Spirituality of Aging: Implications for Living the Autumn Years

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Sister Janet Malone, CND (2013) has written on the impact of cognitive diminishment on one’s spirituality using the metaphor of the seasons. As we age, “We are moving from the attachment of Spring and Summer of our lives to the detachment of the Fall season and then to a sense of holy indifference in the Winter of our lives, that final letting go” (p. 10).

The present article is a further reflection from this seasonal perspective on the spiritual journey through the seasons of aging and, particularly, on the spirituality of aging in the context of life as a religious or clergy.

The spiritual dimension of aging is essential to successful negotiation of the journey, both for the individual and for her/his caretakers.

Physical limitations and challenges in communal living can be better, even integrated, if they are understood in the context of the spiritual experience. In addition, cultivating space and encouraging attention to one’s Autumn years may help make better sense of members’ lives.

There is more to aging than diminishment. There are genuine spiritual needs in the elder years (Kohse & Koenig, 1994). At least until the time of profound dementia, members can more easily reflect on the good and the “enough” of their lives, pondering past experiences, including regrets and failures, and accepting losses within the spiritual journey.

Even in the time of more severe dementia, as Richard P. Johnson (2014) reflects, dementia may be understood as stripping down the psyche to the fundamental, the essentials. Though one no longer has conscious sense of what is in the moment, we may have faith that one’s life in the Spirit continues not only intact but growing.

Caretakers and companions are invited to see behind the blank stare the simple, yet grand and beautiful, presence of Divinity. The heart that beats, peacefully or rhythmically, in holy release from this world and toward a new and holy synchronization with the indwelling Divine in the eternal now.

Johnson (2014) notes, “Aging is about being in exile, about being lost, but mostly it is about being found anew. While cognitive diminishment seems to both push...”
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one away a great distance, it also is a time of holding one closer to God. ... Paradoxically, cognitive diminishment brings one to the doorstep with the Pascal Mystery ... that death brings new life and diminishment brings new growth. As cognitive diminishment successively subdues the ego, divinity emerges to fill the vacuum.” And, in his book, Falling Upward, Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM (2011, p. 160) shares: ‘All the emptying out is only for the sake of Great Outpouring.’

Rohr refers in a number of his publications and presentations to the spirituality of aging as the spirituality of subtraction. The subtraction can come in many forms and in many areas of life, physical, mental, and spiritual. ‘Subtraction’ becomes a freedom from the ego as one grows into the self which will never die. “The spiritual journey is more like giving up control than gaining control ... God hides holiness in the darkest places of our lives. Those with dementia come to experience that the way up is the way down and the way down is the way up... The journey is different for each and when all is taken away each individual finds out who he/she truly is. These changes happen because of the mystery of the God who lives within each person” (Rohr, 2014 p. 324).

In this understanding, diminishment is not unmitigated loss, but even gain. The false self and ego of the first half of life are no longer in control. Our God is present unfettered when the person no longer knows family or even her or his own name. In a special relationship of innocence, God perseveres in faithfulness, meeting her/him in all the joys, frustrations, and sufferings of life. It is a journey into mystery of the God who has been a companion since the first moment of new growth. As cognitive diminish ment successively subdues the ego, the subtraction can come in many forms and in many areas of life, physical, mental, and spiritual.

Rohr suggests that if one has not successfully negotiated the first half of life, the second half will be a ‘dark time’ of struggle to get affirmation, marked by ceaseless longing, doubt, and endless restlessness. A person has to have an ego structure before one can let go of it.

But, even if the first half of life is done well, failure to negotiate the second half of life is to lose the opportunity for true fulfillment and peace of mind—heaven on earth—in the later years of life.

Falling Upward can easily be adapted as a template for retreat reflection. Persons struggling with transition and midlife issues could find comfort in the words of this wise teacher, who no doubt is probably writing from reflecting on his own life experiences.