

REMARKS: PONTIFICAL CONFERENCE ON AGING, 12/2/2010

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I represent the aging demographic this conference discusses. I am approaching 77 years old and live in a continuing care retirement community with 450 other people. We reflect a *fairly* representative sample of men and women aged 65 to 100 years dealing with the joys, struggles, anxieties and health issues that are faced each day.

Recently, I wrote a book entitled “Aging – The Autumn Phase of Life.” This work was inspired by three things: 1) observation of my friends and neighbors living with us; 2) experiences of my own extended family while dealing with age related issues; and, 3) by the reactions of friends who are still living independently in their own homes.

First, let me briefly describe those living with us at Mary’s Woods, a retirement center owned by The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. When we moved to this place five years ago, we were struck by the rich and distinguished lives that had been lived by our new neighbors. They were accomplished, generous, friendly, interesting and loving. Our number includes doctors, ministers, teachers, political figures, business executives, scientists, engineers and architects, among others. While titles told us what these people had done, we were more impressed with who they were and the rich fabric of their lives. Listening to their life stories provided the initial impetus to my book. By interviewing a cross section of these people, I was sure that I could fascinate any reader with their intriguing narratives.

Second, my wife and I experienced some difficult situations with aging relatives and saw, first hand, what happens when people deny the aging process. As we learned, the results can be grim not just for the aging person but for their friends and loved ones as well.

Finally, my wife and I were amazed at the reactions of our friends when we decided to move from our home into Mary’s Woods. Our friends exhibited disbelief that we would give up our home and independence, downsize our possessions and move to “an old folks’ home” at our ages. When we asked what their plans were for the time in life when they might need some additional assistance with daily living, or less responsibility for a home or when their health began to deteriorate, we pretty much received blank stares.

So, the book was written. The most important parts of this book are the personal stories. It contains six major themes. Today, I will focus on three of the six themes that are most relevant to the structure of this conference.

First, when do we get old? Of course, everyone gets old if they live long enough. But old age is more than physical change. It also involves the attitudinal, emotional, psychological and spiritual changes as we age

chronologically. Further, how we care for our body, mind and spirit can dramatically affect the aging process.

Second, I will discuss the distorted prism through which many people view the aging process. Why do we deny that we are aging? What causes us to ignore the need to plan for different living circumstances as we get older? This misguided thinking can lead to much heartache for everyone involved.

Finally, I will suggest the aging process can be viewed as petals on a beautiful flower. When we become old, we suffer a series of losses. These losses are like pulling the petals off this lovely flower one by one. How do we deal with these losses? We can curl up in the fetal position and await our ultimate fate. Or, we can decide to live our final years, months and days as productively and pleasantly as possible, while building our legacy for future generations to emulate and admire.

Let me now address these three themes.

When do we get old? Consider family scrapbooks. My wife and I have scrapbooks with pictures of us from our toddler stage right through today. Our six children and fourteen grandchildren are also depicted as well as all the wonderful places in this world we have visited. Looking at these old books and then glancing into a mirror teaches a lesson. I can track my physical progress from a young boy right through the years to the present. The pictures document the *physical* changes that have occurred but they are one dimensional because they only show differences in body shape and size, coloring of hair and gravity's effects on sagging chins, stomachs and cheeks. Pictures do not record the emotional, spiritual, psychological and attitudinal changes which have also taken place. My scrapbooks do not offer much help in answering the question, "When did I get old?"

We also must recognize that we all age at a different rate. At Mary's Woods, I know many young ninety-five year old people and many old seventy-five-year-old people. So, the number of years of life is only a partial indication. When I interviewed the residents and asked this question, "When did you get old," the responses usually focused on a specific health-related incident, for example, a serious illness, a stroke or a bad fall. Many told me, "I knew I was old after that event happened."

A remarkably sharp-witted ninety-nine year old lady responded to my question emphatically, "No! No! I am not old! I may be decrepit but I am not old." This woman is a talented artist, loves to read on her iPod and composes limericks as a hobby. She has a whole raft of infirmities which she refers to as "annoyances" but they hardly slow her active and interesting daily life.

Maybe the question "when did I get old" is not that important anyway. Things are what they are. Perhaps you have reached seventy, eighty—or even more. If you were featured in a local newspaper article, you can be assured of

being described as an “elderly person.” As young people would say, “Get over it!”

It has been said that those who do not feel old, whatever their chronological age, one day realize with a kind of numbing astonishment that they have not managed to elude it. They are older than they ever thought they could possibly become. They are now called “seniors” or “the elders” or the “elder generation” despite the fact that they feel no different now than they did a year ago. Except for the telling of the years, of course. And, in the end, those make all the difference. ¹

As we look back along the road of life already walked, each of us seems to be merely at a different milepost, a place not necessarily dependent upon our chronological age. Some lead, others follow; the road eventually reaches a destination while at the starting point new travelers begin their own journey. A perfect continuum is in place. Our journey may contain pleasant stretches, but it is seldom smooth, it’s often lonely and sometimes dark. And yet, daylight does come and then we look around in the morning light to glimpse the others traveling with us. Their presence gives us stamina, hope and courage for the next stage of our journey. The aging phase of life is so much easier when it is not encountered alone. Our companions—loved ones, family, friends—are important participants in our travel, encouraging and cheering us on as we approach the final way station.

The second theme is the distorted prism through which many view aging. As Benjamin Franklin said, “All would live long but none would be old.” I recall the time in my forties when I realized I had done little to plan for events after my professional life was over. My wife and I began to discuss what life would be like in twenty years or so. Where would we live? Would our financial resources be adequate to support us in retirement? What did the word “retirement” mean anyway? Most of us assume retirement is a terminal point when daily work ceases. Would I spend this time in a recliner chair watching TV? Or would retirement be more about doing interesting things I never had time for during my professional career?

I believe the most insidious part of this march to one’s retirement is stealth—suddenly it is upon you. This event, whenever it occurs, introduces significant changes in your life.

Here I can relay many case histories of people who reached retirement without a plan for the future. People reaching the end of life’s work often enjoy the initial aftermath of work’s end. Couples report that they are doing pretty well. Yes, they say, we have the aches and pains associated with our advanced ages but compared to our friends we’re doing fine—and now they offer a crucial modifier—and *we expect it will stay that way into the future*. One of the most profound truisms about aging is this: *Nothing stays the same*.

That last phrase gets most people into a lot of trouble. Nothing is so detrimental to successfully navigating old age than the idea that you are somehow exempt from aging and the attendant changes it imposes. This denial can get any of us into difficulty. Why? Because the assumption is incorrect! Each new day brings changes, some that are imperceptible, but changes nonetheless. Our misguided thinking can cause us to ignore the “what’s next” part of our life.

Here’s the mistaken line of thinking. If things are going to be pretty much the same, why should I think about or plan too far ahead? Therefore, I won’t worry about the future state of my health; my potential need for some level of care as times passes, the possibility of downsizing while I still have the energy to do it, or making different living arrangements that will better reflect my future needs. It’s just easier to say, “I’m feeling OK, life continues to be pretty good, I still get around and enjoy my friends, family, an occasional trip and the comfort of my home and my possessions. Why should I borrow trouble by trying to change any of that?”

As C. Northcoat Parkinson wrote, “delay is the deadliest form of denial.” Putting off planning for our future old age is risky behavior. Yes, it is common to view the future and make choices through a distorted prism. Not one of us knows what the future holds. But we make a serious mistake by burying our heads in the sand and deny that changes are happening to us...or that we are truly in control of future events. There is an old saying: “If you want to give God a good chuckle, tell Him what your plans for the future are.”

Finally, let us consider that old age is like petals on the flower-- vibrant, colorful but also somewhat fragile. When we become old, we suffer a series of losses. These losses are like pulling petals off the flower one by one. Dear friends die. Remove a petal. We lose our beloved siblings. Remove another petal. We lose our driving privilege. Our spouse dies. We no longer see or hear well. Health restricts our travel, something that was a highlight of our lives. Remove a whole group of petals. Nights are long because sleep is difficult. Arthritis leaves us with chronic pain, hands that no longer work well and misshapen feet. Hips and knees need to be replaced and rehabilitation is long and arduous. Our dermatologist routinely finds skin cancers, some ominous. We contract Parkinson’s disease. Heart arrhythmias suddenly appear. Memory seems to abandon us. We bear the inconvenience and embarrassment of incontinence. Fatigue is a daily visitor. Remove the remaining petals. The beautiful flower is no more.

These are the “Golden Years?” Please!

But I know from experience that not everything about being a senior citizen is negative. My friends and neighbors are more like a bouquet of flowers, not just a single bud. By and large, old people are upbeat, happy, interested in others and full of good cheer. They are patient with their neighbors, possess a

good sense of humor and are eager to make a positive contribution to the community. They enjoy good food, love an occasional sip of wine, laugh at stories they have heard frequently and tell everyone about their grandchildren. For many, daily life is full of interesting activities, pleasant encounters with neighbors, inviting food and stimulating activities.

While never denying that life is terminal, I see people doing their best to make every day a consequential event. Everyone knows that some of their neighbors or friends may be experiencing anguish—physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual. Along the way, difficult times visit us all. Every day brings triumphs and tragedies, smiles or tears, to someone in the community. Today may not be your turn, but it will surely come to you, because that's the way life is. Empathy can be seen everywhere, and people help each other with the little tasks of life. Today I may be the giver; tomorrow I must receive—and believe me, it is much easier to help than to be helped.

I admit there are some negative aspects to living in a community like Mary's Woods. I hate it when final indignities, especially the loss of independence, affect my special friends. *I just hate it.* There is also a sense of helplessness when there is absolutely nothing I can do to assuage someone's physical or emotional pain.

In spite of this I take great comfort from Henri Nouwen who wrote: "What a gift it is to know deeply that we are all brothers and sisters in one human family and that, different as our cultures, languages, religions, lifestyles or work may be, we are all mortal beings called to surrender our lives into the hands of a loving God."²

How can we sum up what the autumn phase of life is all about?

- It is a time when we move from self-reliance to more dependence on others.
- It is a time of newfound joys, but also difficult losses.
- It is a time when we can solidify our legacy for future generations.
- It is a time for community, for love of neighbor, for sharing our talents with others.
- It is a time for giving of ourselves, especially caring for those who need our gentle attention.
- It is a time for courage in the face of physical and mental diminishment.
- It is a time to spread good cheer and humor to our family, friends and neighbors.
- It is a time to ask big questions about the purpose and meaning of life, to seek intellectual satisfaction about an afterlife—if we conclude there is one—and to ponder our specific reason for being on Earth at this time and place.

In short, we get to be the star performer in the final act of a unique play—one that displays our life's journey with its highs and lows, euphoria and

depression, laughter and tears, triumphs and tragedies. May God bless us all and guide our steps on this challenging, complex and wondrous journey.

1 Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years; Growing Older Gracefully*. New York; Blue Ridge.

2. Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift – A Meditation on Dying and Caring*. New York; HarperCollins.