

From the Director's Desk

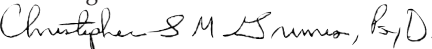
Greetings from the Program for Psychology & Religion at the Saint Louis Behavioral Medicine Institute! We are featuring in this edition of our newsletter an article on the spirituality of aging. It complements a previously featured article that focused on *Cognitive Decline in Aging* (available from the Resource Center of our website: <http://www.slbmi.com/clergy-religious-laity>). In that article, our staff neuro-psychologist, Dr. Carusa, discussed how the Program for Psychology and Religion uses neuro-psychological testing in our comprehensive assessments to make accurate diagnoses and formulate treatment plans for individuals who are experiencing some form of cognitive decline. At the same time, recognizing the whole person, and mindful of the way that our spirituality changes as we age, a spiritual assessment is also a part of our comprehensive evaluation process. The article by Sisters Maco Cassetta, CND and Therese Anne Kiefer, ASC presents their understanding of how spirituality might be impacted by cognitive decline and offers suggestions for how religious community can best accompany the person on the journey through the autumn years.

Those two articles arise from a workshop that Sisters Cassetta and Kiefer, and Dr. Carusa offered last fall: *Addressing Cognitive Changes in the Elderly within the Religious Community*. That workshop, hosted at Mercy Conference and Retreat Center in St. Louis, was tailored to address the needs of leaders, helping them to sensitively and appropriately intervene when a community member begins to show signs of dementia. Dr. Carusa reviewed the types and causes of dementia, and discussed the value of early diagnosis and treatment. Sisters Cassetta and Kiefer focused on individual and community spirituality in late life.

The Program for Psychology and Religion is committed to support the health and well-being of clergy and religious through education, assessment and treatment. Our staff is available for consultation anytime there is need. Call us whenever you believe a member of your religious order or presbyterate may need to be evaluated for symptoms of cognitive decline.

April 28th, we are hosting a workshop for clergy and other leaders of parish ministry on responding pastorally when a parishioner seeks guidance from the minister on dealing with problems related to pornography. Dr. Susanne Harvath, a psychologist and professor at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, will be the featured speaker. The workshop is being hosted by Mercy Center. Visit www.mercycenterstl.org to register, or call 314-909-4656.

One last item: the Program for Psychology and Religion is growing! We are looking for the right psychologist to join our team. Please encourage any qualified candidate to contact me about this opportunity to join a vibrant, multidisciplinary group of clinicians (psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, physicians, nurses, spiritual directors, dietitians, and physical therapists) dedicated to working at the interface of religion, spirituality and clinical science.

Warm regards!

Christopher S. M. Grimes, Psy.D.

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 Saint Louis Behavioral Medicine Institute is an affiliate of Saint Louis University Health Sciences Center

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Paul N. Duckro, Ph.D., Editor

Spirituality of Aging:
Implications for Living the Autumn Years

by Sister Maco Cassetta, MAPC, LPC, NCC and
Sister Therese Anne Kiefer, ASC, MA

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.

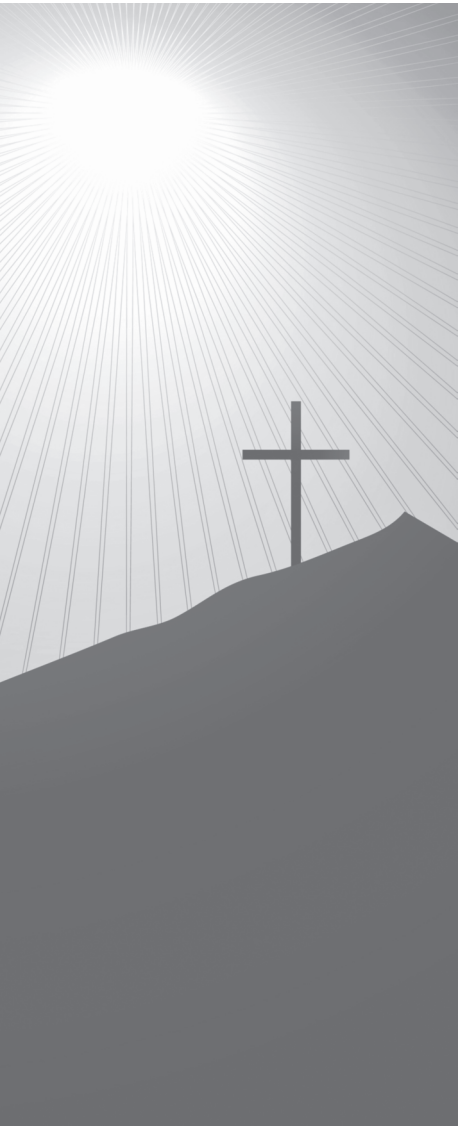
There is more to aging than diminishment. There are genuine spiritual needs in the elder years (Kehoe & Koenig, 1994). At least until the time of profound dementia, members can more easily reflect on the good and the "enough" of their lives, pondering past experiences, including regrets and failures, 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 riotously, 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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Spirituality of Aging: Continued from front page

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 s/he 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 perdures 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 one’s conception (cf. Psalm 139).

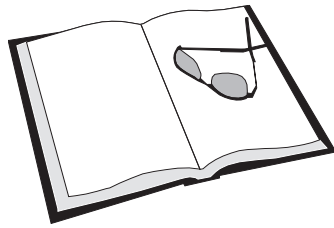
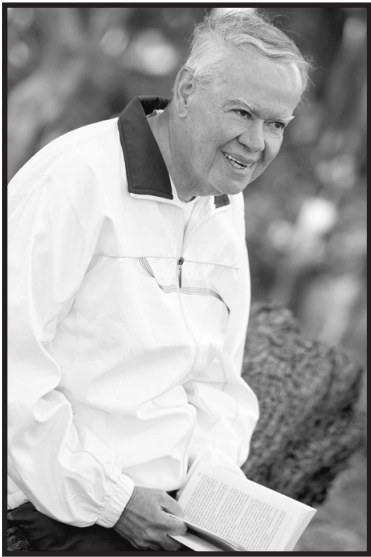
For the aging person the Winter reveals things that the Summer could not. There is a revelation of the central essence of the person, the ultimate spiritual identity of the person, the presence of Christ, God, at the core of the person. This is a challenge for caretakers and family because we do not know what God is doing in a mysterious way, but our faith tells us that God is immeasurably present. The loved one might at some point feel that they are forsaken by God, but they are not forsaken by their caretaker. The more the caretakers are in touch with the mystery of life and suffering in their own lives, the more they are able to be present with the loved one who is suffering.

While the challenges of diminishment are real and burdensome in the day-to-day living, there is a positive light and a sacred way of being with God. The experiences are about the transcendent wonder of a loving God, even though not tangibly experienced. Environments can be created so the space during the Autumn years of members’ lives for sacred Divinity can emerge so that the final journey towards the total letting go in God is realized in sacred awe and, perhaps, wonder. Could it be considered relinquishing, in the most profound sense of that word?

We, when in the role of caregiver, offer presence, companionship, compassion, and respect that can be God-experiences for the loved one. Elders look to the caretaker and/or family member to provide an environment of meaning purpose, and hope. (Kehoe & Koenig, 1994). Having an opportunity to engage in religious observances according to their ability helps to provide their need for comfort and unconditional support.

Ministry with and among our aging sisters, brothers, and clergy can teach us in turn to live in the moment, to live without prejudice or exclusion, without blame and judgment. This is a mutual ministry that all live to bring about the reign of God. These are the blessing and gift of being in companionship with those with whom we journey.

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BOOK REVIEW

“Falling Upward, A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life”

Richard Rohr. Published by JOSSEY-BASS. A Wiley Imprint, 989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741, 2011. \$19.95 Reviewed by Therese Anne Kiefer, ASC

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan, began to write about the two halves of life in 2010. (Rev Rohr built on the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl G. Jung, who had first characterized our human journey as the “two halves of life”). Rohr’s explorations led to the publication of this book in 2011.

His conceptualization of the work of the first half of life is that of creating a container for experience: building one’s ego and identity, setting boundaries, concentrating on survival and safety. It is like “getting a narcissistic fix” says Rohr. One spends time “protecting one’s identity, defending it, proving it and asserting it.”

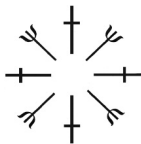
The work of the second half of life is filling the container. Many begin to experience this “filling” in midlife when they contemplate the purpose and passion of life. They desire “home” in a new way, the place of “deep time,” the indwelling of the Spirit. There is an internal longing for wholeness and dwelling in Mystery. They experience being drawn to a life of contemplation, to the solitude that feeds the Self.

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.

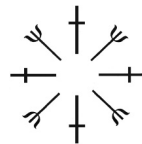
But, even if the first half of life is done well, failure to negotiate the second half of life is to lose the opportunity for true fulfillment and peace of mind—heaven on earth—in the later years of life.

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.

Program for Psychology and Religion, Weight Management Track
St. Louis Behavioral Medicine Institute



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Program Overview

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