


Navigating the transitions of aging

A spiritual direction perspective

Ardith Frey

Years ago I accompanied my parents to visit a relative in a long-term care home. We found her in bed, quite withdrawn and difficult to draw into conversation. She was unhappy about her care and generally with needing to be where she was. After some time with her, we went down the hall

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to see another acquaintance. This woman was sitting in her chair and warmly welcomed us. While having limited eyesight, she had positive comments about her care and expressed gratitude for our visit. The contrast was vivid, and ever since I have carried the question, *How can I develop habits and attitudes that will help to navigate aging with a positive outlook?* At the time, I was pursuing a Master

of Divinity at Canadian Mennonite University on a part-time basis alongside congregational ministry, and I recall the seminar leader, Dan Epp-Tiessen, in a discussion about character-based theologians, making a comment along the lines of this: “We do not prepare for adversity in the instance we experience it; we prepare by the habits and character we develop day by day over time.” In this article, I explore what kinds of habits, spiritual practices, and perspectives may help us navigate the transitions of aging over a lifelong journey.

But first, let me offer a brief description of what I bring to this discussion, including some of the transitions I have experienced. I am a young senior, retired for eight years after twenty years of congregational ministry. In retirement I am engaged in a small spiritual direction practice and in hospice volunteering, among more personal pursuits. Prior to congregational ministry, I worked for Mennonite Central Committee over a fifteen-year period in three different African countries and in Winnipeg. After fifteen years in Winnipeg, our family moved back to southern Ontario largely to be closer to aging parents following the death of one of

them. Two more parents died in the following year, and five years later my husband died from a malignant brain tumour.

It may also be helpful to touch briefly on a definition of spiritual direction (SD). While the more classic area of focus for SD pertained to seeking advice regarding spiritual practices, there is currently a broader understanding that involves fostering an awareness of God's presence with us in all spheres of life. I understand SD as a ministry of prayerful listening for underlying questions or themes related to the directee's framework of meaning and experience of God within the stories they share.

Transitions through the life journey

In the editorial to this issue of *Vision*, Jane Kuepfer and Andy Brubacher Kaethler define aging in terms of *change* that comes with time. Here I expand on this to include the notion of *transitions* that include several phases, each with their own inner work. We experience transitions throughout life, and learning to negotiate earlier ones can give us the resiliency to know we can navigate the later transitions of aging. While not all transitions will carry easily identifiable phases, they will likely all involve some form of acceptance that something is coming to an end, a period of disorientation, and a new beginning—the classic stages first identified by William Bridges.¹ Sometimes these phases are easier to see in retrospect.

Marjory Zoet Bankson adds some helpful components to the discussion of aging from an SD perspective.² Bankson breaks Bridges's three stages of transitions into smaller steps, while identifying tasks for each part of the transition as well as accompanying spiritual practices. For Bridges's *ending* stage, Bankson adds the steps of (1) *release* (letting go of vocational identity), with the spiritual practice of *gratitude*; and (2) *resistance* (feeling stuck), with the spiritual practice of *silence* (time for reflection). For Bridges's stage of *disorientation*, or a neutral zone, Bankson adds the steps of (1) *reclaiming* (looking back to re-claim gifts), with the spiritual practice of *tracking dreams*; (2) *revelation* (forming new identity for the future), with the spiritual practice of *writing*; and (3) *crossing point* (moving from stagnation to generativity), with the spiritual practice of *discernment* (or forming a clearness committee). And, finally, for Bridges's period of *new beginning*, Bankson adds the steps of (1) *risk* (beginning again with new vision), with

1 William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1980).

2 Marjory Zoet Bankson, *Creative Aging: Rethinking Retirement and Non-Retirement in a Changing World* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2011).

the spiritual practice of *developing a “rule of life”* (vision statement); and (2) *relating* (finding new structures, creating community), with the spiritual practice of forming *intentional community*.

I illustrate negotiating these phases of transition with a personal story about a major decision. As I approached my sixtieth birthday with the keen awareness that I would be outliving my husband who had passed at age fifty-nine, the realization that life can be short hit home, making me ex-



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amine priorities for my remaining years. While engaged in a vocation I loved, I yearned for a more spacious rhythm of life not as defined by the deadlines of weekly worship planning, preaching, pastoral care, and other ministry tasks. I longed for more time to spend with my children as well as for reading, contemplation, and creative pursuits. And so began a year of discernment with my spiritual director and financial planner about taking an early retirement. In this time I looked back over previous transi-

tions in my life, some of which had felt risky at the time, recalling how these decisions were guided by trusting an inner call and how God was faithful in providing the needed resources in all of these transitions. I was also able to see in retrospect how much I had learned and grown through these new experiences. This review gave me the assurance to let go of security in order to step out in faith once again.

After announcing my decision to retire to the congregation, I worked at ending well. One of my last commitments was to speak to the seniors' group. Recognizing the wealth of wisdom in that group, I decided to focus on life transitions, giving some examples from my own life before inviting them to discuss in table groups and then report on some of the transitions they had experienced, along with life lessons that arose.

Some described moving to a new country, province, city, or form of housing. Others described becoming empty-nesters or returning to work after raising kids. Others described the death of a loved one (child, spouse, or friend) or illnesses and diminishing strength and physical abilities that accompany aging. Still others described retiring from a fulfilling occupation. Life lessons included trusting God in the midst of changes, enjoying the gifts that accompany new life stages, taking time to process

the grief that accompanies loss, focusing on finding good closure and moving forward without regrets, and listening to the body as it changes. In general, there was a sense that clarity about change often comes after the fact rather than in the midst of it.³

With leaving the role of pastor, I experienced the unease that stepping into a vacuum of a yet-to-be-determined role and identity entails. My spiritual director was especially important during this time in reminding me that I was following a new calling that required trust and that this step into the “wilderness” was spiritually formative and would eventually bear fruit and new direction. I heeded the advice of other retirees to stay in this vacuum for a while—not to be too quick to pick up volunteer roles since it was easy to get as busy after retirement as before. I knew I would need companions on this journey, and eventually a group of newly retired women came together. Together we explored books on aging and spirituality and shared on these themes from our own lives. This group became—and continues to be—a place of trust and belonging. After a while I began to imagine how I might use gifts that had previously given meaning in new ways, with the guidance of a “rule of life” I wrote for helping to identify priorities for involvements and balance. While the middle, murky phase of transition was uncomfortable at times, in hindsight I have not regretted the decision to retire, and I continue to work at aligning involvements with priorities.

Spiritual practices for navigating the transitions of aging

Margaret Silf, who writes from an Ignatian perspective, uses the term *inner compass* to describe how we can find true readings for the directions we want to go.⁴ Silf discusses this within a framework of concentric circles depicting the different parts of our outer and inner landscape, with the outermost circle representing the *where* of our given circumstances over which we have little control, a middle circle representing *how* we experience and respond to events over which we have some choice, and an innermost circle representing *who* we are in which we get in touch with God and our true identity. It is especially in the inner circle that we find our bearings for negotiating changes in the outer circles. Silf also talks about character and habits—how choices we make contribute to making us who

3 This paragraph summarizes notes from the table group discussion at Waterloo North Mennonite Church, May 8, 2013.

4 Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1999).

we are, how “choices turn into habits and habits become character.”⁵ Here I describe spiritual practices or habits that can help to shape our character and inform how we respond to life circumstances and transitions. The following spiritual practices are not an exhaustive list but are gleanings from my own life as well as observations from spiritual direction and hospice work. While these practices can apply to all stages of our life journey, numerous authors comment how it is in the second half of life that we are more ready for the journey inward.

Spiritual guides. Having someone listen prayerfully to our stories and questions is critical for understanding them and getting in touch with our inner longings and fears. While telling our stories to a trusted confidant who offers compassionate presence, perceptive questions, and observations is helpful to seeing new elements, including how God is present within them, I also believe that hearing ourselves tell our stories can reveal things we didn’t see before. In my experience it is helpful to engage with a guide who accompanies us over a period of time that is long enough for trust to build, allowing us to go deeper, and provides the perspective to see repeated themes or shifts and movements in our story, helping us to see the contours of our journey more clearly.

Peer listening companions. We can also benefit from a small group of trusted peers who may be on a similar journey. In my story this was a retired women’s group, but it could be a book club, a prayer group, or some other small group where personal sharing is encouraged and “holding the space” for each other’s sharing is practiced. Peer travelers can remind us that we are not alone, that others care and understand some of what we are experiencing. While it may not be as intimate, we can also experience a sense of community and empathetic understanding in larger peer groups such as the seniors’ group described above, where faith and life stories are frequently shared.⁶

Faith community and practices. Participating in a faith community can also shape us in ways of which we may not be consciously aware. Hearing Scripture read and reflections on it shared help to situate our personal stories within a larger narrative. Encountering God through Scripture,

5 Silf, *Inner Compass*, 2.

6 Storytelling has come up frequently in this article. For a fuller discussion on the significance of storytelling and aging, see William L. Randall, *In Our Stories Lies Our Strength: Aging, Spirituality, and Narrative* (self-published, 2019).

hymns, and prayers puts us in touch with our inner *who* circle and provides an avenue for expressing a range of praises, longings, and laments. Experiencing these practices in community reminds us of our need for

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one another to support each other both spiritually and also in practical ways. Literature supports the observation that persons who are part of faith communities or have personal spiritual practices are often more resilient in facing crisis. This is true across different faith traditions, as I have had the opportunity to experience in hospice work.

Our personal spiritual practices beyond our communal worship can also shape and equip us with resources for navigating the journey. Besides the more

traditional practices of personal Scripture reading and prayer (sometimes using prayer books or other guides such as lectionary calendars), there are also more contemplative forms of prayer that many find helpful, such as centering prayer, journaling, praying with icons or art, poetry writing, listening to music, and nature walks.

Cultivating acceptance and gratitude. One of the premises undergirding the hospice movement is that persons receiving care and supports have accepted that they are on a palliative journey. While it can be difficult to accept such a diagnosis, doing so seems to provide clarity for how they will live their remaining days and allows their energy to go into unfinished life tasks and quality time with loved ones rather than resisting what is happening to them. One of my clients would speak honestly about the difficult symptoms of her illness and then go on to say, “Oh well, what can I do?” I saw this not as a statement of resignation but rather as one of acceptance. I would remind her that while she did not have a choice about her diagnosis, she did have a choice about how she responded to it. I consistently saw her choose to focus on things that brought her enjoyment, such as watching the hummingbirds at her feeder or experiencing visits from her grandchildren. I saw how she would end every conversation with words of thanks and appreciation. My husband also demonstrated acceptance by embracing his palliative journey as a pilgrimage rather than a

“battle with cancer,” and his acceptance and openness set the stance for the rest of us as we journeyed with him.

Gratitude seems to open our eyes to the gifts around us and helps us to live more fully and experience life from a more expansive place. I am personally grateful to the folks I have accompanied through hospice for demonstrating that the lifelong practices we have nurtured, along with the support of loved ones and caring professionals, can give us the comfort, peace, and equanimity we need to end well. I am also grateful to the folks I accompany through spiritual direction and to my own spiritual director for the reminder of the importance of listening carefully to our own stories. And I am most grateful to God who accompanies us throughout life and beyond death.

About the author

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