

Growing Old With Holy Spirit: Why Aging Doesn't Have to Be Awful

It has been an absolute game-changer for me to have had the opportunity to work closely with the elderly for the past two decades. Yes, I know that the characterization of “elderly” is a relative portrayal. When I was an 18-year-old freshman in college, I played basketball at the point guard position, and my chief competitor for the starting slot was 23 years of age. I thought how unfair it was that he was “so old.” So, for this particular article, I suppose I should clarify this connotation and say that for the term “elderly” from this point on, the association will generally be with 80-100-year-old individuals, those who, for the most part, are in the final stages of an earthly reality.

Why the game-changing portrayal? Because in general, elderly people have an accumulated wisdom and perspective about nearly every aspect of life that can only come through an accrual of experiences, both good and bad, some of a very extreme nature. And as varying degrees of confusion and/or dementia slowly settles on most of those I am in daily contact with, there are always the accompanying emotionally traumatized variations of responses from family and friends surrounding their circumstances. As the majority of dementia (which is a symptom) comes from Alzheimer's (which is a disease), there is an accompanying fear that can often feel overwhelming for those whose loved one has been accordingly diagnosed. The spouse is faced with the likelihood that this person, with whom they have shared life with for upwards of 50 years, will probably at some point not recognize them to the degree they have previously, and all the emotional ramifications this will cause.

The children and siblings have many of those emotional components as well as some trepidation that as this disease seems to have some genetic components that this may happen to them at some point. And even with those who do not have to deal with a dementia diagnoses, there is the relatively “normal” aging confusion, identified as “mild cognitive impairment” (MCI): MCI means that there are generally normal cognitive changes that take place in the elderly which are serious enough to be noticed by the individuals experiencing them or to other people, but the changes are not severe enough to interfere to a large degree with daily life or independent function.

So, let me share with you some of the game-changing paradigm alterations for me over these past two decades:

We are all going to die: Yes, of course we all intellectually understand this and have probably filed this information somewhere in the back of our minds. But what can we learn from watching others progress through the actual process, and what adjustments should we try to make so that we have as few fears and regrets as possible?

- Having a belief in and relationship with the God of the Bible is paramount. This relationship helps create a peace which strengthens us during each segment of the aging process.
- Yes, there are many belief systems, and a belief in a “higher power” of some sort seems to suffice for a level of peace to be present, but as a believer in the God and truth in Scripture, I want to encourage a biblical understanding and acceptance for genuine faith to govern our perspective.
- Do your best to make sure at least an acceptable relationship with all family members is in place as early as possible. While each of you is cognizant, do what is necessary to come to a reasonably synchronized perspective or at least an agreeable understanding with

pertinent family and/or friends so resolution is complete prior to possible later-stage confusion on issues.

- As the aging process eventually engulfs most of our lives, relationships naturally change to some degree, and often, complications arise that can make resolution problematic.

Anticipate Vulnerability: Whether that be physical, mental, emotional or all of the above. Every elderly person I have known has eventually come to the point where they need assistance of some sort; in fact, it is inevitable for every single person if you live long enough. No matter how intentional we are, these bodies and minds were not created to optimally function forever.

- For you, who along with me were the initial generation who grew up watching TV, Jack LaLanne was an icon, a man actually ahead of his time. My mom used to work out along with him when he had a televised exercise program in the 1960s before exercise for exercise's sake was so popular. But even though Jack was relatively strong and independent until he passed away at 96 years of age, he certainly was not capable of any of the impressive expressions of a younger version of himself, even though he worked out regularly and ate a healthy diet until he died. No matter what we do, if we live long enough, vulnerability is inevitable.
- Someone in your life is most likely going to need to assist you at some point because if you keep going long enough, you will come to a place where you are at some level incapable. Make sure those relationships have been appropriately cultivated for an extended period of time. Don't assume it will all work itself out. Be intentional about your relationships, especially those who are, or at least should be, important to you.

That's essentially it. If you live long enough, those seem to

generally be the inescapable anxieties of ultimate maturity. I suppose this may seem kind of simplistic to some of you. Our spiritual and relational connections actually do become not only our priorities, but in truth, so often our only distinguished interactions. It just won't actually matter so much what we did for work, how much money we made, what level of impressiveness we possessed or in what free-time activities we participated. Oh, sure there are some benefits for memory consideration, but as I mentioned, this often becomes speculative at best. But at the end of our lives, it is overwhelmingly our spiritual connection with God, in part because we are so close to where our beliefs will ultimately take us and those we love wanting to spend some time with us, that makes the difference.

I am an administrator at an assisted living community, and there have been occasions when I have looked around the dining room during meals and thought to myself, "most of these people were more impressive than I will ever be," and here we all are: In that room may be former ER nurses, college professors, presidents of companies, farmers who had thousands of acres under their supervision, pastors, military commanders and so on. Yet in so many cases, no one these people commanded, bossed, taught or counseled, comes to see them—none of them. Do any of those people ever think about these retired heroes who at one point were so culturally extraordinary: Probably? Maybe? I don't know!

Though family legacies have absolutely been altered by many of these precious elderly people, and that certainly should never be discounted to any degree, they have essentially been set off to one side. And somewhat sadly, this will be scores of our fates, regardless of our current level of perceived status in life. The elderly and unproductive in our communities, though maybe not entirely forgotten, have been fundamentally dismissed and are residing in so many of our assisted living communities, nursing homes or at home with a caregiver—with

those they have cultivated loving relationships with coming to visit them from time to time; and most importantly, God, steadfast until the appropriate moment in time when that relationship confirms ultimate.

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