

The Sunset of Life And Positive Aging

The aging population is growing fast in the world, and we, as Church of God, have to be prepared for it. In our Church, the most devoted, hardworking people, and best worshipers are people over sixties. They do not miss church on Sundays, unless in case of emergency.

Therefore, and as of appreciation for them I had chosen this subject for a project in my class, Introduction to Pastoral Counseling” six years ago, when I was studying for my Master’s Degree in Pastoral Counseling in 2010. Moreover, the article that I have chosen¹, along with other articles that I have searched, helped me understand how aging person identify his or her last years of their lives either as a sunset or a darkness. It all depends on helping them understand the three dimensions of human’s spirituality and the attitude of the person toward them. There are many nursing homes around the country that lack this vision. Most of them care for the physical wellbeing of the elderly.

Aging is a dignified stage of life in my culture. Church and family have the responsibility toward the wellbeing of aging people. Moreover, positive aging may be more dependent on spiritual wellbeing than physical capacity of the elderly. Awareness of spiritual process in relationship to positive aging may also offer pastoral care and counseling additional challenges and opportunities.

Spiritual well-being is one of the most difficult concepts to define, yet it is one of the most essentials aspects in understanding and supporting healthy positive aging. Positive aging is related more to attitude toward life than it is to capabilities and capacity. One of the most

¹ Jernigan, Homer L., “*Spirituality in Older Adults: A Cross-Cultural and Interfaith Perspective.*” Pastoral Psychology, Vol. 49, No. 6, 2001

frequent questions the elderly asks is, “Why is this happening to me?” or “Why is God doing this to me?” The most effective answer is not theological—defending or defining God’s ways. Rather, the most effective approach is spiritual—challenging and sharing in the possibility to create meaning and purpose within the confines of current opportunities. Thus spiritual person is the one who sees the act of the Spirit in his/her life, and the influence of the Spirit on his/her action. In other words, living and acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

There are many difficulties as well as opportunities in the experience of growing older. Experience varies from individual to individual. However, there are three fundamental dimensions of human’s spirituality that define each person’s experience, the meaning dimension (past), the value dimension (present), and the purpose dimension (future). Positive aging and its spiritual wellbeing will be understood by understanding these three dimensions.

There is the perceptual world, which consists of all that is objective, knowable, measurable, definable, and quantifiable. What a person has done and how the perception of self has developed in the past defines the dimension of meaning in life. Meaning derives from actions by and accomplishments of an individual. While this sense of meaning is ultimately individually chosen, we cannot ignore that there are also external definitions of meaning (e.g., societal views) that may be internalized and accepted as a part of one’s self-image.

The second dimension of human spirituality is purpose. Purpose can be viewed in terms of goals, hopes, and plans. External expectations by others or society may also have as much influence on the internalized sense of purpose as they exert on our sense of meaning.

Value, the final dimension of the spiritual self—unlike meaning and purpose—is constant at all times and equal for all people. Value, in spiritual terms, is not related to values. Each person is

born to live and die as a person with a unique but universally equal value. The perception of the value of an individual may vary according to circumstance and situation; the actual value never increases or decreases. The perception of varied value comes from the distortion of seeing meaning and purpose as the operative dimensions.

Christian communities (or churches) have a privilege to add a deeper meaning to the three dimensions of spiritual life. The meaning of life is not from what a person has accomplished, but from what Jesus has accomplished on the cross for him or her and all human beings. The purpose of life for the Christian is driven by the Holy Spirit and the Grace of God.² The value of a Christian is in his or her uniqueness as an individual who is created in the very image of God.

While common wisdom states that the optimistic view of the “glass as half-full” is preferable to the pessimistic view as “half empty,” positive aging may involve rejecting both views in order to find a more functional third alternative. This point was best expressed by a 90-year-old, wheelchair-bound nursing home resident, who was asked to share on which better represented her approach to life, replied, “Neither! I prefer to see the cup as twice as big as it needs to be. Full reminds me of what I no longer can do and empty says things will get worse. I simply pour my current capacities into a cup of the right size and I will always know that my life’s cup will always ‘runneth over.’ ” This what the elder person needs, and that is what Jesus has offered, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”³

Aging may force many losses on an individual, but there is always an opportunity to create meaning and purpose to choose one’s personal focus and attitude. Aging can provide resources

² Some hermits from the Assyrian Church in the 7th and 8th century understand the Grace of God as the act of Holy Spirit that is taking the role of the God the Mother in the Trinity.

³ John 10:10 (NASB)

of strengths developed out of overcoming prior adversities. These strengths may then be applied to muster spiritual wellsprings for the current concern or crisis. Creating a positive mindset, by counting the blessings and encouraging the aged person to practice some leisure activities that bring joy to his or her soul, instead of dwelling in the losses of life will help him or her live a positive aging life. The job of the pastors and people who care and counsel the aging person is to activate the person's faith and count with him or her God's blessings.

CONCLUSION

Understanding personal spirituality as a three-dimensional interrelationship of meaning, value, and purpose provides a framework for enhanced counseling interventions. This framework involves several components:

- 1) Listening for cues to a person's earlier meaning creation.
- 2) Adaptive skills for encountering life-transitions and crises.
- 3) Strengthening desires for fulfillment of purpose.
- 4) Opportunities for compensatory responses to current life situations.

A definition which meets these criteria is:

“Spirituality is the individual and collective organization (centering) of life around dynamic patterns of meanings, values, and relationships that are trusted to make life worthwhile (or, at least, livable) and death meaningful.”⁴

Thus, utilizing an awareness of spiritual process can be an effective way to support and foster attitudes that lead to an enhanced sense of positive aging. Spiritual and pastoral counseling can challenge individuals to develop coping mechanisms that include: a balanced perspective on life issues, a sense of humor, counter-factual thinking, internal strengths and resources for growing

⁴ Jernigan, pg. 435

through life losses and crises, and compensation skills that focus on current capacity and chosen pathways rather than dwelling on lost abilities.

Yes Aging can have its share of physical pain, disappointed dreams, financial strain, grievous losses, frustrating limitations, and even hurtful neglect. We cannot choose our circumstances, but we can, whatever our age, choose our attitude. We can choose what kind of climate we are going to bring with us wherever we are: selfish or unselfish, gentle or harsh, praising or griping, critical or encouraging. I would like to finish with these verses from the scripture:

“O God, You have taught me from my youth,

And I still declare Your wondrous deeds.

And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me,

Until I declare Your strength to this generation,

Your power to all who are to come.”⁵

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12/15/2016

⁵ Psalm 71:17-18