however, has remained constant. People in developed countries are fast approaching the ability to live out their lifespan and the fastest growing group of people are those eighty years of age and older. Catholic sisters are in the forefront of that group.

Older adults may share a birth date, but they are members of a very diverse population. Forty years ago, as a Secular Carmelite and a young behavioral scientist, I was fascinated by the potential for psycho-spiritual development as people aged. I often claimed that one of the reasons I became a clinical gerontologist was to surround myself with mystics! In my spiritual and professional naiveté I reasoned that the fulfillment of a life long-lived in harmony with God’s love would and should eventually result in what developmental psychologist Ken Wilbur discusses as “transformation of consciousness.” The Carmelite tradition calls it “spiritual marriage” and “transforming union.” I wanted to spend my life

with people who had been given the gift of union with God!

In 1981, fresh out of a doctoral program at the University of Chicago, I took a position as an Assistant Professor of Family and Geriatric Medicine at the University of Louisville School of Medicine. In addition to my teaching and clinical service responsibilities, I was expected to conduct research related to the aging process. My choice of research was also my passion—understanding the relationship between spiritual development and longevity.

The primary hypothesis of the research was that individuals who had sought God and had lived a life in close connection with God would find themselves in a state of “transforming union”—having and living the compassionate mind of Christ at the close of their lives. I wanted to find out if this were true. It seemed to be a very logical developmental progression and so I set about designing a research protocol that would involve in-depth interviews of people who were (1) known for holiness in their faith communities or (2) “hidden” to the larger community but identified by at least two of their friends, family members, or caregivers as being extraordinarily inclusive, generous, and loving persons. I created a detailed and lengthy questionnaire

that asked about their experiences with God, with their faith communities, and with others; and their sense of mission or purpose in life and their response to suffering. I also asked them to share with me their faith journey over the course of their lifespan.

The theorists influencing my choice of questions and the analysis of the responses were St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila. John’s *Living Flame of Love* and Teresa’s *Interior Castle* provided the descriptions of the states of spiritual marriage and transforming union I was looking for in older adults. At that point I wasn’t

I often claimed that one of the reasons I became a clinical gerontologist was to surround myself with mystics!

including the teachings or example of Therese of Lisieux, primarily because she had died so young and so little had been written at that time about her “mystical” life. In fact, P. Marie-Eugene, OCD stated years ago that “some hesitated to recognize in St. Therese of the Child Jesus the highest states of the spiritual life, because in her they were not accompanied and proven by the mystical phenomena that they thought to be inseparable from these states.”¹ John had died at 49 and Teresa at 67 in an age when the average lifespan was about 40, so they both fulfilled the requirements of being in mature adulthood. I considered Therese too young to inform my research.

For one year, I searched for people who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. It was a wonderful experience for me personally and I met some incredibly inspiring older adults, but none who seemed to fit the “mystic” category. At the end of the year, I had what I thought were few results and very little to show for the time expended. Not a single person fit the description expounded by John and Teresa. My initial conclusion was that out of the sixty people I interviewed, not a single person had come to experience transforming union. I came to this conclusion because no one seemed to be able to relate to such questions as “Could you tell me how you experience God?” or “Have you had any experiences when praying that seem out of the ordinary?” Often folks would just stare at me blankly, say “No” with a confused look on their faces and either change the subject or stop talking entirely. They didn’t seem to be able to relate to any of the questions I was asking.

This was very disappointing to me and, in discouragement, I dropped the project. I concluded that transforming union must be very, very rare or that I wasn’t asking the correct questions. Because I was working in a secular university, I just dropped the whole investigation, feeling that I couldn’t justify the effort, when I should be investigating something like depression or anxiety in later life--something that really existed. So the study languished in my file cabinet as an unresolved research question. It languished, that is, until I began an intense study of the life of Therese a few years later.

I had been asked to offer one of the lectures dealing with “Aging and Carmel” for the national Secular Carmelite gathering which took place in Louisville, Kentucky in the early 1990’s. Reluctant to share my earlier research experience, I was in a real quandary as to how to proceed. At about the same time I was asked to talk about the spirituality of Therese of Lisieux in a lecture series dealing with women mystics. There was talk at that time about Therese being made a Doctor of the Church and people who didn’t know her very well wanted to know why. I was the only Carmelite the organizer of the lecture series knew, so I was the logical person to try to explain why a twenty-four year old, home-schooled young woman who had entered Carmel at the age of fifteen and had just one book and a few letters to her name was to be awarded the title of “Doctor of The Church.” Accepting the challenge, with six months to prepare, I delved into Therese’s writings and the many commentaries about her life and spirituality with energy and intensity. What I found was totally unexpected!

First of all, I discovered the reason why my research on transforming union and elderhood had been a “failure.” I was looking at the wrong “model.” If I had used Therese as the model for spiritual development, I would have realized that I was surrounded by people who had grown into union with God. The difference was that Therese did not display the plenitude of mystical phenomena discussed by John and especially Teresa. As stated earlier, there had even been some controversy over the years as to her “status” in terms of mystical spiritual development. As a Carmelite, I should have known that these phenomena are not intrinsic to transforming union, that they are “not the fruit of the union of the soul with God.... [T]hese extraordinary favors could never, of themselves alone, be considered as sufficient proof of sanctity.”² But I was attracted to the more exciting and superficial aspects of union and thus completely missed the reality.

Theologians agree that transforming union is characterized by “perfect conformity to the will of God.”³ In this work he makes the following assertions about the transforming union: “In the transforming union we live in the world but are aware of continuous union with God.... We are

no longer attracted to sin.... The love or energy of the Divine can now manifest itself in everything we do, even our most modest activities.... We have a non-possessive attitude toward everything. We can more patiently accept trials. We appreciate nature more. We are interested in serving without compensation and have no desire for domination.... [T]ransforming union is the goal of the first part of the Christian spiritual journey. Despite its rarity, it should be regarded as the normal Christian life.”

Certainly, in her living and in her autobiography and letters, Therese exemplifies the basics, the essentials of transforming union with God. Her eighteen-month anguished doubting of eternal life did not diminish her sense of God’s presence and served as redemptive suffering for the spiritual welfare of others. Her doctrine of “The Little Way” is a spiritual discipline that is especially available to those who are experiencing the aches and pains and the small and large losses that inevitably accompany old age. After studying Therese I revisited my research findings and the spiritually mature older adults I had the gift of knowing over the years. What I have found is that, when one uses Therese as a model for transformative union, and when one looks at the lives of older adults who have lived long, faith-filled lives, transforming union may be not so very rare.

Examples are those who have over many, many years faithfully yet unknowingly lived Therese’s “Little Way,” those who have taken care of spouses, parents or other family members with debilitating diseases such as Alzheimer’s or people who have suffered the many losses of old age. One of the latter comes to mind vividly, a woman who was referred to me by a home health aide, who said she “saved” this woman for her last patient on Friday afternoons. The aide said that by the time Friday comes, she is usually ready to quit her job, primarily because of the verbal abuse she receives throughout the week from people who

need her bathing and other personal care services but hate the dependent condition in which they find themselves. They tend to take their frustrations out on her. The “Friday afternoon lady,” however is just the opposite. Even though she is bed-bound and totally dependent on others for her care, she is the most uplifting person on the aide’s assignment list. She finds that after caring for this lady, whose name is Anna, she is ready to continue providing service to the others for one more week.

When she was telling me about Anna, she was full of energy and said “You just HAVE to interview Anna.” So I did, and was just as physically and spiritually nourished as my friend. The following is part of what Anna shared with me when I inquired about her life and

her relationship with God:

”In the past my spiritual life was very complicated...As I look back on it now I realize that what was important to me was how I was *performing* for God. The emphasis was really always on *me and what I* was doing, even though I thought it was on God.

Now, in my very old age (94) I’ve given up all that performing stuff—probably because I don’t have the energy for it any longer. I can’t do very much any more and I can’t even think much, either. I forget a great deal. Now all I can do is look out at my little world—my house and cats and my dog and the people I hear about in other countries and the people who bathe me and bring me food and the sky and *everything* and I just spend my time loving them. I just look at it all and I love it. Even though my eyesight is bad, in my mind’s eye I see everything. It is all so very beautiful, even the bad things somehow get washed in the beauty of everything. I am so grateful for it all, grateful for ALL of my life...Somehow I feel that my looking and loving is enough for God— that that’s all God ever really wanted from me in the first place – to love what he gave me!”⁴

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I truly believe that Anna, who shared with me that she believes she is in the presence of God all the time--especially Jesus, is living in a state of transforming union. Like Therese, she has no evidence of ecstasies or other extraordinary psycho-spiritual phenomena. However, the way she looks at the suffering in her life and the loving way in which she treats others, is extraordinary.

I am now sixty-six and an elder myself. I have many bio-psycho-social-financial-spiritual life choices and decisions to make about how I will proceed to live to the age of 120! However, the easiest decision is to follow the spiritual call of later life, the call (to paraphrase St. Paul) to "live now, not I, but Christ within me." And I have many, many models to support and inspire me.

P.S. In addition to her many patronages, I truly believe that St. Therese of Lisieux should be named the official patron saint of frail elders.

Her "little way" is the way of Anna, a way available to all who are frail, who are suffering,

and who will soon find themselves in the arms of God. ♦

Notes

¹ Keating, Thomas, OCSO. *Invitation to Love: The Way of Christian Contemplation*. New York: Continuum, 2003.

² P. Marie-Eugene, OCD. *I Am a Daughter of the Church: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality, Volume II*. Chicago: Fides Publishers Association, 1955.

³ Thibault, Jane, PhD, OCDS. *A Deepening Love Affair: The Gift of God in Later Life*. Nashville, Upper Room Books, 1993.

⁴ Wilber, Ken; Engler, Jack; Brown, Daniel. *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*. Boston: Shambala-New Science Library, 1986.

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Habits of the Mercy Sisters Regarding Mind, Body, and Spirit: The Road to Well-being and Lifelong Learning

Kathleen McNellis Carey, Ph.D.

Abstract

This article examines the lived experiences of a sample of Mercy educators through the lens of John Henry Cardinal Newman's concept of liberal education. The qualitative research design aimed to identify how oldest old Mercy sisters perceive the experience of living in community and their teaching/learning background; how they analyze their sense of well-being; and what is needed for their continued life satisfaction. Major findings reflected the qualities of Newman's liberal education: an individual who cares about an active body and mind, is energized by new ideas and learning, sets and attains short-term goals, and is committed to maintaining positive social ties. Such an individual clearly exhibits resiliency and the ability to adjust. She has the strength to accept loss and manage change, remains committed to making a meaningful contribution in her community, and is at peace with the world and herself. These findings can guide those involved in providing students a liberal education, those professionals who work with aging populations, and those individuals entering the latest stages of life.

Introduction

In *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Cardinal Newman argues that a liberally educated person develops a habit of mind "which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom, or what in a former Discourse I have ventured to call a philosophical habit." This article describes the findings of a recent qualitative study on the life satisfaction of oldest old Mercy sisters in light of those dimensions identified by Newman. The study aimed to identify how this sample perceives the ongoing experience of lifelong learning and living in community; how they assess their level of well-being; and what is needed for life satisfaction at this late stage of life.

Major patterns emerging across interview texts reflected Newman's themes as described above, as well as his ideas on good sense, sobriety of thought, reasonableness, self command, and steadiness of view. Such an individual clearly exhibits resiliency and the ability to adjust. She has the strength to accept loss and manage change, remains committed to making a meaningful contribution in life and her community, and is at peace with the world and herself.

This article describes the sample as related to current research on this burgeoning age group, explains the patterns identified across texts, and argues that living one's life as the liberally educated person defined by Newman contributes to a level of satisfaction beneficial during the last stages of life. The findings can guide those involved in providing students a liberal education within the context of a Catholic institution, those professionals who work with aging populations, and those individuals who anticipate a long and productive life.

Participants – The Oldest Old

The participants of this study included 12 Mercy sisters age 85 and older residing in an assisted-living community in Chicago, Illinois. Statistics regarding increases in this population are stunning. During the next 40 years, the number of oldest old, those age 85 and older, will increase more than fivefold, with many countries, including the U.S., having at least 10% of their population in this age group. In addition, the oldest old age group in the U.S. has been growing at a rate almost 3 times faster than those age 65-84.

Clearly, the oldest old are an age group that neither society in general, nor higher education in particular, can afford to ignore. Yet until recently, most attention on the elderly has focused on those reaching 65 or living through their 70's.

However, those in the oldest old age group clearly face more challenges, having experienced more significant disabilities and losses. Dunkle, Roberts, and Haug remark that the oldest old are somehow fascinating, in part because they have outlived their projected lifetimes - they are *statistically dead*: they were born when life expectancy was 47 years, have doubled that, and most likely have outlived friends and family. While physical and cognitive losses are expected and documented, functional change in the oldest old is not necessarily accompanied by continuous decreases in all areas. In fact, Perls suggests that some people in their 90's are healthier and happier than younger old people. Peter Martin's research at Iowa State documented the significant emotional and physical stresses of the oldest old. Yet, he also discovered a strong sense of well-resiliency, drawing strength from within to remain optimistic.

Johnson and Barer also reported little change in the mood of the oldest old, in spite of significant functional declines. "Most survivors continued to express contentment and to perceive their health as good, and were able to sustain their morale and motivations despite decreased disability." These counter-intuitive findings warrant further investigation. Few studies have addressed both the practical issues of how community living is sustained and the theoretical issues about adaptation at the end of life. This study explored both the practical and theoretical issues related to the oldest old who are succeeding at adapting to decreased independence, while maintaining a strong sense of self and inner peace.

David Snowdon's long-term research project, often referred to as the *Nun Study*, adds further insight into the experience of aging and the findings of this study. His research team followed a population of 618 Catholic sisters over two decades tracking a range of physical and cognitive factors. His recent book, *Aging With Grace: What the Nun Study Teaches Us About Leading Longer, Healthier, and More Meaningful Lives*, not only documented the progression of dementia and Alzheimer's disease over many years, it also

found evidence of a profound sense of well-being among the population.

Snowdon concludes that old age, even for centenarians (those who reach or exceed 100), is not something to fear or revile, but "a time of promise and renewal, of watching with a knowing eye, of accepting the lessons that life has taught and, if possible, passing them on to the generation that will follow." Snowdon found that the Sisters of Notre Dame in his study revealed that old age does not have to mean an inevitable slide into illness and disability; rather, it can be a time of promise and productivity, intellectual and spiritual vigor, "a time of true grace". His work provides a foundation for this article's exploration of life satisfaction and the outcomes of liberal education including the *calmness, equitableness, and wisdom* described by Newman.

W. Andrew Achenbaum identified several research groups who have explored the dimensions of wisdom in old age and its connection to life satisfaction. The Baltes group in Berlin focused on wisdom in old age as a skill developed over time, "a software of the mind" that enables some elderly to learn skills that can make them experts at identifying critical issues and deploying appropriate tools for accomplishing a particular task. Monika Ardelt's work takes a slightly different approach, acknowledging wisdom in old age as a complex, elusive concept that is more spiritually grounded than pragmatic, universal in scope, unbounded by time." These views reflect many of the concepts originally set forth by Newman in describing the lifelong experience of a liberally educated person.

Other researchers have explored the concept of creativity in old age and its role in increasing one's sense of well-being. Bronte's 1993 study concluded the participants had the experience and wisdom to contribute. "The older decades had brought them a sense of increasing altruism. They were genuinely concerned about the needs of their communities - they wanted to see the quality of human life improve."

This perspective sheds further light on the lived experiences of the sisters in this study and on the qualities of liberal education that contribute to this level of fulfillment.

In order to understand the role of self-concept in successful aging and the personal qualities and

experiences that support the process in the oldest old, Pearlin argued that it made sense to go directly to the individuals and "ask them about the relevant features of their own lives and the meanings attached to those features." This study sought out the voices of oldest old Mercy sisters in community and listened carefully to their messages about the key factors contributing to or lessening life satisfaction.

Frameworks: Newman's Liberal Education and Gerotranscendence

One conceptual framework that guided the study was Erikson's life stage model of adult development, including the ninth stage added by Joan Erikson in 1997, *gerotranscendence*, a state in which one moves from a materialistic and

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rational vision to a condition characterized by peace of mind and increased life satisfaction. She notes Jung's theory of individuation in which the final stage is a rational process toward maturation and wisdom. During this stage, there may be a redefinition of time, space, death, and self. Clearly, *gerotranscendence* applies directly to the oldest old. While the "old old", those 75-85, may still be focusing on earlier Erikson stages of generativity or ego integrity, it seems the oldest old may transcend some of these issues and arrive at a final stage that "speaks to soul and body and challenges it to rise above the dystonic, clinging aspects of our worldly existence that burden us from true growth and aspiration."

The qualities described in this stage of Erikson's theory are reflected directly in John Henry Cardinal Newman's description of the liberally educated person. Newman speaks of liberal knowledge as one of first principles and relations rather than mere facts. He maintains that it involves seeing life steadily and seeing it as a whole. This perspective relates directly to the dimensions of maturity and wisdom of gerotranscendence. Newman describes that maturation process when he refers to individuals who are *dazzled by phenomena, instead of perceiving things as they are*. The oldest old, if they reach gerotranscendence, are solidly entrenched with an accurate perception of themselves and others. Newman says of the liberally educated:

He has too much good sense to be affronted at insults, he is too well-employed to remember injuries, and too indolent to bear malice. He is patient, forbearing and resigned on philosophical principles; he submits to pain, because it's inevitable, to bereavement, because it's irreparable and to death because it's his destiny.

This theme of maturity and grace flows throughout the interview texts of this study.

Newman also warns that without the maturity and calmness nurtured through liberal education:

It is human nature to be engrossed with petty views and interests, to underrate the importance of all in which we are not concerned, and to carry our partial notions into cases where they are inapplicable, to act, in short, as so many unconnected units, displacing and repelling one another.

Erikson also identifies the need to move out of the materialistic and rational into gerotranscendence where pettiness and 'being right' form the center of one's existence. Newman's words continue to reflect this same theme when speaking of the fully developed intellect:

It is almost heart-searching from its knowledge of human nature; it has almost supernatural charity, from its freedom from littleness and prejudice; it has almost the repose of faith because nothing can startle it; it has almost the beauty and harmony of heavenly contemplation, so intimate is it with the eternal order of things and the music of the spheres.

Both Newman and Erikson move to the description of a spirituality that resonates through the voices of the sisters in this study.

Newman's words also connect to Erikson's ideas regarding peace of mind and life satisfaction. In Discourse VII, he describes the liberally educated individual as one who can understand the perspective of others and come to *bear with them* even in disagreement:

He has the repose of a mind, which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home which it cannot go abroad. He has a gift, which serves him in public, and supports him in retirement, without which good fortune is but vulgar, and with which failure and disappointment have a charm.

An argument can be made that the full experience of a liberal education beginning in the university and extending throughout one's life open the human mind to the possibilities of gerotranscendence. As Newman maintained, liberal education implies action on the mind and a certain character formation that is individual and permanent, somehow connected to religion and virtue. According to Erikson and Jung, this type of experience would lead to the redefinition of time, space, death, and self at the very latest stages of life. The following section utilizes the voices of the sisters in this study to further explore the dimensions of liberal education and the experience of gerotranscendence.

The Findings

The goal of this study was to achieve an understanding of the lived experience of this group of liberally educated sisters in the oldest old category, especially in terms of their level of life satisfaction. Through analysis of the interviews, several themes emerged across all texts. As the themes were further reviewed, three constitutive patterns became clear. These three habits of the mind, body, and spirit reflect the dimensions of the liberally educated, as so eloquently described by John Henry Cardinal Newman. The patterns below reveal a holistic picture or the essence of the common experience of these individuals.

Habits of Mind

Participants focused on keeping their minds active in an unbroken cycle of growth. Each individual revealed a deep passion for lifelong learning and a sense of self-actualization at this stage of life. They not only pursue past interests, but actively seek new challenges and

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opportunities. Newman described this as "an acquired illumination, a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment, referring to the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us." One sister's comment reflects this commitment to lifelong learning:

We get up at six in the morning and we have time for quiet prayer. I have time to write. I do a lot of correspondence, and I feel that's kind of a ministry for me. It keeps my mind active in ways that other activities might not. I haven't conquered the computer yet but if I ever find that I need to correspond that way I am more than willing to learn. I hope they are patient with me.

Another participant reflected the same eagerness to continue to learn, stating:

At first I thought when I retired, what am I supposed to do with all this time? Well, I like to read, so I read a lot. And my nieces are very good to me – they gave me an iPad and now they gave me a keyboard for it. So, I'm working on that now. I like to try all the time to do things that make life better for me. I'm just glad they didn't give me a robe... I had to go to Nordstrom's to return the first one. I really appreciate things that keep me growing instead.

The participants are still willing to take risks and they do not fear the unknown. New experiences and new information are viewed as opportunities for growth. Yet, they are most aware that not all their peers share this openness:

I do know of some others who are lucky enough to reach my age and they just don't seem interested in learning anything new. I always said, the day I can't learn anything more, I might as well pass away. After all, I feel I have been guided on a path by God my whole life and with every turn, another pathway was opened. Why, I've been to every state in the union, and a lot of that just because I took advantage of the opportunities. I've crossed the ocean 5 times. I've been to the Holy Land. I may not be able to travel like that now, but I can still learn in many other ways. I'm still finding out that some things I always accepted aren't even true anymore. What if I hadn't stayed open, I would never even know that.

These comments represent a group of individuals who care about maintaining their quality of life by keeping their minds active and open to new ideas and new individuals. They continue to see and find Intellectual stimulation in new and lifelong interests.

Habits of Body

Participants' reflections also reveal the habits of the body founded upon good sense and moderation as well as an acceptance of reduced physical abilities. They seek to preserve their physical health as much as possible through activity and wise medical considerations and believe that these activities are essential to their continued relative good health at this stage of life. This care of physical self and others reflects the calmness and moderation Newman espoused. As one participant stated:

You know, I have a walker, I just got it yesterday. I can't move as quickly, I can't do as much; people can't get over how good my mind is, but at my age, I'm tingly – you know what – I tingle, by the end of the day when I walk a lot, now I'll walk a half hour or hour a day, when I walk a lot, around the block area, that's to keep my feet strong.

The texts also reveal a gracious nod to the passage of time and to the loss of some physical abilities:

I remember older people sauntering along and just wanting to get ahead of them. I laugh at myself now – they're waiting for me to get out of the way or to catch up. When you're younger, you want to get things done. Now it's difficult for me – I use a walker and a grabber to pick things up. I say to myself – Take your time, things stay where they are for a long while.

All participants commented on the structured activities available in their community that directly foster physical health and keep the mind active as well:

I especially love our exercise classes after breakfast and then another physical activity later in the day. We have to keep moving you know. Some of us have a harder time than others—but we all try.

This evidence of flexibility and coping reflects Newman's thoughts on the clear, calm vision and comprehension of all things. This ability acquired through a liberal education clearly sustains individuals during these latest stages of life.

Habits of Spirit

Participants expressed a strong sense of inner peace in perhaps the strongest and most prevalent pattern within the text of the interviews. Each reveals energy for the present and the future and has come to terms with the past. The present is satisfying and meaningful as measured by new standards. Participants now detach themselves from bothersome or stressful situations.

Key to this inner peace was the perception of old age as a period of growth and completion, a gift to be treasured. One participant stated:

What I've enjoyed very much is the wonderful opportunity for prayer to enrich my spiritual life, which maybe I neglected because of how busy we were. I've appreciated that opportunity a great deal. We have lots of opportunities for reading and reflection and I have very good conference discussions with other people – some more in-depth. I would say I'm very content.

Another dimension of this inner peace involves the positive attitude necessary to sustain it. One sister stated:

I think when I was younger even though I didn't express it, I felt more critical about things. That begins to drop off. I think it's maturity, don't

you...letting things go. You don't make judgments.

This theme was supported in all texts:

As events happen, I don't let them upset me like maybe when I was younger. I've an accepting attitude, there's that word ATTITUDE again. I don't think of this as the will of God. I don't think God directly plans anything in our life; he lets it happen. It's how you accept it, I think. You don't think, Why me? You don't dwell, like some people might.

None of these participants was pining away for the past. When they do look back, they appreciate the good things that have happened and are quite philosophical about the negatives and even the tragedies of their lives. This sentiment can be heard in another sister's comments:

I've enjoyed everything, yes, I've had a very happy, successful, comfortable life....some things have been very hard, I grant you, very hard. I can't tell you how many boards and committees have driven me to the edge. I've done a lot of that sort of thing and admit I don't miss it at this point. But what I feel now is a sense that I met those things head on and did my best. Even then, I had a lot of fun besides. Don't we all make our own fun?

Yet another participant commented:

I get content with our daily activities, the opportunities for prayer and reflections. I find it very soothing after all the pressures of getting papers done on time and I used to have meeting after meeting. I don't think I could do that anymore and I value the time I have now just to reflect...I think that is what I appreciate the most about being given these extra years of life – such a bonus, don't you think?

This sense of accomplishment can be heard in the comment of this 94-year-old participant:

Honey, I'm not bragging, but I am a positive person – I take each day as it comes and I try to remain joyful every day. Not joyful where I'm laughing, but in my heart I try to remain a happy nun.

This positive attitude provides insight into the acceptance of loss of control. One sister spoke honestly about a specific loss:

Well, I gave up driving two years ago when I came here. I was driving up until the day I came you know, but I got the feeling that they didn't think it was safe for me to be driving anymore – although I DID pass my driving test. But, I wanted to do the right thing you know.

Another dimension of Habits of the Spirit involves remaining a productive member of one's community. One especially interesting example of this quality is reflected in this participant's comment:

Well, my twin and I still have a lot of fun.

She's still teaching full time. We've done a lot with other people. I've been able to do a lot of counseling. I've had an opportunity, especially with experience in rehab nursing, guidance and counseling. I've been able to help a lot of people with problems. I think that helps you look at other people and you see that life isn't easy for anybody, you have to balance things and I feel that you are just given that gift to try to cope with whatever God sends you.

The peace of mind, wisdom, and connectedness described by the participants relates directly to Erikson's concept of gerotranscendence and to Newman's "repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad." Their comments reveal that they have accepted a certain loss of control, remain socially connected, and display the humanism inherent in the liberally educated person.

Profile Summary

A profile of one type of individual who survives to age 85 and continues to thrive emerges from the lived experiences of the participants of this study. The picture is one of a highly vital human being, committed to maintaining social ties, who cares about an active body and mind and continues to be energized by new ideas, who still views life as full of possibilities, and who sets and attains short-term goals. The individual has absolutely no regrets and continues to experience high levels of satisfaction with interpersonal relationships and with daily activities. Resiliency is a key personality characteristic and the ability to adjust one's stand of judgment realistically is clearly exhibited. The individual has the strength of character necessary to accept loss and manage change, and remains committed to making a meaningful contribution to society. This picture of an engaged and energetic person living fully in the present, open to what the future holds, yet at peace with the world and herself is a fitting

description of the experiences shared in this study. None of these participants was pining away for the past. When they do look back, they appreciate the good things that have happened and are quite philosophical about the negatives and even the tragedies of their lives.

This profile confirms the literature that indicates that the oldest old can and often do maintain vitality and a positive sense of well-being. Johnson and Barer discovered that these survivors not only maintain a sense of well-being but are likely to improve their self-ratings, apparently

transcending factors that undermine well-being, and attribute their positive feelings to coming to terms with the realities of very late life. They continue to find ways to overcome barriers and obstacles. These participants are able

to enjoy life, to share their spirit, energy, and wisdom with those around them, and continue to experience a high level of fulfillment and satisfaction in their lives. As liberally educated women, they have built upon the qualities Newman described as *"freedom, calmness, moderation, and wisdom"* – and are now able to enjoy the well-deserved fruits of that education.

Conclusion

Newman stated, "We attain to heaven by using this world well, though it is to pass away; we perfect our nature, not by undoing it, but by adding to it what is more than nature, and directing it towards aims higher than its own." The sisters who participated in this study demonstrate a keen awareness of this message. Their words reveal that they have developed a

strong ability to "use this world well," to add to the communities around them, and, in that effort, to draw others to the same level whether in the classroom or beyond.

Their expressions provide evidence of the freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom Newman espoused. As such, they provide a standard for those who seek to obtain and share the liberal education tradition. Martin Svaglic argued that Newman was seeking "a union of intellectual curiosity and achievement with the humility and charity of the truly religious man - a

humanism, that is, in the Judeo-Christian tradition." The stories of these Catholic women are told in that statement.

The message to those seeking high levels of life satisfaction throughout the years, even in the latest stages where loss of physical and mental abilities is inevitable, is

strong and direct - cultivate those habits of mind, body, and spirit that are the core of a liberal education. The message to educators at Catholic institutions also resonates - nurture that liberal tradition within each individual student because the benefits are life-changing and lead to a sense of fulfillment during every stage of life. Newman argued that certain liberal qualities could not be gained without great effort and could take a lifetime; these included "the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive, just estimate of things as they pass before us." As one Mercy study participant stated, "I thank God for the years I have been given to learn, grow, plant the seeds of love of learning in so many, and experience the joys of community. You ask if I am satisfied in life-I really could ask for nothing more." ♦

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In the Footsteps of Anna

Katherine Doyle, R.S.M.

She almost seems like a footnote in the story, a widow waiting on the Messiah. This woman known only to us as a holy widow named Anna provides a paradigm for our identity as women who seek the Holy One. In the scriptures, Anna is a faithful woman who lives her life rooted in God and engaged in temple service. Anna meets us in the latter years of her life, as an elder of eighty-four years the scriptures tell us. (Lk. 2:36-38) Upon seeing the child Jesus, Anna bursts forth in praise and thanks. She recognizes God is visiting his people and proclaims the presence of God among us. As religious women grappling with the challenges of growing older and smaller, what does Anna say to us?

Reflecting on the reality of Anna's life pushes us to look at the context of her times. Widows held a special claim on the Jewish community. They had no resources, possessed no voice. They were among the poor of God, dependent upon the compassion of the community for their sustenance. Throughout the scriptures, widows provide a model of those who are open to see the holy when it meets them. The widow offers hospitality to Elijah; the widow offering her mite brings forth the praise of Jesus for she has given her all. Jesus is moved to compassion by the plight of the widow of Naim. Anna belongs to that circle of women who place their trust in God and are alert to God's visitation. It is when they are most vulnerable that they are also most open. Could the aging of religious communities be such a moment? Could it hold within its reality an invitation to prophetic witness?

Browsing through the ever increasing books on aging, it quickly becomes evident that many focus on two issues: "successful aging" as the author conceives it to be and responding to the needs of the elders among us. Another set of works focus on how persons can avoid or delay the diminishment that is associated with the aging process. In spite of such abundance, it is challenging to find works that explore the meaning of aging, its prophetic task in the culture or society. As religious who are called to listen to

the voice of the Spirit in our lives, it is this latter question that invites our attention.

Henri Nouwen and Walter Gaffney point us in that direction. They assert:

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...When aging can be experienced as a growing by giving, not only of mind and heart, but of life itself, then it can become a movement towards the hour when we can say with the author of the Second Letter to Timothy: *As for me, my life is already being poured away as a libation, and the time has come for me to be gone. I have fought the good fight to the end. I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith.* (2Tim. 4:6-7)¹

To Nouwen and Gaffney, aging is a natural movement bringing us into the heart of life's meaning. They look at aging through the lens of a journey which brings us into the core of who we are and are called to be. That is not the way everyone sees the experience.

Since the 1980s apostolic religious congregations in the United States have experienced the dynamic of decreasing numbers of new members coupled with increasing longevity on the part of current members. The average age of communities has moved into the late 60's, 70's and, in some cases, 80's. An initial reaction to this movement was to double efforts to attract new members who would carry on the charisms and works of the group. On a purely practical level, the aging of religious communities is frequently seen as problematic.

The "Why?" question brings forth a plethora of responses. The dynamic of aging religious prompts discussion on everything from the style of community life to the habit, from our theologies to our social concerns. Sisters find themselves trying to explain and defend choices that were embraced in fidelity to the call of Vatican II. At the same time sisters wrestle with the possibility that some of those choices might not be serving the continuation of the community into the future. The existence of aging as "problem" which has the

potential to move communities to probe more deeply the essential elements of their lives, is sometimes overshadowed by anxiety about retirement, the ability to sustain ministries into the future and shrinking membership. Just like the widows of scripture, religious women ask: "Why is this happening to us?" "Is this the final era of our congregation?" "Who will come after us?" Each of those real but anxiety-filled questions takes us away from the mystery and opportunity of the present moment.

In his work *Toward a Practical Theology of Aging*, K. Brynolf Lyon explores the Christian tradition's understanding of aging. He identifies those insights as "(1) old age as a blessing, (2) aging as a process of growth, and (3) the religioethical witness of age."² Each of the themes overlap and become braided together in a perspective of aging as a gift, challenge and witness. While Lyon raises questions about the viability of these themes in contemporary society, he gives us three entry points for reflection on the presence of God in our aging process.

In addition to identifying the idea of aging as blessing, process of growth and witness, Lyon suggests that two starting points for reflection shape current discussion. One bases "successful aging" solely upon whether elders feel happy and fulfilled in their lives, an inward criteria, while the other perspective looks at whether the life of the elder is generative of life for others. Lyon reminds his readers that the traditional understanding of aging involved,

a profound sense of interconnection of the generations: the fulfillment of each was connected with, and required promoting, the fulfillment of others. The focus of the moral praxis of aging in all this, then was on the individual in relational context: in relation to that one Other whose purposes must be one's own and in relation to those many others whose lives form a part of one's own.³

The recognition of interconnection of generations reminds us the no generation lives unto itself. Each generation leaves behind a tangible legacy of word and deed. When the interconnection between generations is broken or weakened, the younger generation is deprived of paradigms and patterns for overcoming adversity, challenges and moments of crisis. In *Age-ing to*

Sage-ing, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi reflects that: "because elders are in touch with the traditions and stories of the past, they can transmit a spark, a living flame of wisdom, to help young people meet the challenges of the present and the unfolding future."⁴ Schachter-Shalomi goes on to point out that disconnected from the tradition, the younger generation remains rootless and lacks the accumulated wisdom of preceding generations.

The elders who fully live their lives provide a model of hope for others. Nouwen reflects on this witness of hope saying:

It is possible to describe the full maturity of old age and to capture some of the light radiating from those who experience the days of their old age as precious gifts? [sic] It is not easy, but maybe we can come close by speaking of the hope, the humor and the vision of the many who have grown old gracefully and carefully.⁵

Each of us know elders who epitomize such radiant witnesses. Each does this in a way consistent with their deepest sense of who they are in God's sight. At ninety-years-old Sister Marion Duquette, R.S.M., became an active partner in retreat ministry through creating sets of original Mercy cards for friends who were retreat facilitators to share with their retreatants. She captured the themes of their talks and summarized them through her poetry. Mary Monica Burns, R.S.M., moved from a rich and active ministry in education and community service to dedicate her life to providing homes for those in need of shelter. She re-trained and was a tireless advocate for affordable housing. Only a premature death ended her efforts.

In their late 80's and 90's, Sisters Margaret Helena Mullin and Mary Camillus Murphy teamed up to raise funds to rebuild a flood ravaged school in Kenya. Using their creative skills they knitted and crafted their way to the completion of the project. What these women had in common was their ability to be a blessing to others, to continue to grow and to witness to life-giving love. Age was no limitation to that ability. On the contrary, the manner in which they lived showed what life could be when lived with integrity and compassion. The elders mentioned were ordinary people but elected to use each moment of each day to be life-giving for others. They neither lived in

the past nor fretted about what was to come. They were present minded.

Joan Chittister sees living in the present as an important dynamic during our aging years:

The present of old age, the age we bring to the present, unveils to us the invisibility of meaning. Everything in life is meaningful—once we come to see it, to experience it, to look for it. Once we really come into the fullness of the present, then we cease to take life for granted. Life is now. Only now. But who of us has ever much stopped to notice it? We did what we did in all those other years because those were the tasks of life then. But the task of life now is, simply, life. What we haven't lived till now is waiting for us still. Behind every moment the spirit of life, the God of life, waits.⁶

When you know that you have little time left in life, all things become precious. Time becomes a coin of dear price. In the face of death, some focus on quality time with family and friends while others do their best to fulfill dreams long postponed. Pop culture's image of the "bucket list" captures this desire of the aging or infirm adult desiring to live out their hopes. Old and bold become partners.

The elders who inspire us are not self-focused. They are persons for others even in the face of their limitations, frailty and weakness. Using skills developed over a lifetime, seniors frequently begin to focus on social or political issues that impact the future of peoples and planet. Freed from the urgencies of young families, they devote their time, talent and resources to things about which they are passionate. Robert Atckley suggests that the latter years of life open us to explore the riches of spirituality and find there the impulse to serve others.⁷ This sense of being "for others" takes another form in many religious communities where the elder sisters are missioned to the prayer of intercession. This work of mercy

brings together the longing for intimacy with God and concern for others.

In earlier times, the elders of a community were responsible for passing on the myths, stories and richness of their people to the next generation. In part the place of honor they held was rooted in the community's realization that without that knowledge, the next generation would be impoverished. Technology has changed that reality but there are still truths which must be passed on from person to person, stories that encourage the young to pursue their vision. It is here that we find one of the major roles of elders:

What do spiritual elders contribute to society? Elders evoke our higher potential by widening our vision of human unfoldment (sic.). They contribute wisdom, balanced judgment, and enduring values over the past several centuries.

They serve as models for our own aging Self, enabling us to embrace the movements of our own life cycle with deepening hope and faith, rather than paralyzing fear. They affirm our basic worthiness, strengthening our will to live, our aspirations, and our devotion to ideals. In this way, they act as representatives of Earth's long-term investment in evolution and as guardians of the commonwealth of species fighting for survival in the natural world.⁸

Weaving these collective ideas together, what can we say about the possible movement of the Spirit in our shared experience of growing older. When today's senior religious were newly professed, religious women were the primary work force of the church. They provided a vital witness to the church's redemptive mission, created systems for education and healthcare that have provided vital services for thousands, built safe havens for societies most marginalized. We moved and aged in an atmosphere of influence, achievement and status. Idealistic, well-educated

Anna belongs to that circle of women who place their trust in God and are alert to God's visitation. It is when they are most vulnerable that they are also most open. Could the aging of religious communities be such a moment? Could it hold within its reality an invitation to prophetic witness?

and passionate, today's senior sisters embraced the changes of Vatican II with vigor and determination. Aging has not made such a population any less eager to serve but physical limitation has invited sisters to a new self-identity that weds being and doing together.

Woven together, what research and tradition tells us is that every society needs a group of persons who have walked the way to wisdom, a group that plumbs the depths of the spirit and finds there the meaning and impetus to turn outward in service. Such a group of spiritually grounded, mature elders provide a horizon of meaning for those who follow after them. They witness to the value of integrity and the vital role of self-giving. The involvement of so many sisters in efforts to preserve Earth, in struggling to find ways to hand on the legacy of mercy to new generations of leaders, in movements to end violence and to welcome the stranger, all confirm that religious communities have strong resources committed to what Schachter-Shalomi called the task of passing on wisdom and deepening hope. By the witness of their lives, they point others in the direction of authenticity, growth and hope. It is this understanding that prompts us to ask: "Is the aging of women religious at this time in history a channel of revelation to the next generation?" "Do our lives speak to the young of our world a word of encouragement, challenge and wisdom?" If we embrace this moment with such an understanding, will it release the energies that will draw others to seek the same holy path? There is a mutuality of need between the young and the aged of a culture.

The elders among us, our Annas, provide a witness that reaches out to the cultural hungers of our time, the hunger for meaning, connection and hope. Seasoned by years of active service, transformed through contemplative prayer and honed by the ups and downs of community living, religious seniors are a reservoir of wisdom. Perhaps that is the prophetic witness that God asks of us today. If so, then the challenge is finding new ways of building intergenerational connections that facilitate such a transmission of insight and learnings.

This prophetic task is vital in challenging the cultural primacy placed upon productivity, wealth,

comfort and youth. Senior sisters attest to the value of giving without expectation of return. The sister who is a wisdom witness shows us what it can be like to be the person God created us to be. It would be naïve to overlook the real losses and suffering which is part of the aging process but it is a disservice to look only at that dimension of our graying. Reflection upon both the call of prophetic aging as a movement of the Spirit among us reminds us that we live in the heart of the Paschal mystery. There is suffering and loss but there's also the promise of new life and freedom. Our traditional understandings of aging coupled with contemporary learnings from psychology and gerontology offer us new ways to look at our aging in the light of its meaning for us and for the world. It is a lens worth exploring. ♦

Notes

¹ Henri J. Nouwen and Walter J. Gaffney, *Aging the Fulfillment of Life* (Image Books, Garden City, New York, 1974): 14-15

² Brynolf K. Lyon, *Toward a Practical Theology of Aging* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1985): 35.

³ Lyon, *Ibid.*, p. 91

⁴ Zalmen Schachter-Shalomi, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (General Central Publishing, New York, 1995): 143.

⁵ Nouwen, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

⁶ Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully* (BlueBridge, New York, 2008): 204-205.

⁷ Robert Atchley, *Spirituality and Aging*. (John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2009): 148.

⁸ Schachter-Shalomi, *op. cit.*, p. 215.



End of Life: One Chapter in Life's Story

Patricia Talone, R.S.M.

Family members, health care professionals and pastoral care personnel often make the mistake of approaching those nearing the end of life as if the events and decisions they face are a distinctive part of the individual's sacred story, separate from all that has gone before. In truth, old age is just one chapter in a life narrative. Probing and understanding that narrative brings meaning, dignity and grace not only to the elderly or dying person, but to family, community members and caregivers as well.

It wasn't a terminal degree in theology, or even more than two decades working in clinical ethics that taught me this truth. I learned it as a friend, sitting with a man who was pastor and mentor to me during a formative time in my life. Monsignor H. was a stand-out from the first moment that I met him. In 1968, I arrived with four other sisters at the convent of a small, Appalachian town in mid-August in the midst of a scorching heat wave. Because I knew the convent had been closed for the summer, I anticipated all the work involved in opening a house. None was necessary. The windows were open, the house cleaned, the beds made, the refrigerator stocked. The people of this former coal-mining town generously welcomed the sisters to their home. After unpacking what little things I had with me (those were halcyon days!), I went to the kitchen to begin preparations for our dinner, when I noticed a wiry, white-haired man vigorously pushing a manual lawnmower in the convent back yard. Realizing that he had to be hot and thirsty on this blazing afternoon, I poured him a tall glass of iced tea and brought it to the yard. I introduced myself and asked his name, amazed to know that this sweat-soaked, servant-leader was the pastor, who had wanted our house to be just-so. We quickly became friends.

And our friendship grew throughout the years. I was transferred – more than once – to other assignments. He later suffered a debilitating stroke and moved to a retirement facility for

priests, where I was able to visit him regularly. Although he suffered physical limitations, he remained vital intellectually and emotionally. He read as much as he was able, listened to public radio, never missed a televised Phillies game, and re-formed close bonds with seminary classmates living at the facility. His sense of humor grew rather than faded in the face of diminishment, along with a deep-seated and evident prayer life.

One afternoon I received a call from the facility's administrative assistant, telling me that Monsignor H's friend and seminary classmate had died in his sleep the night before. She said, "You know what good friends they were. I'm afraid that Monsignor might feel sad or lonely and I thought a visit might help him." I went as soon as I could to be with him. As we talked, I asked him, "What does it feel like, Monsignor, to lose a lifelong friend?" I was clumsily trying to ask how he was, what did this mean to his life. He responded with a metaphor that I'll never forget.

**In truth, old age
is just one chapter
in a life narrative.**

He recalled his first year out of high school, when he was an 18 year-old engineering student at Villanova University. To get there each day he took a trolley that ran from his hometown to another city in the suburbs west of Philadelphia; the distance from home to Villanova was seventeen miles. He recounted that the morning ride was quiet, filled with last-minute reading and studying in preparation for classes. But in the afternoon, the young men just socialized, joking, laughing, and telling stories. He recalled the sense of camaraderie and enthusiasm that the young evidence so obviously. As the trolley traversed the western suburbs, classmates disembarked at each stop, waving good-bye to their friends. Because he lived at the transport's terminus, for the last few miles he was the only college student remaining. Looking directly at me he said, "I feel as if I am again the only one left, riding the trolley and waiting until I arrive home."

“Does that feel lonely or scary?” I asked because I truly wanted to know. “Not at all,” he replied. He explained that when the trolley stopped he had about five blocks to walk before arriving home. He recalled that it was usually dark by then, and often chilly. So he walked briskly through the town until he turned down his own street, looking ahead until he could see the light shining on his front porch. “I knew that as I opened the door of my home, I would be welcomed by the warmth within, by the wonderful smells of a meal my mother had prepared, and by the smiles and laughter of my family. And that sense of anticipation is what I feel now.”

Monsignor’s metaphor taught me, as no book or class lecture could, the power of story. I realized that early memories stay with one throughout life. Often only in later years, as one has time and inclination to ruminate over the past, over shared stories and traditions, can one recognize the richness and meaning of earlier experiences. In Monsignor H’s case, that memory of light, warmth and love had carried him through the South Pacific during World War II, through varied ministerial assignments and challenges, and through sickness at life’s sunset.

A narrative approach toward life should be part of our DNA as faith-filled Catholics. Sacred Scriptures, both the Hebrew and New Testaments, are replete with accounts that tell the deep story of who we are and who we are called to become. The gospels demonstrate that Jesus repeatedly used narratives and parables to convey profound truths to his followers, and thus to us. Sisters of Mercy, members of a congregation founded in Ireland, have been nourished by stories for generations. It is characteristic of our Celtic heritage. Often the stories about our foundress, Catherine McAuley, are so vivid that, as one person visiting Baggot Street recounted to me, “She seems to be alive still.”

What is the purpose of these stories? University of Chicago theologian, James

Gustafson observed that “Narratives function to sustain the particular moral identity of a religious community by rehearsing its history and traditional meanings as these are portrayed in Scripture and other sources. Narratives shape and sustain the ethos of the community.”¹ Oft-repeated narratives not only provide a basis for self-understanding as individuals and communities. Even more importantly, they enable us as individuals and communities to move forward, to assess our current situations and to make concrete decisions. They “function to give shape to our moral characters, which in turn, deeply affect the way we interpret or construe the world and events and thus affect what we determine to be appropriate action as members of the community.”²

Every one of us has different narratives in concert within our lives. These stories are not inconsistent, but similar, to a great symphony they may play simultaneously. In caring for the sick and dying, one must listen to each motif, recognizing the deep story of the believer, the personal story and the communal or familial story. Marianist theologian, Bernard Lee, of St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, repeatedly teaches about the “deep stories” that inform and give meaning to life. These are the meta-stories that provide a framework to all of the smaller stories that give one’s life a sense of both reality and meaning.³ When listening to

any life story one must listen attentively, recognizing that the parable or story as told carries its own meaning and significance. But listening more carefully to the way that the story is told, for the story beneath the story, can reveal its deepest meaning and evoke the strongest commitment from both the story-teller and his or her listeners. Keen listeners recognize that stories describe who we are, they shape who we are, they sustain us through the challenges we inevitably face, and they provide us with guidance for future decisions.

When one has a long-time relationship with the sick or elderly person, as I did with Monsignor

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H., questions to draw forth narratives may arise in a natural sense, with a modicum of ease. But, as parish members or pastoral ministers, we are at times called upon to accompany persons whom we do not know as well. A recent study and book by Canadian palliative care experts reinforces the fact that asking a terminally ill patient a key question may help health-care professionals and pastoral ministers to develop a bond of empathy with their patients and fellow life-travelers. Doctor Harvey Max Chochinov calls this the “patient dignity question,” advising care-takers to simply ask, “What do I need to know about you as a person to give you the best care possible?”⁴ The author points out that patient answers were as varied as were the patients. Some wanted time alone; others wanted someone present with them all the time; some did not want to eat; others hungered for life-long comfort foods; some wanted music; others longed to be read a treasured book or story. In each case the questioner learned key elements about the person’s sacred history and was able to tailor end-of-life care to the person’s needs, thus reinforcing the patient’s dignity. Furthermore, narrative-eliciting questions re-connect the patient with the whole of his or her life, helping the patient to experience the sunset of life as part of an organic whole.

Those of us called upon to accompany persons at the end of life all want to do something – and also want to do the right thing. We often focus on those areas where we feel competent and sure, focusing on the patient’s physical comfort and care. Does she have sufficient pain control? Is the bed angle at the maximum comfort level? Should the slides be open or closed? Can I prepare

her favorite morsels? While all of these things are important, they are only a part of the story. The best thing that we can do is to truly accompany the dying person, reinforcing his or her dignity by evoking and then truly listening to their stories, always keeping tuned to the story beneath the story. At these moments we bring comfort and sustenance to the sick person, while at the same time, bringing tremendous richness to our lives. We help to connect the person to the whole of life by remembering and celebrating the gift of life that we share together. ♦

Notes

¹James M. Gustafson. *Varieties of Moral Discourse: Prophetic, Narrative, Ethical and Policy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College and Seminary, 1988: 19. Gustafson delivered this talk at Calvin College’s Stob Lecture.

²Ibid.

³Bernard J. Lee. *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament*. New York: Paulist, 1993. Lee repeats the theme of deep story in his many books and articles. He has notably related this to religious life and charism as well in *The Beating of Great Wings: A Worldly Spirituality for Active, Apostolic Communities*. Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004.

⁴Harvey Max Chochinov. *Dignity Therapy: Final Words for Final Days*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012; 71ff. Chochinov is director of the Manitoba Palliative Care Research Unit and Cancer Care Manitoba. The text contains questions and sections applicable to those who provide physical and/or spiritual care to persons at the end of life.



Review of Mary Jeremy Daigler's, *Incompatible with God's Design* (Lanham, M.D.:Scarecrow Press, 2012) 216 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8108-8479-3; Hardcover \$67.50; Kindle/Nook \$42.00.

Margaret Susan Thompson, Ph.D.

Mary Jeremy Daigler's, *Incompatible with God's Design: A History of the Women's Ordination Movement in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church*, is the first comprehensive scholarly analysis of its subject, and is without question an admirable piece of work. Daigler provides her readers with a depth and breadth of detail that cannot be found anywhere else. She traces the roots of the women's ordination movement to origins that predate its emergence in the United States. She demonstrates conclusively that the movement is neither a product of the Second Vatican Council nor of activism by women religious, who were relative latecomers to its ranks. Readers—even relatively well-informed readers—will become acquainted with new foremothers (and a few forefathers) whose names, prior to this work, remained woefully unfamiliar even among specialists.

The preface of the book sets out the author's intent clearly:

It is a history, not a polemic or an apologia; its subject is ordination, not merely "increased participation" in the life and ministries of the church; it describes a broad movement, not merely the one organization called "WOC" [Women's Ordination Conference]; its focus is on the Roman Catholic movement only; and its setting is the United States, providing a national picture while including international and local groups insofar as they relate to the U.S. story. [vii]

With this, Daigler explicitly differentiates her approach from other recent works, including Gretchen Kloten Minney's passionate *Called: Women Hear the Voice of the Divine* (2010), Roy Bourgeois' self-referential *My Journey from Silence to Solidarity* (2013), and the 2011 documentary, *Pink Smoke over the Vatican*. Her account is broadly chronological, but not entirely so. It also is thematic and, while this may be a little confusing to some readers (it was not for this reviewer), Daigler helpfully provides a "family tree" or timeline as one of her appendices (187-88). The titles of her chapters are themselves

illuminative of her approach ("Braid," "Mosaic," "Circles," etc.), providing metaphorical and systemic contexts that are made explicit in each chapter's conclusion.

It is impossible to summarize a book like Daigler's in a short review, so instead I will mention a couple of its representative contributions. Perhaps most importantly, readers learn throughout the volume about the varied and sometimes incompatible approaches taken by advocates of women's ordination. Some studied theology, some wrote theoretically, some placed their analysis within the context of feminism, and others used pragmatic problem-solving and radical protest. In this, supporters of ordination paralleled the multifaceted approach of the woman suffrage movement, both in the United States and internationally—and Daigler is aware of the parallels. From the outset, Daigler makes it clear that she is writing about something that is amorphous—"more of a movement than an organization" (37): a distinction that is both important and perhaps unappreciated by those who may criticize her for not focusing more extensively on groups like the Women's Ordination Conference. Similarly, she goes to great length, especially in Chapter Three, to emphasize that women religious, while significant in the later stages of the ordination effort, were by no means there at its birth or central to its early development. This is an important corrective to a misplaced emphasis that may owe at least some debt to Theresa Kane, R.S.M.'s indisputably important address to Pope John Paul II in 1979 (reproduced in its entirety in Appendix C [185-86]), but Daigler notes persuasively that it is unfair to the many "laywomen" who laid the principal groundwork.

Perhaps this over-emphasis on sisters is because women—unlike men, who have the option of the secular priesthood—have only community and religious life as formally recognized loci of professional dedication and

"consecration" in the Roman Catholic tradition. [Yes, there is consecrated virginity, but the limitations of that status are too extensive to discuss here and, in any event, it is not ministerial in orientation.] Indeed, the stories of some of the early pioneers—women like Georgiana Putnam McEntee, Frances Lee McGillicuddy, and Mary Lynch—are implicit reminders that seculars in particular might find their journeys both isolated and isolating to degrees that some women religious may not appreciate.

Daigler does, and that is one of the strengths of her account.

Another strength is her discussion of lesser known groups within the movement, one of the more important of which is RAPPORT (Renewed and Priestly People: Ordination Reconsidered Today), which heretofore has received virtually no public attention. RAPPORT—primarily seeking ordination, for now, to the diaconate—is controversial even within the ordination movement itself, because of its reluctance to critique extant ecclesial structures.

While it can be inferred from various implications in this book that Daigler is sympathetic to women's ordination, she carefully balances her representation of the various approaches that recent advocates have taken: those seeking ordination (to the diaconate and/or priesthood) within the current Roman Catholic ecclesial framework; those wishing to be ordained in the tradition of apostolic succession but not necessarily in communion with the Vatican (the Roman Catholic Womenpriest Movement, Old Catholics, etc.), and those advocating a renewed priesthood that challenges current clerical, kyriarchal, and patriarchal Roman structures. More importantly—and potentially more revolutionarily—Daigler's approach demonstrates both the foolishness and the counter-productiveness of any systemic efforts to prohibit or sanction all discussion and exploration of the issue of women's ordination. She reveals both the longevity and complexity of the issue, the range of voices, which have been heard in the past and

which cannot be silenced retroactively, and the seriousness of purpose with which literally generations of advocates have pursued their cause. For the most part, she allows the historical actors to speak for themselves, placing them in contexts that helpfully illuminate their experiences, but not attempting to speak for them.

Incompatible with God's Design is not perfect. What book is? Two limitations need to be acknowledged. First is Daigler's understandable but sometimes frustrating decision to protect the identities of certain living individuals, especially some priests and bishops, who might face repercussions if their names were revealed. The other, less understandable, are the number of places where published works are mentioned without citation, even in the bibliography (see, for example, some on page 135), and other concepts—sometimes potentially important, other times

merely intriguing—also are unsubstantiated. See, for example, the claim that St. Therese of Lisieux's desire for ordination is felt by "some" to have been "unknown" to clerics who supported her designation as a "Doctor of the Church." [pp. 136-37] None of this is supported with evidence in this volume, either. A "common argument" in one place [91] and an intriguingly referenced—but unexplained and unsourced—"pumpkin prank" elsewhere [97] are similarly frustrating. The lack of specific references, especially as the account approaches the present day, may sometimes be understandable but are nonetheless vexing in a volume so evidently well-researched and otherwise well-documented.

Still, these are relatively minor issues. It must be emphasized that Jeremy Daigler's, *Incompatible with God's Design* really is a remarkably comprehensive, substantial and, yes, dispassionate piece of scholarship. As such, it no doubt will stand as the work on the subject for quite some time to come, and will prove of interest to scholars and general readers seeking to learn about a movement that has been and will continue to be of indisputable significance for contemporary American Catholics. ♦

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of the issue of women's
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Discussion Questions

(Iddings) Sister Mary Anita writes about the transition from her prior life as a nurse, administrator and counselor, to a less externally active phase of her life now. She describes the alternative activities she has developed to give her life shape and meaning in the present, and about her movement into her senior years as a conscious choice. How would you answer the question she posed to herself: “What can I do now that I could not do when in the active ministry?”

(Carey) No matter your age, what evidence do you see in your actions that you are developing habits that contribute to healthy aging: Taking interest in new ideas, setting and accomplishing short-term goals, keeping up relationships with friends and family, accepting loss, managing change, making some contribution you feel is meaningful, practicing peace with yourself and peace with the world?

(Doyle) Given your personal history and gifts, what gives you a sense of meaning in your life now: Aging as a blessing, a process of growth, or as a record and witness to your ideals? What do you feel in the following list is part of your personal legacy? Loyal service to the Church, earnest prayer for others, overcoming adversity, telling stories that inspire younger people to meet life’s challenges, living in the present, your interest in social and political issues that impact society?

(Kerrigan) If you are retired from what you used to do, and you were asked to describe your own ministry, what would be the highlights? Prayer for others, being a visible presence in visiting and talking with others, being a listening ear to the younger generation, being an agent of change for a more just society? With what biblical woman do you identify in your own personality—Deborah, Huldah, Anna, Elizabeth or Mary? Are there other scriptural passages that inspire you at this point in your life?

(Talone) If you were asked by caregivers to provide their best service to you, what would you ask for? When you took care of others, how did you tailor your actions to what you knew would please them, ease their discomfort, and respond to their individual needs and preferences?

(Thibault) What is your definition of “spiritual transformation”? What persons provide you examples of spiritually enlightened, spiritually inspiring and consoling presences in your life—among either the living or the deceased?

Contributors

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Katherine Doyle, R.S.M., (West Midwest), currently serves as pastoral associate and Director of Adult Formation for Holy Spirit Parish in Sacramento, California. A native Sacramentan, Katherine holds a B.A. in history and M.A. in educational administration from the University of San Francisco, and an M.A. in liturgical studies from St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota. She served in community leadership from 1994-2004 and was Director for Mercy Center in Auburn, California, and has done retreat work and spiritual direction for twenty-five years. Community archivist and historian, Katherine is author of *Like a Tree by Running Water: The Story of Mary Baptist Russell*.

Mary Anita Iddings, R.S.M., (West Midwest) graduated from St. Mary’s College of Nursing and earned a B.S.N. at University of San Francisco. She served in positions of nursing service administration and nursing education, and established a licensed vocation school at St. Mary’s Hospital in San Francisco. While serving on the California Board of Vocational and Psychiatric Services, she established the first licensed vocational school in a penal institution—at San Quentin Prison in northern California. She served as R.N. at Mercy Retirement and Care Center in Oakland, and at Marian Care Center in Burlingame in skilled nursing. She was counselor at Women’s Recovery Association in Burlingame. Mary Anita was a liaison (now called personal contact) for 12 years. After her recent retirement, she is living at Marian Life Care Center in Burlingame.

Sharon Kerrigan, R.S.M. (West Midwest), holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Foundation, a D.Min. from Chicago Theological Seminary, and an M.A. from Loyola University in Chicago. She has been an adjunct professor of social science and religious studies at St. Xavier University, as well as administrator in college and university settings. She served for some years as system Director of Mission and Spirituality for Provena Health and Provena Senior Services. She is currently assistant administrator at Mercy Convent in Chicago, and involved in the practicalities of construction of the retirement center for Sisters of Mercy. She acts as a personal contact for West Midwest sisters, and serves on the Editorial Board of *The MAST Journal*.

Patricia A. Talone, R.S.M. (Mid-Atlantic) is Vice-President of Mission Services for the Catholic Health Association in the U.S.A., located in St. Louis, Missouri. Prior to joining CHA, she served as VP for mission services and ethicist for Unity Health in St. Louis, a subsidiary of the Sisters of Mercy health system. She holds a B.A. from Gwynedd-Mercy College, an M.A. from St. Charles Seminary in Philadelphia, and a Ph.D. in theological ethics from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her dissertation was published as *Feeding the Dying: Religion and End of Life Decisions* (Peter Lang, 1996). She served as associate professor of humanities from 1988 to 1997 at Gwynedd. Presently, she serves on the board of the Mid-America Transplant Services. She served more than ten years on the board of the National Catholic Aids Network. She has authored numerous articles in health care and theological journals. She lectures both nationally and internationally on mission and health care ethics. She has received academic awards and two honorary doctorates—from University of Scranton and from Misericordia University. She also serves on the Editorial Board of *The MAST Journal*.

Jane M. Thibault, Ph.D., OCDS, is emerita clinical professor of geriatrics and gerontology in the Department of Family and Geriatric Medicine at the Medical School of the University of Louisville, Kentucky. She taught medical students and residents there for 32 years, as well as providing clinical services in the Geriatric Evaluation and Treatment Unit. She has a small private practice counseling middle-aged and older clients. She designed a restraint-free chair for the elderly and is president of the company that manufactures them, Eld-Arondak, Inc. Dr. Thibault is also adjunct professor at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary where she teaches “Pastoral Responses to Aging.” She holds a B.A. in English from Salve Regina University in Rhode Island, an M.A. in counseling from Chapman University, an M.S. in Social Work from the University of Louisville, and a Ph.D. in clinical gerontology from the University of Chicago. She is married and has two granddaughters. She has been a secular Carmelite for 45 years. With Harvard professor Robert Weber, she shares a website “Contemplageing.com.” Her publications include two books: *Understanding Religious and Spiritual Aspects of Human Service Practice* and *A Deepening Love Affair—The Gift of God in Later Life*.

Margaret Susan Thompson, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of history, political science, religion and women’s studies at Syracuse University in New York. She holds an A.B. from Smith College, and received her Ph.D. in U.S. History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has written extensively on the history of American women religious. She is an Associate of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan and has made a presentation on “A Nun’s Life,” the web-blog and program sponsored the IHM’s. Her publications include “Women, Feminism and the New Religious History: Catholic Sisters as a Case Study.” Her research interests include Catholic sisters in American history and politics, and the Americanization of Catholic women religious. This review is her second contribution to *The MAST Journal*.



MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

MAST, The Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching and administration; and to provide a means for members to address issues within the context of their related disciplines.

MAST has been meeting annually since then, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Aline Paris, R.S.M., currently serves as MAST'S Executive Director. MAST will hold its next Annual Meeting at St. Raphaela Center, Haverford, PA, June 14-15, 2014. Members act as theologians in the Church and carry on theological work in their respective disciplines and ministries. They also seek to be of service to the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

For information on becoming a member and being added to MAST's mailing list, contact the association's Executive Director, Aline Paris, R.S.M. by e-mail at aparis@csm.edu or by mail at College of St. Mary, 7000 Mercy Road, Omaha, NE, 68016.

Dues can be paid by check, payable to MAST and sent to association Treasurer, Marilyn King, R.S.M., The Laura, 1995 Sam Browning Road, Lebanon, KY, 40033-9162. E-mail mheleneking@windstream.net.

Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have, over the years, taken on responsibility to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., currently serves in that capacity.



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