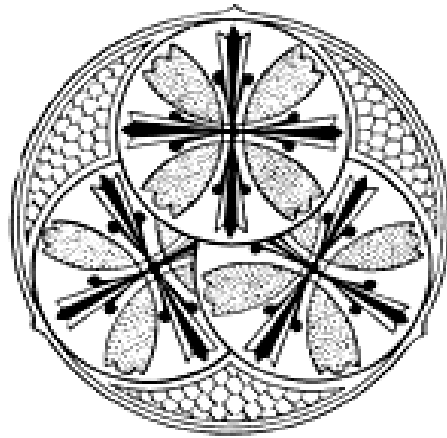


BENEDICTINES

LXIII:2 2010: FALL/WINTER



"If anything is clear in my mind, it is that if a person accepts leadership today, it is not to do things, it is not primarily to deal with directional statements. It is rather a call to face the next four years, or five or six — to face the circling in the desert as did Moses for 40 years — facing whatever may happen with the members in your monastery on the same path, members who are icons of God, and it is because of them that indeed God is at your side. That is sufficient."

— Esther Fangman, OSB, p. 12



Endings

*over . . . finished
ready to start again
endings are only a necessity
a necessity for new beginnings
new beginnings can be nurtured forever*

— Mary Eleanore Rice

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Maintaining Spiritual Vitality Amid Life's Transitions

Transitions and change are an inevitable part of life. Even when we have gone through many of them, they never seem to get any easier. There is always a letting go, then a feeling of in-betweenness before the new beginning. The letting go phase is a time of grieving our losses and making peace with them. The in-between phase Marilyn Ferguson has described as being in the air between trapezes with nothing to hang on to. The new beginning is when we begin to feel “at home” with the change.

Whether we are moving to a new country and culture or losing family members and friends, changing ministries or living groups, facing retirement or failing health, a great many of us are in transition. Sometimes the change is our own choice; often it is unexpected or the result of growing older and having less energy. Whatever the circumstance, we have a choice of either being open to new possibilities or letting it crush our spirit.

The authors in this issue address several aspects of transition. Sister Esther Fangman reflects on her experience as president of the Federation of St. Scholastica for the last 12 years. She provides a sobering view of the challenges and changes she has seen in Benedictine monasteries, including demands on prioresses, restructuring communities, personnel issues, and diminishing numbers. She stresses that “today’s leader must be one who embraces listening as the principle guide for direction” and to see community members as “icons of God.” In regard to merging communities, she advises members to “trust the unknown in God’s plan.”

Richard Johnson, a prominent psychologist, shares his insights on ten spiritual life building blocks that lead to health in what he calls the “illumination years,” ages 66 and beyond. He believes that “continued growth and emerging happiness flows from our quest to discover new purpose, new meaning and new life” in our later years. As people age they need to focus more on their interior world in order to

become more generative and wise elders. He challenges us to approach life changes as opportunities rather than threats.

Father Raymond Studzinski, a theology professor, also writes about maintaining spiritual vitality in the mature years. He suggests monastic practices such as paying attention, listening, reading, and being agents of hope as being ways that “can make tired souls into vibrant elders.” He recommends reading not only the scriptures but also the book of our life experiences to become more aware of God’s involvement in our lives. Above all, we need to cultivate the virtue of hope in order to be agents of hope in our communities and in our world.

No matter what our age, we encounter many changes and transitions. We cannot know what the future holds; we can only know that God is with us every step of the way. Even when we feel as if we are in mid air between trapezes, we are being held in loving arms. Even when our bodies fail, our spirits need not die. Even when we feel we have nothing left to give, we can be mentors to younger members and beacons of hope to others.

Someone has said that we need to think of ourselves as “sage-ing” rather than aging. Most of us have a wealth of experience and knowledge to share with others. I have gained much wisdom from the sisters in our retirement center about patience, contemplation, trust, gratitude, enjoyment of nature, appreciation, and acceptance. I also admire the energy and enthusiasm of the young as they undergo transitions in a constantly evolving society.

“I came that you might have life, and have it to the full,” Jesus promised. May our lives be full at every stage we pass through, until we reach complete fullness in eternity.

—Barbara Mayer, OSB

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Listening Turns the Soul to God

by Esther Fangman, OSB



Sister Esther Fangman gives a sobering account of the changes she has seen in the past 12 years as president of the Federation of St. Scholastica. Her views on the challenges of leadership are stark yet hope-filled.

This is an edited version of a talk given at the General Chapter of the Federation of St. Scholastica on June 19, 2010, in Atchison, Kansas

Transition and Change

In January of 1998, there were 22 monasteries in the Federation of St. Scholastica and a total of 1,160 finally professed members. After my first four-year term as president, the calendar year 2002, we dropped to 1,023 – then four years later to 882 members – and, as of the end of 2009, we were 760 finally professed members. When we look at the full 12 years, this would be a decrease of 400 professed members. This change in numbers is largely due to death. Will twelve more years bring another drop of total membership in our monasteries to approximately 360 members?

I predict eight or more monasteries will need to restructure in the next 12 years.

Further, in 1998, we had 22 monasteries; we now have 21 with one monastery in the process of restructuring with another. How many more monasteries will see the need to reconfigure in the next twelve years? What are the implications of these demographics? These numbers are certainly sobering. I predict eight or more monasteries will need to

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restructure in the next 12 years. Certainly, a key factor in predicting the future is the decreasing membership; however, decreasing numbers, in my opinion, is not the major issue propelling future changes.

Leadership

The major issues center around leadership. Two key areas are energy and competency. First, there indeed may be a member of a community who embodies the qualities the Rule of Benedict calls for in an abbot/prioress, and who has the ability to bring unity rather than polarization to the community as the constitution calls for in the Federation of St. Scholastica. However, her health and stamina may no longer be able to bear the burden of leadership. If nothing else, the last 12 years have convinced me that the pressure, stress, intensity, multi-tasking, among other things, have increased the demands on prioresses. Put plainly, people are wearing out as their age increases. Many good leaders simply do not

Sister Esther Fangman, OSB, was president of the Federation of St. Scholastica for the past 12 years. She is a licensed professional counselor and has provided counseling services in the Kansas City area since 1981. She is currently on sabbatical, volunteering as a therapist for victims of war and torture.

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have the stamina to manage what the role of prioress requires.

The second issue that is propelling future changes in leadership is competence. I am making a distinction between the leadership qualities required in the role of prioress and other key leadership roles both in and outside community. There may indeed be members in a community who are quite competent in several areas, but none who has the particular and sufficient gifts to be prioress. I believe in the grace of God. I believe in the grace of office. In fact, I even believe in miracles. However, even though God is remarkably generous, the gifts that coalesce in Benedictine leadership are not given *ipso facto* to a member of the monastery when she is elected prioress. Consequently, elections cannot be simply choosing the next one who is “most competent.” Instead, the reality that these gifts are not given to all is simply one more clue that suggests the need for restructuring.

Even though God is remarkably generous, the gifts that coalesce in Benedictine leadership are not given ipso facto to a member of the monastery when she is elected prioress.

What else does this data suggest? The amount of work we engage in has not lessened – the work force has. This is true not only in regard to

Benedictine leadership – it is a reality for the entire community. When I was in my early twenties, I was teaching second grade on my second mission with six other sisters in Kansas City. I remember begging the superior to be allowed to do some tutoring for the disadvantaged. Why? The main reason was because I had all of this energy and needed a place to put it. Those days are gone for most of us – that is, the energy is gone. This is a reality. This reality of less energy and an increased work load demands that each monastery address its future.

Restructuring

Now, given what I have just said, I must also add a few more thoughts on planning for our future. Over the years, I have seriously searched, questioned, and pushed for discussions on restructuring, trying to address how we can be respectful of different monasteries’ traditions and cultures and help them make decisions on how to manage their futures. The last general chapter in 2006 addressed this concern directly. Numerous articles and the sharing of ideas have followed up on this. The pre-chapter in 2009 had several presentations of different monasteries’ journeys in restructuring. Reflecting on this information, I wish to make the following comments.

I believe that there are and will continue to be monasteries in this

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Federation that will open their doors to another monastery that is seeking some kind of merger. Nevertheless, we have to find ways to do this that do not overburden any one community. There is no doubt in my mind that the easiest way to do that would be for monasteries that close simply to do so – arranging for their property and material goods to be taken care of and then each member individually seek a transfer to another monastery. The burden of the work that accomplishes such a transition then rests with the monastery making the request. The best scenario is for this restructuring to happen before members become physically or mentally unable to do this.

However, we have tried to develop ways members in a monastery can live out their lives gracefully by “staying in place.” From my perspective, two things are necessary for a monastery to seriously consider this option in their process of restructuring with another monastery. First, are the members able to develop a realistic plan for doing it and then secondly, are they financially stable as a community.

If the members of a monastery want “to stay in place and live out their lives,” then there is a great deal of work that needs to be done. I say to those who seek this solution, work now on setting up the means for this kind of restructuring to happen and

remember that “staying in place” is still a loss, still a process of detaching from everything for the sake of the kingdom. Therefore, be willing to give up things; be willing to let go. Plan ahead. “Staying in place” as long as you can means you are able to take care of yourself. It means you do not need someone to come and be with you so you can stay where you are. It means you do not need someone to sell your property or handle your finances on site. It means you have the capacity to make daily decisions about the land, the house, the horarium.

I would compare it to what the parents of one of the sisters I live with has done. They lived in a house and then chose a retirement center that would accommodate their different stages – from providing minimal help to total care. They planned by a will how their finances were to be used and eventually distributed. They even planned where they were to be buried. This is not to say family members will not be there to help. Their help, however, will not be needed on a daily basis and no one will have to give up a job to care for them.

Important Considerations

I say this because I think this is truly possible. If living out your lives where you are is the desired outcome, then preparations need to be made when you are able to do it. It is

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difficult for a host monastery to consider forming an alliance with a monastery that wants “to stay in place” when there is great distance and considerable work involved. It has nothing to do with not wanting to help; most often, it has to do with “How do I do this if there is a great distance and everyone in my community including myself as prioress are already overstretched?”

In addition, “staying in place” is predicated on the requesting monas-

Women monastics tend to believe that if they are members of a community then everyone should know one another — that is the way it “should be.”

tery being financially stable enough to carry out its plans. As far as I can tell from visitation reports, no monastery in the Federation is prepared to spend money to financially underwrite another monastery so that its members can continue to live in their existing monastery.

Desiring to “stay in place” raises another issue. When we talk about this form of restructuring, we are talking about a monastery remaining where it is, but all the members “transferring their vows” to the host monastery. They “stay in place,” but they become a house of the host monastery. In one way, it is similar to our concept of a mission house with

some differences. They might not come to the host monastery for chapter meetings, celebrations, and similar activities. They become canonically connected, but they do not seek personal connections with members of the host monastery.

Here is the “rub.” We as women are instilled with the concept of relationships. Women monastics tend to believe that if they are members of a community then everyone should know one another – that is the way it “should be.” In addition, we have the tradition and the training that says as members of a monastic community we do certain things – we attend chapter meetings, vote, and go to profession ceremonies. How can a person be a vowed member of a community and not really “know” one another and attend the basic events that occur and form the monastic common life? Such a model goes against everything we believe in.

New Paradigm

Yet, we are thinking here of a new paradigm that does not fit our traditional perspective of what it means to be a Benedictine. I came to understand this better in my awareness of the Warren monastery as a Byzantine rite. For me, it started with a question. How can we ask members of a transferring foundation to give up their way of praying, their basic rituals, their very culture? What

if one of the monasteries in Mexico needed to restructure? How could we ask them to do that? Further, I know from psychology that after divorce, realignments for reconfigured families take an average of seven years to make some kind of adjustment.



Age adds to the challenges. Our experiences tell us that it is more difficult for older persons than younger ones to shift their identities extensively. These factors lead me to consider possible alternatives to the restructuring questions. Is it possible for the members of one community to be members of another group and still maintain their identity as a community? Is it really possible for a monastic to have canonical vows in one monastery but live out her life as a member of her original monastery? I believe it is.

In the future, we may have to stretch the relationship concept. We think that as vowed members of a community all have certain responsibilities. But can we make room for somebody to be a member of

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our community by vows, and yet because of today's circumstances, let them live them out differently? It is hard. Nevertheless, choosing to relate in this different way does mean that the one who ultimately "turns out the lights" is, after all, the prioress of the host monastery.

Other Models

Another scenario that is happening in monasteries as they restructure looks similar to how Piedmont, Oklahoma, joined with the Mount St. Scholastica community or the plan between Eau Claire, Wisconsin's return to St. Benedict's in Minnesota. These models reflect a decision of an entire monastery to join another and to make the commitment to move to the host monastery. However, this model also may not always be possible. In fact, there may be monasteries whose composition makes it impossible for them to move as a total group. One or more members may be unwilling to go where the rest of the group goes. Probably the more common factor here is that there are one or more members of the monastery who are "troubled" in a way that forces the host community to say no to that member. If we want to remain healthy, we must remember as we get smaller, it is too difficult to absorb members who are troubled.

When one of the members is not accepted, the option for the total

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group to transfer is not possible. Instead, it is necessary to return to the previous model of each individual's choosing where to go to begin the transfer process. Accepting difficult members may also influence a host monastery's willingness to assume the risks involved. This factor could also influence a host monastery's willingness to take on the risk of connecting with another monastery even if plans to "stay in place" are well worked out long in advance.

Nevertheless, to those monasteries that are willing to act as host to another community, allowing an entire monastery or members of a monastery to join you in some form, I say this: be able to trust the unknown in God's plan. Every single detail of what is to happen or might happen simply cannot be known ahead of time. You cannot know for sure that this will work. It is a risk. It will take time. There will be problems. Just remember, these women are our sisters.

Future Leaders

What else can we expect from the future? In this section, I want to talk about Benedictine leadership in general and what that means in the future. First of all, it is probably a truism to say that the Benedictine ministry of leadership today is unpredictable. What we think will be our issues, our

challenges, what may or may not occur – we just cannot be sure.

Therefore, those who assume leadership roles today must approach them with an open mind, for as scripture says (I have modified this somewhat): "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will, but first let me make some suggestions of what needs to happen – please no lawsuits, especially sexual abuse cases; please keep the money coming, and, for goodness sake – give us vocations – healthy ones."

We may think we are elected because we have a certain vision or that we can handle certain issues. We may think we are elected because we are the person to deal with a certain situation. If anything is clear in my mind, it is that if a person accepts leadership today – it is not to do things; it is not primarily to deal with the directional statements. It is rather, a call to face the next four years, or five, or six – circling in the desert as did Moses for forty years – facing whatever may happen with the members in your monastery on the same path, members who are icons of God, and it is because of them you know that indeed God is at your side. That is sufficient.

When I went to California in 2002, I did not know that I would witness a hit and run accident that almost took the lives of two of our prioresses; nor did I know I would face an apostolic visitation of Erie in regard to the

prioress's response to following Rome's directions regarding the relationship between herself and a member of her community. I did not know that I was to participate in an unprecedented investigation of women religious in the United States. I did not know there would be other specific and painful matters that I cannot mention.



Listening Leaders

Thus, my conclusion is: if we decide to embrace leadership today – we simply do not know what we will face. We are not in charge of the agenda for the next term. For the past 12 years, I have listened to the prioresses and they have told me what they are dealing with, and it is not the directional statements their communities worked so hard on; rather, it is the unexpected situations that occur. But, most often, the largest unexpected issues come with personnel. Today, however, apostolic visitation ranks right up there. Thus leaders

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today must face an unplanned agenda, an unanticipated future. In all this, our leaders must first of all be women of faith who embrace the present moment and whatever stands in front of them.

Another issue is the common assumption that we need to elect someone smart. We believe that if a leader is intelligent, has common sense and good problem-solving skills then she will be able to carry the day when faced with personnel issues. This just isn't so. The more "troubled" the person is that we encounter in our monasteries the less common sense or "good solutions" work in helping her.

The good news is that intelligence, good problem-solving skills and common sense does work with healthy individuals – at least part of the time. At times they are able to hear and accept a leader's help. As for the troubled individual, what is needed in a leader is to handle the situation with wisdom.

If what I have said is true, then it must follow that first and foremost, a Benedictine leader today must not be one who first embraces rules, constitutions, canon law, and tradition. Rather, today's leader must be one who embraces listening as the principal guide for direction. Today's leader does not direct the future with the framework of answers that have proved true in the past. She is one

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who even before beginning to know what to do, listens with the heart to understand the situation. Such an approach to leadership is pastoral. It is an approach that says every human being before me radiates the presence of God. It is not only that they are to be seen as children of God, but they radiate, they glow with God's image. This is why I referred above to the members as icons of God. Such a vision gives a leader a context in which to respond. To this, there are no exceptions.

We do not choose what we will face as leaders – our only preparation is love enfleshed through listening.

Personal Reflection

Several years before I was elected president in 1998, I celebrated my twenty-fifth year as a member of the Benedictine community of Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas. Shortly thereafter, God blessed me in special ways. I really don't know exactly how to explain it, but God blessed me with a special solace in my prayer. So when I was elected, to obtain assurance that things would work out, I prayed to God like Gideon in the Old Testament and laid out my fleece before God. In Judges 6: 36-37, Gideon said to God, "Prove it to me in this way. I will put a wool fleece on the threshing floor tonight. If the fleece is wet with dew in the morning but the ground is dry,

then I will know that you are going to help me rescue Israel as you promised."

Mine was, "Okay God, I will embrace with all my heart this election, but you in turn must continue to give me experiences of this solace during my time as president to show that this is a good thing." The experience was just such a blessing and quite frankly I didn't want to lose it. However, my request of God did not happen the way I planned. Instead, these 12 years have been blessed abundantly and in ways that I could not have anticipated.



So let me explain it this way. We have used sunflowers to adorn our tables and the words "Listening turns the soul to God" as our theme for this meeting. The sunflower is the state flower of Kansas. It does, however, grow all over the world. What is unique is that when it begins its growth it follows the sun. So in the morning it faces East and at night it has turned toward the West.

Sunflowers continue this way until they are mature, soaking up the rays of the sun for their life. When they are mature they no longer follow the sun as the rays become too overwhelming – and like Moses they must hide their eyes. They can only stay alive with so much exposure.

“Listening turns the soul to God” is reflective of what these past 12 years have been for me. My experience has indeed turned my soul to God. I didn’t receive the particular solace I wanted, but I received instead a day by day penetration of God pulling me on this journey toward him. Indeed I am still trying to follow the sun, not yet mature, but there is no doubt in my mind that you have been like the sun stretching me toward God.

Stretched toward God

Let me give some concrete examples. Because of my position as president I have had the opportunity to travel around the world and share in Benedictine monasteries worldwide. This has so enlarged my understanding of the facets of Benedictine life. There are Benedictine sisters in the Philippines who everyday get up like I do and say morning praise and welcome one more day to do the will of God. There are Benedictine leaders in Africa who everyday try to figure out what is the meaning of this or that injustice, dis-

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cerning what they should do. Can you imagine how profound it is for me to know that I stand in solidarity with them? Listening to them has indeed

Without a doubt she loved everyone of those misshapen, irritating, demanding, struggling human beings that made up her community.

turned my soul to God.

As president, I have had the opportunity to hear some major presentations that have intensely affected me. I am going to give you a few examples. Several years ago in Cullman we had presentations by Sisters Mary Collins (Atchison, KS) and Katherine Kraft (St. Joseph, MN), on reconciliation. Now and then talks affect me intellectually, but these for some reason resonated at a different level. I went home more deeply aware of “my sinfulness.” It was not an experience of sadness or discouragement, but something comparable to what Benedict implies in chapter 7 of the Rule on humility. It was “recognizing who I am.” This is the kind of thing that helps me understand my place in life, helps me understand the immense mercy of God, and gives me even greater ability to accept the humanness of others. Listening indeed has turned my soul to God.

Over the years I have also seen and heard and observed things which

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I wish did not exist. The hardest part personally for me in being president was watching destructive ways sisters hurt one another in a monastery. Sometimes this was the use of power by those in authority to hurt those under her; sometimes it was living out the common life, one sister to another. People are not for hurting. That is not why we exist. But even this can “turn the soul to God.” There was one particular year in my 12 years where the

Somebody becomes somebody because another has listened with the ear of her heart.

scripture that was most helpful to me was the one that talked about Jesus “weeping over Jerusalem.” I understood this better. There are things that I was powerless over. I could not change things that one person did to another, I could not take away the pain, but I could weep. Listening turns the soul to God.

One more example I wish to give. This is so simple. I remember once talking with a prioress. I was listening as she described situations, people, struggles, etc., in her community and how she was handling them. She gave quite a picture of the human condition, the struggling realities of life. What went through my mind was – here I sit with a woman who embodies all that Benedict talked about in the Rule in regard to the abbot. Without a doubt she

loved every one of those misshapen, irritating, demanding, struggling human beings that made up her community. Such a model for me (and there were many such models over the past 12 years), turned my soul toward God.

There is yet one more way to understand the words: Listening turns the soul to God.” Did my listening over the last 12 years turn your soul to God? Listening can be compared to the “priceless” coin the woman found in scripture. It is in itself of unbelievable worth. We can diminish the soul of another – lessen their very existence of who they are by withdrawing our listening. Somebody becomes somebody because another has listened with the ear of her heart. This reality, this truth also leads me to say to you – has my listening or lack of it turned your soul away from God? I truly have tried not to do that, but I am also aware that it is so easy not to live in the present moment with another or be so caught up in what I think I have to offer, or be stymied by my own negative feelings of anger, etc., that I may well have missed hearing your heart. So I apologize for those times where I have failed to listen to you or your community with my inattentive heart.

Thank you for this journey. You have helped me stay on my path. Indeed my soul has been turned to God because of you.

Leaning into the Moment

Nothing of my own,
Yet endowed with treasures
Of time and light, music and sky,
Given every moment for me to multiply.

With attitude of gratitude,
I steal away alone with God
In calm to mend and tend
My tiny pantry of gigantic gifts
Of color, line, space, and time.

And there on satiny cotton shelves
Beauty and balance, healing and gratitude galore.
Red love, blue friendship, joy of green and yellow,
Peacefully enabling, richly mellowing,
Subtly enhancing my everyday journey.

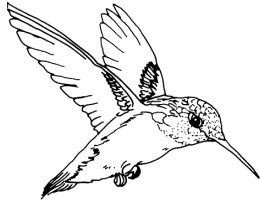
Joy bends my rainbow.
Ready am I, leaning far into
Rays of grace, shining through
Every precious, promising moment.

**Mary Beth Maier, OSB
Ferdinand, Ind.**

Arrhythmia

Out of rhythm. I wander in life's desert
Unable to focus on you, O God, who are my nourishment
My heart is in arrhythmia.
I flutter restlessly, competing with time, memories and distractions,
Like a hummingbird who fights over sweet syrup
Never getting to drink.
God of Life's rhythm, arrest my heart!
Shock me with your gentle love.
Defibrillate me into your rhythm.
Make my heart beat in unison with yours.

**Rose Marie Stallbaumer, OSB
Atchison, Kan.**



Morning Prayer

Christ is to come as
your Dawning. Cast off slumbers,
all that encumbers.
Be radiant, sing! Let all
receive, believe in Him.

Gold and serene dawns
the day. Like the sun let faith
burn bright in good deeds.
In all we do, may love light
the way and reflect the Son.

**Mary David Hydro, OSB
St. Leo, Fla.**

Rosary House at Gethsemani

Hauled from fields behind the cloister,
Now curtained within thickets upon the hillside.
Haven of shovel and pitchfork,
Deflated burlap – emptied of seed,
Water buckets – dry homes for widowed spiders,
Cleared for the repose of pilgrims,
Walking the wooded knobs,
Searching for a silent God.

Pallid walls, dulled by rain and freeze and wind.
Prayerful hands secure the plank floor,
Scuffed by the claws of wild community.
Consecrated hands nail an ill-fitted window in place,
a discard salvaged from a neighboring farm,
“Rosary House” lists above the lintel,
startled by a dark-eyed deer, brush strokes
lift and trail its christening at the emergence
of this first silent pilgrim.

A retreat for one who seeks solace.
On the ambo, a raw-planed board stretched across the interior,
lies an open notebook.
Words scrawl across the lined pages
on which schoolchildren write lessons.

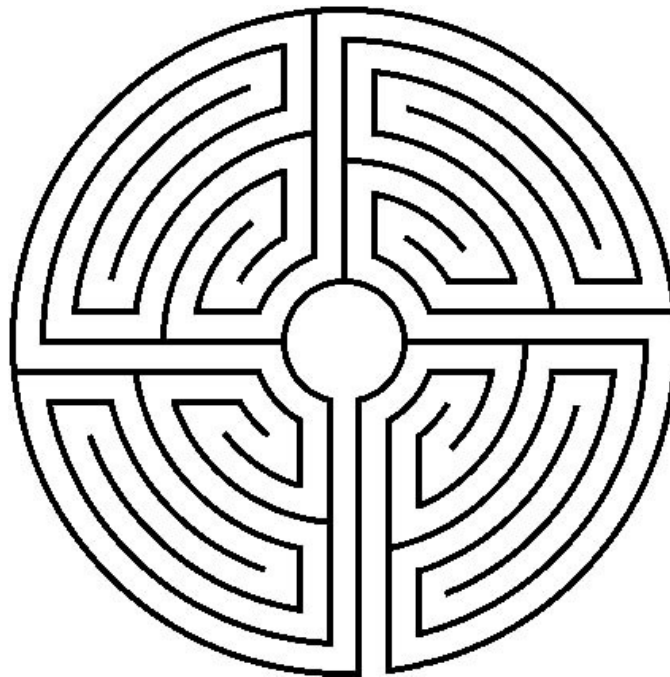
Each page holds lessons waiting to be scored
by teachers with fingers of red ink.
Pages of illness, pages of desire,
pages of lost children and lost spouses and lost hope.
Each page incomplete, gnawed and frayed,
The marks of teeth and tongue disfigure every page.
And when the words are eaten by the author of all words,
they are as honey in the mouth.

Suzanne Rose, Obl.SB
Owensboro, Ky.

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Aging Well: Soul Experience of the Illumination Years (66+)

by Richard P. Johnson, Ph.D., PCSG



Dr. Richard Johnson believes that the “illumination” years can be a rich and fruitful time for spiritual growth even as our bodies weaken. He offers ten spiritual life building blocks as guides for optimal health as we age.

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Spiritual health is that state of living optimally, vitally, and fully regardless of the condition of your body.

Healthy aging doesn't happen on its own. Age alone does not automatically confer competence in "performing" this process we call aging well. Aging requires work; and this work needs to be quite intentional. So what are the competencies of aging well? This question provides the motive "push" and the underpinning for this paper. If aging does have purpose (this article clearly says that it does) then we, as practitioners of aging, can address and traverse the process of aging with varying degrees of competence, and "perform" the overarching act of aging well or not.

There are building blocks to health on all levels. Optimal physical health requires nutritious diet, generous exercise, no tobacco or other toxins, adequate sleep, moderate (or no) alcohol use, and the like. Optimal psychological and emotional health requires stress reduction, stimulation of mind, healthy relationship connections, a positive outlook on life, clear thinking, being "in touch" with our feelings, making considered choices, and taking forthright actions. So too, healthy soul or spiritual living requires certain building blocks to achieve optimal spiritual health or spiritual thriving.

My research, concentrated observation of the human condition, and long hours studying, listening to and interacting with literally thousands of counseling patients has informed me to identify ten spiritual life building blocks, or "tasks" that lead to optimal global health in what I call the illumination years, ages 66 and beyond.

Ten Necessary Tasks for Spiritual Health in the Illumination Years

1. Transformation vs. Powerlessness
2. Living Mystery vs. Self-Reliance
3. Physical Diminishment vs. Denying Reality
4. Confronting Self vs. Self-Absorption
5. Mentorship vs. Becoming a Critic
6. Becoming Involved vs. Falling into Alienation
7. Wisdom vs. Confusion

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8. Innocence vs. Irritability
9. Taking Stock vs. Dependency
10. Creative Completion vs. Infantilization

These ten tasks are presented as dialectics, i.e., “*something vs. something*,” which means that both sides of the dialectical equation exist as inclinations within us. The question is which of the two sides will be stronger, which side will exert more influence over our overall personality operation? The left side of the dialectic is the positive, healthful side, while the right side represents a stressed or even distressed psycho-spiritual posture; it’s where we eventually go when we’re repeatedly or even continuously under strain.

These ten represent the spiritual “work” that we must pursue and achieve at some level in our illumination years in order to find fundamental happiness. As such these ten can be seen as requirements of the soul. Together they form the foundation and the framework upon which we can build a solid life where we radiate a glow of vitality, maximize our inherent gifts and strengths, optimize our physical and mental capacities, find purpose in life, and experience that internal sense of fulfillment we call “meaning.”

Each of these ten psycho-spiritual challenges represents a separate segment of our overall path of personal

growth and happiness in the illumination years. Each is, at one and the same time, a new segment of our path *and* an extension of the life path we have walked before. The path we walk is a circle of life, a labyrinth-like journey of discovery that swings around and around again and again. As it does, we sometimes feel that we have walked this way before. Yet even though the current part of the path seems so familiar, it is actually a new and different part with a unique feel and special purpose all its own. As one task of optimal living wanes in importance, another task is already waxing.

The life changes that transitions bring can be approached as opportunities or avoided as threats.

The life changes that transitions bring can be approached as opportunities or avoided as threats. The purpose of our search for meaning ushers in a renewal the likes of which we have not seen in our life to date. When the responsibilities of one stage of life are lifted, a new forum for happiness emerges. This forum for change and growth is inside us; it is the realm of the soul. Part of the personal work necessary in our illumination years is bringing our interior world into sharper focus, finding a more comfortable balance between our outside and our inside world. Our continued growth and

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emerging happiness flow from our quest to discover new purpose, new meaning, and new life in our illumination years.

Transformation vs. Powerlessness

The degree to which we become more personally empowered by coming to a more profound understanding of and deeper appreciation for the message of the eight beatitudes.

We are called to change in every decade of our lives to be sure, yet it is in this illumination stage that we can come to feel that this transformation is actually unfolding more clearly. When Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount and blessed us all with the eight beatitudes, he gave us a prescription for transformation, a map for happiness. Jesus calls each of us to conversion, redemption, and transformation. Transformation is an ongoing process. In our illumination stage we see a time of quickening, a time when the pace of internal spiritual change accelerates.

This is when we can look to the beatitudes for a better understanding of the dimensions of change. It is in our illumination stage that the busyness of our worldly pursuits ebbs and we gather up the time and the focus necessary to be more contemplative. The lessons of the

beatitudes dawn in our lives in new ways. The beatitudes do indeed transform us; they offer us a path to happiness unlike anything that the world could ever give. The beatitudes are counter-cultural, as is Jesus.

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When we fail to address necessary change in our lives, when we fail to enter into the redemptive process of transformation, when we fail to move down the path to personal “newness,” we find ourselves stuck in fear, and founder in a personal powerlessness where our inner potency, our internal direction, our interior focus is lost. In such a state we feel impotent, incapa-



ble, and disabled. Our former competence seems to have drained from us; we feel unendowed and crippled. Our morale seems disconnected, exhausted, and shattered. We seem overcome with weakness and lack the vigor that marked our former years. In

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short, we find ourselves on the “other side” of the beatitudes; we may intellectually understand them better than we ever did, yet we feel strangely “unplugged” from them, and deny ourselves the spiritual power that flows naturally from them.

Living Mystery vs. Self-Reliance

The degree to which we allow ourselves to walk more by faith and less by sight.

It is in our illumination stage that we generally experience a noticeable intensification of the call of God, a greater clarity in listening to God, and a heightened trust in God’s work in our hearts. This represents a deep shift in the way we run our lives. Formerly trapped in our own internal mental processes of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and deciding, we now experience a new freedom in letting God take the lead in our lives.

We let go of our need to influence every waking moment of our lives, and begin to forfeit our desire for personal control; we learn how to consult God better. It is at this point that we begin to disengage ever so slowly from the tyranny of relying on our own perceptions as the primary guiding light of our lives and ease into living in the secure mystery of God. This shift is a gradual one; it is shot through with fits and starts, but the trend toward increasing reliance on

God and decreasing reliance upon self remains a constant throughout our illumination years. This, of course, doesn’t happen with everyone in exactly the same way, if it happens at all. Nothing is universal when it comes to human and spiritual development; everything happens in God’s time, not our own!



If we fail to address this spiritual task we may find ourselves left in the shadow of vanity where conceit, complacency, and/or over-confidence cloud our spiritual progression. We may put on an arrogant, self-righteous, puffed-up mantle of superiority that inhibits us from tasting the “new wine” of Jesus. Self-reliance is inherently rejecting; others’ insights and opinions mean very little to us, and we bearishly “keep to ourselves” in one way or another, discounting the potential contribution that interpersonal connections and relationships can bring. We may adopt such an arrogant attitude and personal posture because underneath our bravado lies a fearfulness that we guard from open exposure.

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Physical Diminishment vs. Denying Reality

The degree to which we can come to see more clearly the discomfort and even the suffering caused by our bodily changes as invitations for spiritual deepening.

Physical diminishments are real in our illumination years; they cannot be traded-in for a pious spirituality (however genuine), as if spirituality will absolve us from the suffering that is a part of diminishment. We must plod through the suffering and walk the walk of our physical world; our faith in God cannot somehow remedy the diminishment. There is no way around the suffering, no way to eradicate the pain, avoid the losses, or wipe away the discomfort.

Our illumination stage is a special time when we discover new ways for learning about ourselves, new avenues for self-awareness.

Yet, in the struggle, in the pain, and in the heartache of physical diminishment, we can dig deeper into ourselves and find the stamina, the perseverance, the steadfastness, and the true spiritual “grit” that resides there. We can ask God to bring spiritual power (virtue) to bear in our lives. Physical diminishments therefore bring us into closer connection

with our real power, our genuineness, and our authenticity; physical diminishments offer us a clearer picture of our truer reality – the real us.

If we fail to dig deeper into ourselves and discover our true reality, we are doomed to searching only the outer world for the strength to deal with our physical diminishments. The world has no strength, it has no answers for us; science cannot conquer death. Certainly we are to use the very best that science can offer, and that’s considerable. Yet, if that’s the only place where we search, then we can never surrender to God; we don’t find our true spiritual “grit” with which God has gifted us so we can deal mightily with the maladies of living in the illumination years.

Confronting Self vs. Becoming Self-Absorbed

The degree to which we can plumb the depths of our authentic self and discover there our spiritual uniqueness.

Our illumination stage is a special time when we discover new ways for learning about ourselves, new avenues for self-awareness. The process of individuation, of progressively becoming the person who we really are most accurately, proceeds through our entire life. Yet in the illumination stage there appears to be a natural resurgence of this lifelong phenomenon. In

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the second half of our lives we begin diverting increasing portions of our energy away from learning about the world outside of us and into learning about the unique world inside of us.

Our life can be seen as a progressive unfolding of our “real” selves. With each step of our life journey we encounter new events, relationships, occasions, etc. Each life event is another potential learning opportunity when and where we can continue the sacred process of unfolding our true selves, or chose to do the opposite.



If we fail to make our illumination years a hero’s journey of discovery of the holy self that resides deep within us, then we place ourselves at risk of lapsing into a lackluster life, centering our focal power on our worldly selves. The conversations of some people in their illumination years become dry and lifeless when they increasingly focus their attention on their own physical maladies. Such

persons seem myopically mesmerized, even enraptured, by their bodily changes. They can wax on and on describing the conditions of the various systems of their bodies in acute detail. They seem to choke on a self-focused narrowness that robs them of their vitality, their verve, and their personal vibrancy.

Mentorship vs. Becoming a Critic

The degree to which we find and can exploit avenues for passing on whatever wisdom we ourselves may have learned.

Developing a mentor role, the urge to pass on vital “life-learning” to younger generations is a necessary activity for those in their illumination years. We find healthy delight in teaching others some of the “pearls” of life we have learned. Through success and failure, awe and hardship, wonder and devastation, we have gained greater command over the forces and impulses that govern our behavior. When we reach our illumination years, our own historical mass of experience compels us to make personal contact with those younger than us and prepare them for what’s ahead and perhaps allow them to escape some of the “mistakes” we have made along the way.

Yet it is on the spiritual plane where mentors have their greatest

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impact. When a mentor can share his or her faith journey, a new dimension of growth opens both for the mentor and the mentee. This is where the richness of life can be shared, filling the mentor with exceptional joy.

If we cannot, or do not, find expression for the mentorship impulse that resides in us, then we place ourselves at risk of becoming a life critic. Such persons attempt to cover-up their sense of being uninvolved in the mainstream of life by paradoxically attacking it. They ultimately become consummate fault-finders. They never fail to make critical comment on virtually everything that crosses their purview. Because they can find no outlet for their own life experience, and they fail to teach what's inside of them, they become contrary, and "turn" on the very culture that nurtured them for so long. They become taciturn, cantankerous, irascible, and rude.

Becoming Involved vs. Alienation

The degree to which we have found ways of exercising good stewardship of our time, our talents, and our gifts.

Regardless of our age we are still charged with expressing our gifts and talents, still expected to contribute to the larger community; to give of self, to assist others, and to generally endeavor to make this world better. Discovering

an arena for personal activity where we can express our gifts proves troublesome for some in their illumination years. "Where can I go?" "What assistance could I possibly offer?" or, "I have no gifts or talents that anybody needs!" Such thinking sabotages our mandate of discovering people and places, situations and human needs where we can contribute by offering what is uniquely our own.

Our entire lives we have received personal benefits from our work or our life causes. Among these benefits are: a sense of accomplishment, time management, socialization, and a certain status, i.e., a place in the order of the community. These needs don't just evaporate as we move into the illumination years; they remain needs. We must continue to find arenas where these needs can be fruitfully expressed, so that the fullness of our endowment from God can be fulfilled.

If we fail in our spiritual developmental task of "becoming involved," then we risk "falling into alienation." Alienation robs our soul of vitality and deadens our spirit because it cuts us off from the life-force of the community. Involvement invites us to enter into the community and take our rightful place, shining our unique spark of God's light into some dark corner. We aren't ever called to reform the entire world, only lighten a small space that is near at hand. Alienation pushes us away from the

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community; it is a thief that steals our very soul from us, leaving us shallow and hollow. Eventually we become reclusive, preferring avoidance rather than involvement.

Wisdom vs. Confusion

The degree to which we have developed a spiritual understanding of life that gives a unifying order to our soul.

What is wisdom? This essential virtue is recognized as the laurel crown of the soul awarded to those who aspire to spiritual heights in their illumination years. Wisdom has many faces, each uniquely reflected in the minds and hearts of those advancing toward elderhood. Wisdom is a sense of life's coherence; a conviction that life is understandable. Wisdom includes the conviction that one's life will continue to have meaning right up to the very last.

Wisdom means investing in others; being interested in, and supportive of, the dreams of others we love and the community at large.

Wisdom recognizes that life is difficult and that the process of maturation is even more so; yet paradoxically, as we more fully integrate this perception into our personality, we also plant the seeds that will grow into the

power necessary for transcending life's difficulties. Wisdom acknowledges and accepts that tragedy exists. With this acceptance comes transcendence. Wisdom means investing in others; being interested in, and supportive of, the dreams of others we love and the community at large.

The degree to which we cannot approach wisdom places us at risk in our illumination years of becoming increasingly confused. This is not the mental confusion of dementia, but rather the confusion that results when we cannot extract personal meaning from the ongoing process of our lives. Such confusion leads to physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual agitation, a free-floating anxiety that attacks our peace of mind and heart. According to the celebrated developmentalist Eric Erikson, confusion manifests itself in many ways: erosion of support system, decline in mental functioning, boredom, fears of physi-



cal decline, rejection of aging peers, disillusionment, and lack of meaning. We cleave only to ourselves and live out of the mainstream because we feel emotionally “unglued.”

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Innocence vs. Irritability

The degree to which we can rediscover our childlike qualities of awe, wonder, and delight.

Our illumination years can be seen as ushering in another spiritual task that can be termed “emancipated innocence.” Returning to innocence allows us to unearth the “child within” and rediscover those childlike qualities that may have lain fallow since childhood. Innocence allows us more fully to perceive ourselves and the world with renewed imagination and possibility. We can slow down, “smell the roses,” and appreciate the wonder and miracle of life itself.

This renewed innocence ushers in a new “prime of life” where we can once again feel childlike excitement, adolescent stimulation, and renewed dynamic interaction with life itself. This energizes us and refills our life with dreams, curiosity, laughter, and play. Innocence gives us a lively awareness, a mindfulness of the joy of living in the now. This means freeing ourselves from old forms of thinking, old attitudes, and developing thoughts of delight. Surprise, inventiveness, and flexibility are the hallmarks of this newly reemerging innocence of the child within.

When we cannot tap into our inner child, we can slip into a noxious

notion that the world is somehow against us. As a consequence we become critical, we defend ourselves, and insulate ourselves from a world we have come to see as harsh and unfriendly. We build coping strategies and behaviors that are designed to protect us from discordant outside forces that we see as threatening. Our criticism somehow gives us the distorted notion that we have in some strange way overcome others; it gives us a hollow sense of potency, a false strength that makes us think that we have somehow subdued the “evil” forces that exist “out there” and returned some of the blame that we feel is due them.

Taking Stock vs. Dependency

The degree to which we can arrive at the profound spiritual truth that God’s hand has been upon us at every step of our life journey

It is in our illumination years that the pace of making sense of our entire life quickens. In this time, external and internal forces converge giving us the opportunity to gain a global perspective of how God has been at work in all the days of our lives. We search for the patterns, the themes, the successes, and the failures that have all combined into the amazing amalgam we call our life. It is in this blessed illumination time that we earnestly dig into ourselves and resurrect what is genuinely ours. In a sense

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we accomplish the work required to “co-create” the self that we truly are.

The manner, the insight, the forethought, and the spiritual anticipation we give to our own death can lead to a sense of completion in us.

It’s in the clarifying and the telling of our personal stories that we can arrange and rearrange the facts of our lives into a cohesive whole, a seamless ribbon of living and loving, of tears and triumphs, of dangers and delights, of passion and peace that all flood into our minds as we move through the transitions of our lives. In our illumination years we rediscover and redefine the past challenges that we knew were hard at the time that we were crossing the scary bridges of our lives, but which now take on a new significance as we look back and re-experience them in the light of what has occurred since.

When we cannot find the sense of security inside, we seek outside forces, external supports to provide us with some semblance of hope. We feel inadequate inside and begin looking to others for the confidence we can’t seem to muster up from within ourselves. Over time we become dependent on others because we can’t seem to develop a healthy dependence on God. We flail about, frantically turning over every stone as it were, looking for that person, that medicine,

that formula that will be the “solution” to our problem and bring us relief from the horrible insecurity that has befallen us.

Creative Completion vs. Infantilization

The degree to which we can face death creatively, with forethought, insight, and spiritual anticipation.

The concept of “creative completion” rests not only in approaching life creatively, but also facing death creatively. Creative living requires originality; it is “participation which sees life not as an arrival or as an end, but as a journey into the very moments of death” (*Creative Aging*, Mary Baird Carlsen, p. 2) Death is a mystery, and yet it is as common as life; it is a life task we all must enter into.

The manner, the insight, the forethought, and the spiritual anticipation we give to our own death can lead to a sense of completion in us. This completion is not a morbid recognition of “the end,” but the robust, vitalizing, and full-colored understanding and appreciation that death is but a commencement not unlike our commencement from high school. It marks both an end of one phase of life and the beginning of another. This healthy peace we make with death is the final spiritual developmental task of our illumination years, a task that will

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carry us through to the end of our earthly sojourn.

Infantilization, becoming like a child, is a way of pulling back from full participation in life by ever increasing dependence on others, on the world, on medicine, on substances, on compulsions, etc. Infantilization, reducing one's beliefs, perception, thinking, and feelings to the opinions of others is all too commonly seen in the later decades of our lives. In a strange way, dependency forces us to almost beg for direction from others, and yet when we get it, we still feel insecure and seek further direction, which appears to others as though we are rejecting the very counsel just given.

them to completion. It is only through the mysterious animating mechanisms of grace that we can tap into the abundant power of our soul and find therein the necessary energy to embrace these tasks and incorporate them into the fabric of our lives.

The illumination years constitute a collective time and space of life designed by God for entering into a new unity and coherence of living, a time for ongoing personal renewal, emotional re-invigoration, and spiritual regeneration. The illumination years offer the holy grail of wisdom and a time for a renewed soul and a renewed heart now better aligned with the flow of God's grace pumping a new passion for spiritual aliveness.

Spiritual Growth Plan

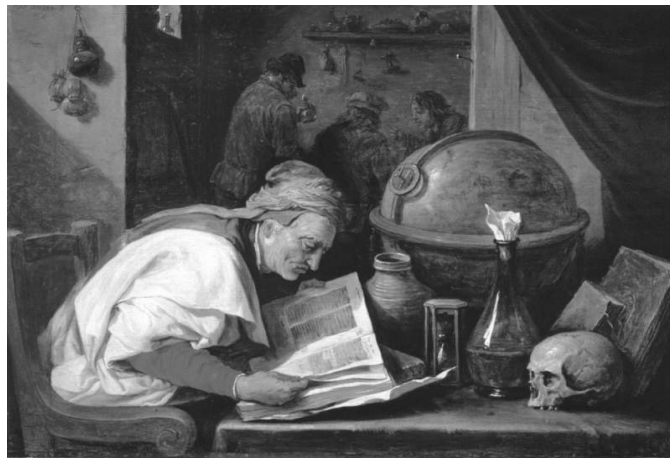
Each of these ten tasks requires a new commitment, and demands a new motivating power from deep within us. The energy that animates our commitment and motivates us to follow the imperative of God's call and live abundantly in our illumination years is the same energy that has always motivated us – the power of grace. These ten challenges are ultimately resolved in our lives on a spiritual or soul plane. On the human level alone, we lack the fortitude necessary to address these ten tasks with the confidence and tenacity that is required to bring



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Maintaining Spirituality in the Mature Years

by Raymond Studzinski, O.S.B.



With a wealth of literary allusions, Father Raymond Studzinski writes about the path to aging gracefully. “Sustaining others in hope as well as cultivating it in ourselves gives us renewed energy and a sense of purpose,” he says.

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The “golden years” is a common way of designating those later decades of our lives; yet often the experience we have as we grow older is far from “golden.” One elder remarked; “One doesn’t understand, but sometimes one’s thinking matter is barely alive and the aging frame just does not permit you to do things. Old age is a punishment, I think.”¹

Admittedly, growing older presents challenges to us as we face significant diminishment. Even keeping ourselves spiritually energized is not without its difficulties. Rather than the golden colors of autumn leaves speaking to us of a loving God, the source of all beauty, we may find ourselves beset by the anticipation of winter with its coldness, starkness, and its cry of absence – a God silent and out of reach. How we can survive and even flourish spiritually in the midst of such circumstances is the question we want to consider here.

Interestingly, Carl Jung, who did so much to help us appreciate the possibilities for us as persons as we mature and move through the lifespan, also had a deep and abiding interest in alchemy, the medieval science which concerned itself with changing base metals into gold.² Perhaps, what we need is an alchemical approach to some of the base experiences of aging that would change them into spiritual gold for us.

The Alchemist, a recent novel by Paulo Coelho, may indeed provide some clues as to how to do that.³ In the story Santiago, a young shepherd, has a dream about treasure buried in Egypt. A mysterious king convinces him that he must follow his personal dream and so he goes in search of the treasure. His adventure takes him to Africa and to the desert and he proceeds on his way to the pyramids. During the twists and turns of his journey he meets a number of people who help him including the alchemist. It is the alchemist who tells him that he has to find life in the desert for only the person who can find life in the desert can find the treasure.

Throughout the journey the shepherd learns to listen to his heart and read the various signs that are given to him and so does find life in the midst of barrenness. In the end he finds his treasure, not where he had traveled, but where his journey had started. It is a story about finding gold, something really valuable, in the fabric of life, even in the desert.

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What can be drawn from this story as well as many others in the Christian and monastic tradition is that there are practices which can in effect help change deserts into gardens, which can make somber grays into vibrant colors, which can make tired souls into vibrant elders. In what follows we will look at some of these practices which can make such a difference in our lives. They are nothing new; indeed, many of them are listed in Chapter 4 of the *Rule of Benedict*, “The Tools for Good Works.”



Paying Attention

One of the striking features of the shepherd in *The Alchemist* is how much he pays attention to what happens to him and around him. Probably most people have not given too much thought to paying attention since their school days when they had to pay attention to class lectures in order to pass exams. Yet paying attention is a very important spiritual practice and one that is associated with contemplation. For

what one attends to above all is God. Indeed, *acedia*, the vice which John Cassian saw as especially pernicious, is a disease of *inattention* when we forget what we should really be focused on and give ourselves over to useless distractions. Boredom is the term we use most often to describe what can be a habitual state of inattentiveness.⁴ To attend is to be in a state of receptivity much as Mary was at the Annunciation or Abraham and Sarah were at the time of their visita-

Paying attention not only to what is outside us but also to what is interior to ourselves is a way to mine the gold found in the hills of our accumulated years.

tion by the divine guests. Paying attention means that we are ready to respond because more is being said to us and more is being asked of us. We pay attention because we know the “more” breaks through to us from the ordinary, the mundane, the unexciting. Growing older for us students in the school of the Lord’s service does not exempt us from continuing to pay attention.

Contemplative attending requires that we wait in patience for that which we long to manifest itself. As we do this, we develop a faith vision that enables us to truly see and not merely look around as we might when we are browsing in a store and we tell the

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clerk “I am just looking.” To truly see, to truly attend is to approach what surrounds us as the poet does with awareness of the “more” which grounds the waterfall, the sunset, the rose. In Gerard Manley Hopkins’s memorable term we see the “inscape” and not just the landscape. To see the inscape is to see through the reality in front of us to the God who is its

*see them close to the window and also in the top branches. They are already there even when the yellow falling foliage was still hiding them. Should we be so thankless and of so little faith that we deliberately overlook among the falling withered leaves the buds that here cling tenaciously to trunk and branches?*⁶



source.⁵ The *Rule of Benedict* invites such attending when it instructs us about receiving guests or caring for the tools of the monastery. A German pastor imprisoned in a Nazi prison camp and awaiting certain execution sent a letter to his wife in which he clearly manifests his contemplative attending. He writes about the power of faith and what he is able to see with eyes of faith:

Once again the chestnut tree is preaching a sermon to me. Its bare black branches reach out to me so promisingly bearing the small brown buds for next spring. I can

Paying attention not only to what is outside us but also to what is interior to ourselves is a way to mine the gold found in the hills of our accumulated years. Deep feelings within us can be the focus of our attention and can yield wisdom if we give them time to speak to us. What proves an obstacle is our need to be in control and to be doing something rather than allowing something to unfold within us. As we make ourselves receptive to what is within, we can often find ourselves prompted to make some shift in our life that will free up energy and make us vital once

We pay attention because we know the “more” breaks through to us from the ordinary, the mundane, the unexciting.

again.⁷ Paying attention to feelings in addition to our usual aches and pains was a practice which Ignatius Loyola learned himself and then prescribed in the program he set forth in his classic *Spiritual Exercises*.⁸ Most especially we need to pay attention to the

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mystery within, to the God whom we find in our hearts. Of course, keeping ourselves still and focused on God is a challenge; we so easily get distracted and caught up in other things. Cassian recommended the repetition of the Psalm verse: “O God, come to my assistance, O Lord, make haste to help me” (Ps 70 [69]).⁹ The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and contemporary exponents of centering prayer recommend the choice of one word which is used to quiet the mind and keep one focused.¹⁰ The manifest fruit of such prayer is the deep sense of centeredness which comes over us and sustains us through the ups and downs of daily life. We also learn to rest in God, to allow God to touch and heal us in the core of our being.

What is necessary is not to have a perfect story but one which by the grace of God is good enough.

Paying attention requires living in the present and experiencing what is going on right in this moment. Rather than preoccupied with what may have transpired in the past or worried about the future, we harness our energies to attend to the now. This opens us to those divine visitations which happen around us. Like Simeon and Anna in the temple, we are ready to see the blessing which will unfold in front of us. Life acquires richness as we are able to enter into our experience of friends, of beauty, of nature more fully. The *Rule of Benedict* with its

focus on hearing God’s voice today and on seizing this present moment to begin living fully encourages our embracing life with eyes opened wide, fully awake and attentive.

Listening - Reading

As we quiet down and pay attention, we may find ourselves able to listen to God in a deeper way even if our physical hearing may have declined. One Anglican priest reflected on his experience of moving to a retirement home and the changes that it brought about in him:

We used to chatter to [God] all the time. . . . Lots of us began by being taught by our mothers to say prayers, then shown by our teachers how to say more prayers, and so on we went, talking, talking, talking! But praying? [An old friend] . . . wrote, “It is no longer a question of ‘Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth,’ but ‘Hear Lord for thy servant speaketh.’”¹¹

One place where God speaks is in the Scriptures as St. Cyprian reminded us many centuries ago.¹² So, our new found ability to really listen can lead to a renewed appreciation of *lectio divina* as where we hear God in the Scriptures.

But we have not only the sacred books of the Scriptures to read, we

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have as well the book of our life experiences. In the course of living we have written with life's events our own story. It, too, can be a treasure chest of wisdom for even our mistakes may now be seen in the light of faith as "necessary faults" so that we learned to depend less on ourselves and more on God. Reading one's life story and listening to God speaking to us through it requires the same attentiveness that *lectio* of the Scriptures does and also the same digging as the meaning and graced significance of some events or relationships may not be immediately apparent.



The Scriptures, of course, offer us master stories as keys for understanding our own. For monastic people theology is experiential and not abstractions disconnected from life. Some decades ago Anton Boisen, the founder of the Clinical Pastoral Education movement, spoke about learning theology from reading living

human documents.¹³ Reading and re-reading the story we have written so far, our own living human document, can be an exercise in theology which does not lead to idle speculation but to heartfelt prayer. To probe God's involvement in our life stories leads us to see the scandalous closeness of God to human persons. God has indeed been traveling with us on our life journey.

Hope is a communal activity and involves shared imaginings.

Reading the text of our lives may remind us of unfinished business. Like the Scriptures our life text may issue a call to action, putting before us various tasks such as forgiveness of self and others which we have put off for too long. With passing years we gain perspective and so we can assess our involvements more accurately, realize more fully our flaws and failures as well as those of other people. To us and to them we can administer the balm of forgiveness and bring closure to perhaps painful episodes that have festered in our memories for many years. What begins to come into sharper focus as we age is that our life story, every life story, has its rough spots – chapters which we may regret and wish had not happened.

What is necessary is not to have a perfect story but one which by the

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grace of God is good enough. Our God delights in finishing the work which we have begun and brings it to a perfection that we never could. Consequently, we are able to overcome what Erik Erikson saw as one of the struggles of growing older —the ten-

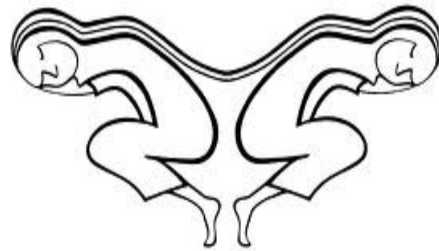
Clearly being a person of hope and an agent of hope for others is a critical vocation today and one that elders are invited to accept within society and our communities.

dency to give in to despair and disgust rather than grow in hope and be agents of hope in our communities. It is this latter role which can contribute mightily to our keeping vital in those golden years.

Hoping and Being Agents of Hope

Twice in the chapter on the Instruments of Good Works, we are reminded to be hopeful; we are told “Place your hope in God alone” and “Never lose hope in God’s mercy.”¹⁴ However, we may seldom think of hoping and promoting hope as practices that need to be cultivated and hence we need to take seriously the double recommendation in the *Rule*. Perhaps hope is that secret ingredient that makes monasticism so valuable to our world. Clearly being a person of hope and an agent of hope for others is a critical vocation today and one that elders are invited to

accept within society and our communities. In one sense seniors are uniquely equipped for it inasmuch as they typically have seen their share of misfortunes, wrong turns, human foibles and yet have come to know how good comes out of tragedy, how God and grace triumph ultimately. Peter in his Pentecost speech announced, using the Prophecy of Joel, that in these days of the Spirit the young shall have visions and the old shall dream dreams.¹⁵



Keeping a dream alive, replenishing a dream, is a function we can take on as we grow in years and look for ways to contribute to those who will continue on after us. In John Bunyan’s classic, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, an allegorical story about Christian and Christiana, two pilgrims journeying from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, Christian is helped on the journey by a companion named Hopeful. Without Hopeful, Christian would have drowned when he tried to cross the river separating him from the Celestial City.¹⁶ Hopeful reassures Christian that the bottom

Maintaining Spirituality in the Mature Years

of the river is firm and he won't drown. At one point Hopeful says, "These troubles and distresses that you go through are no sign that God has forsaken you, but they're sent to try you, to see whether you will call to mind that which you've received before of His goodness and depend upon Him in your distress."¹⁷ Certainly Hopeful's efforts can be symbolic of the tremendous witness and support given by seniors to juniors within a community which fulfill the RB's call for seniors to love their juniors.¹⁸ Such a practice of sustaining others in hope as well as cultivating it in ourselves gives us renewed energy and sense of purpose.

Hope is a communal activity and involves shared imaginings. It is hope that enables us to go forward in life undaunted by the difficulties which may lie ahead including death itself. Years ago Erik Erikson wrote: "Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death."¹⁹ It is a confidence which comes from the hope intimated in the verses from Robert Browning's poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra" where God says "A whole I planned,/ Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid."²⁰ Sharing imagining about the future in the face of death is common in the Christian and monastic tradition. Gregory the Great shares in his *Dialogues* the hopeful vision granted to two monks after Benedict's death. "In it they saw a road, strewn

with carpets and flashing with many lamps, which led straight eastward from his cell to heaven. Above this road stood a man radiant in appearance and dressed in a stately robe. When he asked whose road this was, they confessed that they did not know, and he told them, 'This is the road by which Benedict, beloved by the Lord, is ascending to heaven.'²¹ Along with sharing encouraging visions of the future, staying invested in what goes on around us as long as we can is what the practice of hoping and promoting hope entails.

Like the shepherd in Coelho's *The Alchemist*, we may find that the treasure, the gold which we seek, is not so much in those distant hills as right here where we began our search. It is found in the faith which moves mountains, the faith which knows that what we hope for, what our heart desires, the One in whom we have placed all our trust will provide. That faith is rooted in baptism which has given us the living hope won for us through the dying and rising of Jesus. As the First Letter of Peter affirms: "In this you rejoice, although now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1: 6-7 NAB). What beckons us together is that vision of the Holy

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City with streets of gold but no temple, for the temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. "Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever and ever" (Rev 22: 5 NAB).

ENDNOTES

¹ Cited in Ronald Blythe, *The View in Winter: Reflections on Old Age* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1979), 179.

² See, for instance, C. G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), 108-112.

³ Paolo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, trans. Alan R. Clarke (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁴ See Carol Zaleski, "Attending to Attention," in *Faithful Imagining: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Niebuhr*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee, Wayne Proudfoot, and Albert Blackwell, 127-49 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

⁵ See Urban T. Holmes, *Ministry and Imagination* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 93-100.

⁶ Letter from Pastor Paul Schneider to his wife, November 7, 1937 in Helmut Gollwitzer et al, eds. *Dying We Live* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956): 14-15, quoted in Edwin Schneidman, *Voices of Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980): 189.

⁷ See, for instance, applications of the technique of focusing developed by Eugene Gendlin to the spiritual life by Peter A. Campbell and Edwin M. McMahon in their *Bio-Spirituality: Focusing As a Way to Grow* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985) and *Focusing and Prayer* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1991); cf. Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

⁸ See the fine contemporary presentation of Ignatius Loyola's "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits" in Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for*

Everyday Living (New York: Crossroad, 2005).

⁹ Conference X, 2 in John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, 379 (New York: Paulist, 1997); see Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 110-11.

¹⁰ See *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York, Paulist, 1981): 131-34; and Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: Continuum, 1997): 43-51.

¹¹ In Blythe, *The View in Winter*, 251-52.

¹² See "To Donatus" 15 in *Saint Cyprian: Treatises*, trans. Roy J. Deferarri (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958): 20.

¹³ See Glenn H. Asquith, "Encountering Living Human Documents: Boisen and Clinical Pastoral Education" in *Vision from a Little Known Country: A Boisen Reader*, ed. Glenn H. Asquith, 229-37 (n.p.: Journal of Pastoral Care Publications, 1992).

¹⁴ RB 4: 41,74, *RB 1980: The Rule of Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, Timothy Fry et al., eds. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981): 182-85.

¹⁵ Acts 2:17.

¹⁶ See *The Pilgrim's Progress in Modern English*, ed. L. Edward Hazelbaker (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1998): 211-17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 214-15.

¹⁸ RB 63:10, *RB 1980*, 278-79.

¹⁹ *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963): 269.

²⁰ In *The Complete Works of Robert Brown-ing, with Variant Readings and Annotations*, Vol. 6, ed. John C. Berkey, Allan C. Dooley, and Susan E. Dooley (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 1996): 226

²¹ *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great: Book II, Saint Benedict*, trans. Myra L. Uhlfelder (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967): XXXVII, 47.

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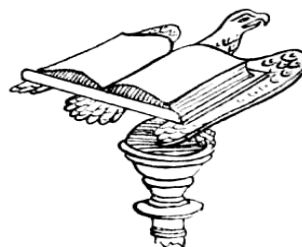
A BLESSED LIFE: Benedictine Guidelines for Those Who Long for Good Days. By Wil Derkse. Liturgical Press, 2009, 95 pages, \$11.95, ISBN 978-0-8146-1863-9.

Wil Derkse, in this small book outlines his perspectives on Benedictine spirituality 'for those who long for good days.' Since he is a Benedictine oblate, married, and a father of two adult daughters, he brings different insights to this topic. This book is applicable not only to oblates and lay people interested in Benedictine living, but also valuable to Benedictine religious themselves.

Since Derkse has a previous book on Benedictine living he does not presume that everyone has read it, so his opening chapter summarizes that book. Thereafter follow additional Benedictine attitudes that "may be fruitful in non-monastic contexts" as he says. "When I put them together, I noted that it is always about attitudes and virtues that both contrast with traits of character of contemporary culture and yet are painfully missed in our culture."

The following Benedictine attitudes are addressed:

- Cultivation of silence and rest
- Serious yet relaxed dedication to daily work and to daily study
- The appropriation of the virtue of humility which etymologically means the "courage to serve"
- Virtues of hospitality, care, good and fruitful stewardship, respect, gentleness, quiet patience, intelligent capacity



to discern, and 'generativity'. (In this chapter Derkse takes on a lifetime of work in interpreting these virtues and barely skims the surface. However, in his defense, he is promoting a lifestyle.)

- Positive ways to arrive at 'durable' joy
- Listening from the heart and speaking 'good words' in the right manner.

By far the best chapter is the one on humility. In modern language and daily examples he brings this virtue to life. This is the longest chapter in the book and demonstrates his wrestling with the topic as he read chapter 7 in the Rule of Benedict. Derkse states that Benedict wants us to know that "we are little people before each other and before the face of God, little people with limitations and boundaries, but with an unsuspected and lifelong potential for growth to be developed." He rephrases each of the twelve steps of humility in a language that is recognizable, for example, titling the seventh step, "Being glad that our inflated ego has been punctured" and the eighth step, "Joining yourself willing but not uncritically."

Martin Kessler translated the book from the original Dutch manuscript and as with most translations, some difficulty exists. Derkse uses examples of the Benedictine monasteries he knows from the

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Netherlands. Some are related to the culture there and not easy to relate to other cultures, yet there is a commonality of Benedictine life throughout the world that is impressive.

**Janelle Maes, OSB
Atchison, Kan.**

CATHERINE OF SIENA: A Passionate Life. By Donald Brophy. Blue-Bridge, 2010, 289 pages, \$24.95, ISBN-13: 978-1933346281.

Too often one assumes St. Catherine of Siena was an anorexic gadabout woman, convincing popes to do the right thing, whatever that was, in those complex political city-states of the middle ages. This book wipes out those misconceptions and helps the reader see why Catherine was considered a saint in her own time. She has much to teach us today about sanctity and women in the Church.

This new study, based on the latest known about the fourteenth century and period research on Catherine herself, was a delight to read. This historical period developed clarity for this reader, who once loved to study medieval history. It is a good biography from any angle.

In her lifetime (1347-1380) Catherine was known as a wonder worker. Now we think of her as a truth teller. This “uneducated daughter of a Sieneese dyer has become the champion of today’s church reformers who use her as model for plain speaking when confronting authority.”

This book gives a feel for the medieval city of Siena, which had a population of about 50,000. The main commerce was banking, leather and cloth. Her parents were not of the nobility, but her father was a guild member, which carried no small status.

Her parents had twenty-five children. Most died in childhood, but ten names are known. Catherine arrived with a twin sister, who did not live long. Since she was late among her siblings she was bonded closer to her mother, who would in later life become a disciple of Catherine’s. While she was still an infant, the devastating bubonic plague arrived in Siena. Growing up Catherine had the double burden of knowing she had survived her twin sister as well as the plague, and was thus in some sense a ‘chosen one.’

A joyful and pious child, her first vision of Christ came at about age six. As a teen she declared her intention not to marry. She spent about three years mostly in a small room in her parents’ house engaged in solitary prayer, attending daily mass, walking in the family garden in the evenings. In this solitude Catherine wanted to grow closer to God. The way was painful, requiring courage and perseverance. Voluntary suffering at that time was not masochistic, but seen as a way to restore peace to humankind. Thus she practiced penances, extreme fasting not being the least.

During this time she came to know and later join the Mantellate, holy women associated with the Dominicans, rather like today’s third orders. She found the repetition of the designated prayers

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boring and sought among the other Mantellate a noble woman who taught her to read the psalms, as Catherine longed to do.

When at age twenty she began an intense public life, many followers became a little community around her. Her wisdom and obvious holiness were like a magnet to those disposed to seek God. It was not easy for her to stay focused on God when she had so many other options, but manage she did. She carried out the works of mercy along with other Mantellates. She still communicated with God in dreams and visions and ecstatic states. She did make a famous trip to Avignon to urge Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome and assume his leadership responsibilities. Needless to say, she met with considerable opposition from various quarters. Gregory did in time return to a suburb of Rome, but these were conflicted days, with political, commercial and church powers intertwined.

Catherine was loyal to the Church, some might say even to a fault, especially toward the end of her life. It was always union with God that she sought. "By this light, I shall come to know that you, eternal Trinity, are table and food and water for us."

Catherine was named a patron of Italy in 1940. In 1970 Pope Paul VI named her one of the first female Doctors of the Church, though she lacked formal education, teaching herself to write as an adult. In 1999, Pope John Paul II named her one of the six patron saints of Europe.

**Barbara McCracken, OSB
Atchison, Kan.**

THE IMMORTAL LIFE OF HENRIETTA LACKS. By Rebecca Skloot. Crown. 2010. 369 pages. \$26.00. ISBN: 978-1-4000-5217-2.

How can the story of the small, dime-sized sample of cancerous cells from a poor, black, 30-year-old woman being treated for cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins Hospital be the topic of a 350-plus page book? This may sound like a simple, uninteresting topic, but the book is a combination biography, detective story, science lesson, medical research study, and exposé on life in the United States in the mid-twentieth century that is both detailed and yet easy to read and understand.

Skloot tells the life story of Henrietta Lacks, a poor black woman from Clover, Virginia, from whom doctors took cells from her cervix when they were treating her for cancer. As researchers attempted to learn to grow cells in a culture that could be used for medical and scientific purposes, doctors routinely took cells from patients without their knowledge or consent. Such it was for Henrietta. The story would have ended here as it did for most people when their cells did not reproduce, but Henrietta's cancerous cells were different. HeLa, as they came to be known, reproduced prolifically then and still do to this day.

There are estimates that over 50 million metric tons of HeLa cells have been grown in laboratories around the world. Millions of dollars have been made selling HeLa cells to laboratories and in the discoveries that have come from using them. HeLa cells have been used in laboratories where researchers developed the

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polio vaccine, tested drugs for treating herpes, leukemia, influenza, hemophilia, Parkinson's disease, studied human longevity, and many more things. HeLa cells have become a standard item in laboratories for the past fifty years.

Having heard one brief mention about Henrietta Lacks in her high school biology class in regard to HeLa cells, Skloot's curiosity was piqued. She spent over ten years getting to know Lacks, her family history and her descendents in order to tell her story. Very little was known about the donor of the HeLa cells before Skloot's book—there was even confusion as to the donor's actual name. The book details how Skloot got to know the family and thus was able to provide an accurate and descriptive picture of the woman who provided the HeLa cells.

Finding Lacks' family, making contact with them, and having them tell their story was no easy feat. Since the family only learned of the contribution Henrietta's cells made to science some twenty years after her death and since they have made no profit from the multimillion dollar industry these cells produced, understandably, they were quite reluctant to talk to Skloot about Henrietta and her life and their own lives. Through patience and trust, Skloot got to know the family and does an amazingly thorough job of telling both Lacks' past and her family's life after her death. No longer is HeLa just the name of some cells used in laboratories around the world, now they have a context—HeLa is Henrietta Lacks who has a history, a story of her own, and descendents who are alive today.

Interwoven with the details of Henrietta Lacks' and her family's life, this book also educates the reader in many other issues related to Henrietta's life and the HeLa cells to help the reader understand the magnitude of her contribution to science and the human race. Skloot describes the scientific research involved in the quest to grow human cells outside the body, the description of how cervical cancer was treated in the middle of the twentieth century, and the contamination problems with growing human cells in cultures. All the medical and scientific research and terminology is described in a way that is understandable to one who does not have a degree in biology or medicine. Through Henrietta's story, we also learn about medical care in the U.S. for poor black people during this time period and how racism is intertwined with questions about research on human subjects both with and without their knowledge. Many issues in bioethics are raised and brought to the forefront through the unearthing and the telling of Lacks' life.

**Linda Herndon, OSB
Atchison, Kan.**

THE NUN AND THE DOCTOR. A Conversion Love Story at Midlife.

Richard P. Johnson. Ages Press, 2004,
276 pages, \$10 ISBN-0-9743623-2-8.

A novel? Yes, sometimes a novel embodies a profound meaning in an engaging way, reaching persons who may

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not have other means to hear, to learn and to be touched with an important message.

The Nun and the Doctor is the sole novel among 20 books and numerous articles by author Richard P. Johnson. His writings, workshops, retreats and conference presentations typically focus on the spiritual and psychological changes inherent in one's middle (ages 40-65) and later years. The author is director of Senior Adult Ministry of the Johnson Institute located in St. Louis, Mo.

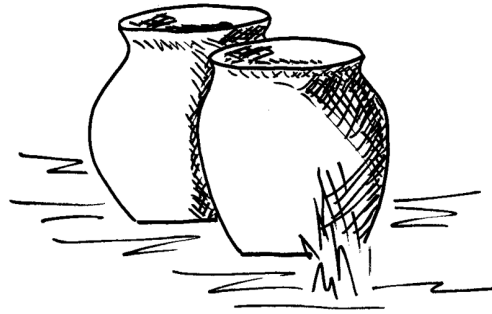
The doctor? The reader first meets Dr. Stanley Renowski yelling to the surgical staff in the opening words of chapter one: "Will you wake-up! What do you think you're doing? Either follow my lead or get out. If you were any good, you'd anticipate my moves ahead of me!" The doctor remains in his usual frenzied state, and the concluding words of that chapter further reveal his life's driving force: "Renowski punched his stopwatch signaling yet another triumph . . . over surgeons . . . everywhere! Renowski lived to conquer, for both the pleasure of the hunt, and the spoils of being on top – unquestionably on top."

And the nun? Prior to her 25 years in the convent, Sister Theresa spent 10 years as a stewardess. She became a cloistered nun, and the reader hears her inner lament: "I still haven't mastered the art of praying. I condemned myself for my insufficiency. I expected perfection."

What brings these two together? A terrible car accident happens to the doctor along with his wife, while a tragic accident in the monastery happens to the nun.

The results? "He could move his head, but couldn't get response elsewhere in his body." And in answer to the question of the young male EMT to the nun, "Does anything hurt?" the injured Sister Theresa whispered so that the other sisters could not hear, "I can't move my legs!"

The third main character of this story is Jan, the head nurse for the spinal cord injury rehabilitation floor. As she was greeting Sister Theresa, she was interrupted by a commotion down the hall. "You kept me waiting for five minutes in the ambulance. Is this the quality I can expect in this place? Take me someplace else; get me out of here."



As *The Nun and the Doctor* unfolds, the reader follows the journey for each of them – its pains, resistances, victories, confusion, fears, surprises, separations, mutuality, and much more. The unfolding of one's authentic self is truly a labyrinth journey – "who I have become" and "who I think I am" is not enough, it is not the full picture. A new birthing is underway.

Johnson presents an authentic and absorbing story. But there is also, for those open to it, much to learn, to reflect on about changes humans experience in

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mid-life and later years. Johnson's novel reflects a conviction underlying all his works. He writes: "At each stage and age of life the deepest yearning of our soul cries out in distinct ways . . . yet we may miss the message. We must be still, live in the moment, and listen, listen, listen."

For one who is drawn to "listen" to more of Dr. Johnson's perceptions, especially those regarding the spiritual developmental tasks in our maturing years of mid-life and beyond, information and materials, including a free newsletter, are available at: drjohnson@LifelongAdultMinistry.org.

Jan Futrell, OSB
Piedmont, Okla.



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Haikus at Mt. Lemmon

Frequent thunderstorms
created flowing rapids
monsoon season time.

Mountain stream rapids
rush across rocks, small and large
music to my ears.

Walking forest trail
beyond Turkey Run Canyon
lectio moment.

Marcia Ziska, OSB
Atchison, Kan.

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