# Finding meaning in old age

Cynthia Brubacher Noel

I was blessed to have my grandma—and her wisdom, faith, and humor—in my life until she was ninety-four-and-a-half years old. When she was eighty-nine, having already lost her first husband and many loved ones, and being a woman of deep faith, she longed to rejoin them in the presence of God. However, being used to trusting God's ways for her life, she confided, "At this stage, my job is to be ready to go but willing to stay if that is what is asked of me." Five years later, her patience was tested as pain and debilitation overtook her days, and she began to voice the plaintive question of so many others in this period of old age: *Why am I still here?* Having lived a life of service and care for others, she was struggling to find meaning and purpose in her growing state of helplessness and suffering.

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For those who tend to the spiritual care of older people, encountering this state of melancholy is not uncommon. While the experience of aging is certainly affected by health, financial comfort, relationships, and life experiences, many people from all walks of life utter such questions as these: *Has my life mattered? Were my contributions worthwhile? Do my remaining days count for anything?* Rather than eliciting stumbling words of empty reassurance, these questions can begin a rewarding process of spiritual exploration.

Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, viewed life's purpose as a process of meaning making that did not merely look inward but transcended the self. Frankl believed that meaning could be found through what one contributes or creates; through what one receives from the world in the experience of beauty, truth, and loving intimately; and, finally, through the attitude one takes toward an unalterable situation,

even if it is painful or results in death.[1] Within this framework, a spiritual care provider (SCP) or pastor can facilitate the meaning-making journey.

## Finding meaning through service

For older adults nearing the end of their lives, loss has become one of the primary themes in their stories. As with my grandma, they have lost loved ones, their homes and belongings, often some physical abilities, their work and hobbies, which represent their ability to create and contribute, and their independence. In the face of so much loss, with no hope for recovering their previous state, it is no wonder people may begin to question the meaning of their current existence. As they experience the limitations of life, they are forced to reckon with their humanity and mortality. In this task, Frankl claims that, even in the face of unavoidable pain, suffering, or death, we are all still responsible for our attitudes—for how we choose to respond and find meaning in our circumstances—and this becomes part of the calling of old age.[2]

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For people of faith, like my grandma, the source of meaning in the final years of life is rooted in spiritual traditions and devotion to God, and here they discern their continued call to serve God and others. Older adults can show hospitality and love to those who tend to them. They can provide encouragement and a listening ear to caregivers, and through their own need they cultivate in caregivers the spiritual fruits of patience, kindness, and gentleness. By graciously receiving care with humility and trust, they participate in others' fulfillment of their vocation, and in return older adults experience the love and care of God through their caregivers. Vocation at this stage in life is deeply rooted in interdependence and intergenerationality.

In a society that overvalues productivity, we often miss the God-given gifts offered by older adults. I recall my later visits with my grandma where

1 Melvin A. Kimble and James W. Ellor, "Logotherapy: An Overview," in *Victor Frankl's Contribution to Spirituality and Aging,* ed. Melvin A. Kimble (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 2000), 14.

2 David Guttmann, "A Logotherapeutic Approach to the Quest for Meaningful Old Age," *Social Thought* 20, no. 3-4 (2001): 122, 124.

her pace and processing were slower, and as I joined in relationship with her, I was also invited to slow down, which became a gift in my own hectic stage of life. This interconnectedness of caregivers and those cared for reflects and reveals God's inclusivity and invitation to relationship.

## Finding meaning through ritual

Rediscovering vocation is not the only way in which older adults can find purpose in their later years. Embracing ritual and Scripture within pastoral care is also helpful in the meaning-making process. Rituals add value and richness to the struggles of daily life and provide a place of security and comfort in changing and unknown territory. Rituals may include prayer, music, reading Scripture, liturgical practice, and celebrating communion.

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Through familiar rituals, older adults are tied to God and to others as they recognize that they are part of something greater than their own present suffering. Through the taking of communion, they are reminded of God's suffering and that they do not suffer alone. Communion was given by Christ to his disciples as a means to look back on their time with him in the past while awaiting his promised return in the future, and its practice gave structure to the present. This intertwining of time is a great gift to older adults for whom time is often an enemy.

In joining together to lament and celebrate, the SCP leads older adults to recognize and rejoice in the gift of life and then provides a means for them to offer their own individual gifts, their worship, and their attitudes back to God, knowing they are received by a loving God with rejoicing (Zeph. 3:17).

When sharing the ritual of reading Scripture, there are many opportunities for older adults to find connections, and therefore meaning, in the larger themes of the Bible. Some may identify with feeling in exile when shifted off to long-term care and now on the periphery of their community, having left behind all they have known. Some may identify with the pilgrimage motif in the Bible, feeling on a journey to an unknown destination as they confront the mystery of death. Others may identify with a particular person in the Bible, such as Naomi who lost her husband and both her sons and looked to find new meaning in her life or Simeon who

asked that God dismiss his servant when he felt his purpose in life had been accomplished (Luke 2:29).

Whatever their situation, older adults receive this assurance from Scripture: "Even to your old age I am he; even when you turn gray I will carry you" (Isa. 46:4a). The reading of Scripture is a rich resource for older adults who look to find meaning in their suffering. Practicing rituals of prayer, singing, and reading Scripture point to beauty and truth and remind seekers that they are enveloped in the most intimate love, the love of their Creator. The Spirit of God that inhabits all these rituals can permeate their minds and hearts and refocus their attitude to one of seeking God and God's calling even during suffering.

## Finding meaning through spiritual autobiography

The ultimate calling for older adults is a call to let go, to die well. The tasks of dying well are summed up in the statements: "Please forgive me, I forgive you, Thank you, I love you, and Good-bye."[3] Fulfilling the vocation toward dying well is a process involving reflection on the past, present, and future.

While many older adults spend time in retelling their life story, engaging in spiritual autobiography or life review is more intentional. Through this process older adults make meaning through creativity, through seeking beauty, truth, and love within their stories, and by choosing to respond fruitfully amid their present state of suffering. This process helps older adults to bring order and cohesion to the events of their lives and gives them purpose. Creating a spiritual autobiography is a process that can be done individually or with others. The SCP's role is to ask probing questions in memory-provoking ways and to help the older adult to find patterns or themes.

In his work *Remembering Your Story*, Richard Morgan outlines a number of techniques that can be used in a spiritual autobiography: creating a timeline or other visual of significant events, places, and relationships; creating a diagram that tracks highs, lows, and turning points in one's life and considering where one experienced God in those times; considering life in seasons or comparing the years of one's life to months in the calendar or traced through a biblical narrative; creating an audio or visual

3 Joyce Ann Mercer, "Older Adulthood: Vocation at Life's End," in *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie. J. Miller-McLemore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 297.

recording; journaling, scrapbooking, or creating a piece of art such as a decoupage box.[4]

Whatever the method chosen, the role of the SCP is to elicit reflection and to support the older adult in looking for connections to the greater web of God's story, while affirming the good that came from their lives. The SCP's primary task is to listen carefully and empathetically and to provide validation. The SCP, although spiritually attuned to God's presence, is not telling the older adult how to feel, respond, or make meaning, as this must be their own discovery.

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The older adult is the author of their story. While the author cannot go back and change the events of the past, they have the ability to reshape their perspective; they can see even difficult times more positively as steps along the path. The process also helps older adults to remember that all that has been meaningful in the past is still with them and cannot be taken away. In creating a spiritual autobiography, the older adult may find places in their story where they need to explore forgiveness, express gratitude, give love, or relinquish regrets, thus fulfilling the tasks of dying well.

Spiritual autobiography is not only a task for looking backward. As they review their stories, older adults are reminded of the ways God has been present on their journey and active in their lives and has invited them into God's story; this can rejuvenate faith in the present. Hope is renewed for their remaining days, and there is assurance that they will remain in God's proven care even into the next mystery after death.

While many older Mennonites in particular are uncomfortable with drawing attention to themselves, encouraging participants to share their story with their family or congregation in order to build up the faith of others is also vocational. My grandma's faith informs mine still, and when her last days finally came, we were able to attest together through the Psalms from her well-worn *Living Bible*: "Let each generation tell its children what glorious things he does. . . . The Lord lifts the fallen and those

4 Richard L. Morgan, *Remembering Your Story: Creating Your Own Spiritual Autobiography* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2002).

bent beneath their loads. . . . He is close to all who call on him sincerely. He fulfills the desires of those who reverence and trust him; he hears their cries for help and rescues them" (Ps. 145). And then to her, true meaning was revealed.

## About the author

Cynthia Brubacher Noel is a registered social worker and holds a Master of Theological Studies degree from Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario. At home in Salem, Ontario, with the five lovely children gifted to her and in her professional practice with people with various challenges, she strives to create welcoming spaces in which people recognize their infinite worth as children of God.