

God just isn't finished with me yet

Meaning, memory, and mystery

Jane Kuepfer

I was raised in a family with Scottish Presbyterian roots, where no one talked about faith for fear of being “too religious.”¹ We trusted that seniors had it all figured out and their faith carried them, although we would be stretched to say we understood how. I wonder sometimes about their experience with God and meaning in later life and how my grand-



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parents would have talked about their faith if they had felt free to put it into words.

My husband's grandparents, Amish Mennonites, were more vocal about what sustained them. Relationship with God provided companionship through

lonely times, Scripture and prayer brought comfort, and an understanding of something waiting beyond death was a source of enduring hope. They took seriously the responsibility of transmitting that faith to younger generations and showed their love through prayer.

Many Mennonites have memories of grandmas who, at difficult times, would say, “I don't know how anyone can get through life without faith.” But spirituality is not only for those blessed with a heritage of comfortable faith conversations.

While, for some elders, a simply articulated faith has profound depth, others cringe at simple words in the face of a complex array of life experiences and a relationship with God or religion characterized by struggle and challenge.

As a spiritual-care provider in long-term care, I am finding that generations aging now are more inquisitive and less likely to lean on assumptions, and that their honest questions help us all to think about what we mean when we say a spiritual life helps with aging.

¹ An earlier version of this essay was published as Jane Kuepfer, “God just isn't finished with me yet”: Meaning, memory and mystery are part of the aging process,” *Canadian Mennonite*, June 18, 2018; it is reprinted here by permission of the author.

Many seniors have not been part of a church for some time. They are not interested in saccharine definitions of spirituality. And some would not call themselves “people of faith” at all.

Yet we all have spiritual needs right to the end of life. We are sustained by whatever resources are available to offer us hope, love, peace, and joy in our circumstances. For example, we might find hope in children, in the cycle of nature regenerating, in conviction that problems are not permanent. We receive and give love in networks of family and friends, old and new. Peace comes with reconciliation in relationships, quiet space, unhurried time. And joy is often in the little things: beauty, surprise, music, humor.

Spiritual resources found within and without

Recently, I conducted research with baby boomers who are nearing or past sixty-five. I learned that these boomers find spiritual resources within and in the space and people around them, as well as in their faith, for those who profess it. They all grew up going to church and Sunday school weekly. But their relationship to traditional spiritual resources, such as Scripture, prayer, music, and their church community, has evolved in different ways for each of them. They continue to be open to exploration and learning, anticipating that their spirituality will continue to grow and change as they age. Which makes sense, since aging is all about change.

If we live long enough, we inevitably experience change in health and independence, roles and identity, energy and activity, relationships, community, and home, to say nothing of all the changes we experience in society, technology, and the world. Many elders report change in perspective, a shift in values with a different stage of life, and change in where they find meaning. It would not be surprising for elders to find new spiritual life as well.

Meaning, memory, and mystery

I like to think about our spirituality as we age as being about meaning, memory, and mystery.

If we are to aspire to live long lives, it is vital that these lives have *meaning*. Do we understand ourselves to be part of a bigger picture or a bigger story? When life is difficult, what meaning do we make of it? What has been, and is now, our purpose or calling in life? What do we imagine when we envision dying and death?

For elders, another important aspect of spirituality is *memory*. Throughout life, memories of sacred moments accumulate, and familiar practices, including prayers and rituals, come to hold deeply rooted meaning. Memories interrupted by dementia can often be accessed through these familiar practices, especially those involving music.

Mystery is another increasingly friendly aspect of spirituality for elders. Many attest to a greater level of comfort with the unknown as they grow older and the freedom to let go of the need for control.



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We live out our spirituality through our connections to self, others, nature, and the divine. We express our spirituality in relationships, traditions, and practices and through stories, beliefs, and values. Our spirituality sustains vitality

and enables people to cope with crisis, transition, and circumstance. As we understand better what contributes to meaningful aging, we will be better able to support one another in our families, churches, and communities.

What seniors offer congregations and need from them

Congregations can gain a lot from the gifts of seniors. Older members carry the story of the church's past along with a lifetime of experience. They are likely to have insight that younger members do not and contribute to the next generation as mentors in faith and life.

But seniors are not just at church for the benefit of younger members. The church is a community of profound meaning for seniors because it has the capacity to speak to their deep spiritual needs, offering belonging, care, and inspiration. Hope is fueled watching the children parade with palm branches or participating in an engaging Christian education discussion. Love is nurtured through smiles and hugs and opportunities to support others near and far away through faithful prayer and giving. Peace comes in quiet music during worship or healing prayer at the close of a visit from the care team. Joy erupts in the hallelujahs of an Easter morning gathering with friends.

New questions emerge with this new life stage. What is the purpose of life after working years are done? How do I connect with the world when most of those with whom I shared life and memories have died? Where is God in suffering and illness? What is my role as a grandparent? How do I

faithfully manage my finances and legacy? How do I support and sustain friendship with my peers who are experiencing dementia? Who am I now in the eyes of God? There is much to learn in the process of growing old. These are spiritual questions, and our church communities are good places to ask them together.

Growing spirituality in today's seniors

When something is growing, we can't know what it will look like tomorrow.

A research participant explained her growing spirituality: "I learned when Mom was sick [with dementia] that life is okay if my ducks aren't all in a row sometimes. God walks with us no matter what. I learned that in new ways. . . . I know there's lots more that's going to happen that I wouldn't choose, and times I will say life's not fair, but I have incredible peace. I know God will be with me."

Another reflected on how important his questions have been:

I think my faith today is stronger than it would have been any time throughout my life, but . . . I question more things than I would ever have questioned. I doubt more. I've changed my mind. When I was twenty-five years old, my faith would have been very black and white. Today I'm not as sure about many things. Most people would look at that as saying my faith is weakened, but I think my faith is stronger because I know who I am, I know what I believe. Those things aren't shaken. Yet my world has become much more inclusive than it was forty years ago. . . . The most inspiring and important things in my faith journey have been hearing other peoples' opinions and perspectives, and not being afraid of those. . . . My faith has grown because I've had those conversations, and keep having them.

Sometimes challenges present opportunities, and growth comes through difficulties. A spouse whose partner recently died shared how much she had changed through the experience of loving and caring for him, saying, "I'm a better person now because of it all."

The losses of age can strip away many of the blessings of life: cherished relationships, health and strength, meaningful work. While we experience God through these blessings in our youth, for some the empty spaces they leave make room for a deeper relationship with God and for growing spiritual maturity, intimacy, and freedom.

Words like generativity, integrity, universalizing faith, and gerotranscendence (a theory that explains aging from a psychosocial perspective) have been used to describe spiritual development in later life. The spiritual transformation only possible in the “second half of life” is of increasing interest among contemplative writers.

Ron Schlegel, founder of Schlegel Villages long-term care and retirement communities, is fond of saying, “There is much we lose as we get older, but our spirituality can continue to grow and thrive.”

As my older friends living long lives say, “It might be that God just isn’t finished with me yet.”

About the author

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