

Spiritual Direction With The Aging

Companioning People on the Journey to a Good Death

By Doreen Riddell

A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of [Spiritual Growth Ministries](http://www.sgm.org.nz) (www.sgm.org.nz).

Spiritual Direction With The Aging

Companioning People on the Journey to a Good Death

INTRODUCTION

I have chosen this topic because I feel drawn to working with the aged. I am becoming increasingly aware of the particular needs of those in late adulthood and late, late adulthood and I feel more attention needs to be given to their spiritual nurture. I feel concerned for the frail elderly who may be housebound or institutionalised as well as those who are able to be much more active. My experience is limited but in the past four months I have been exploring the model of small groups meeting regularly to share their faith and life experience.

In this paper I have not considered the special needs of those suffering from Alzheimer's Disease and other forms of dementia. Ngarie Beehre's research paper¹ and Eileen Shamy's book² focus on these needs.

Also I am not writing specifically about death and dying but about companioning people on the journey towards death through the afternoon and evening of life.

THE NEED TO ACCEPT OUR OWN MORTALITY

To be companions to the aging we first need to know ourselves and to be in touch with our own aging and our mortality. Nouwen and Gaffney ask

“How can we be fully present to the elderly when we are hiding from our own aging? ... Only as we enter into solidarity with the aging and speak out of common experience can we help others to discover the freedom of old age”³

Margaret Guenther adds,

“We must face the fact of our own mortality and befriend it if we are to minister to those who are facing death. Only then can our ministry be honest, based on the stark solidity of bed stone ... we should be able to hear the questions of life and death, the ‘God-questions’ even when the specialized vocabulary is not present ... we can listen to what is not said and be aware of the great empty places”⁴

AGING IS MOVING TOWARDS FULFILMENT

Unfortunately negative feelings and stereotypes of old age are very common. Fischer observes that many people

“have accepted the negative images of old age, made them their own and begun to live out of these images of incompetence and insignificance. The task of a spirituality of

¹ Beehre, Ngarie. Spiritual Care of the Frail Elderly with Alzheimer's Disease

² Shamy, Eileen. More than Body, Brain and Breath

³ Nouwen, Henri, J.M. and Gaffney Walter J. Aging, p98

⁴ Guenther, Margaret. Toward Holy Ground, p134

aging is to convert the imaginations of both old and young to a new vision of the future.”⁵

d’Apice says that

“One of the gravest fears about the losses of these later years is that they will include a serious decline in intellectual ability and a deprivation of mental powers. But this is rarely the case”.⁶

It is important to distinguish the physical aging process from intellectual development, creative capacity, social participation and spiritual maturity. In his letter to the Corinthians Paul makes this distinction,

“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”⁷

These words of the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel point to old age as a time of rich opportunities for personal growth:

“The years of old age may enable us to attain the high values we failed to sense, the insights we have missed, the wisdom we ignored. They are indeed formative years, rich in possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through inbred self-deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness.”⁸

It is most important to be mindful of the rich possibilities for personal growth in the second half of life as we relate to the aging. Above all it is the potential for spiritual awareness, of an ever-deepening relationship with God that we are most concerned with. I believe this relationship is fully realised in death.

I believe death is not an end in itself, not a passing into nothingness, but rather a homecoming, a return to the One from whom we came. Paul Tournier describes the wonder of our personhood, “The person is a mysterious reality which goes beyond existence at both ends, transcending both birth and death.”⁹

Lord Coggan expresses it more personally:

“It is said of Jesus Christ that he knew that ‘he came from God and was going back to God’. Between these two poles his life was lived. He came from God; therefore God had a purpose which he must fulfil. He was going back to God; therefore life was moving towards a goal, a climax ... Life seen like that has a dignity and a significance all its own.”¹⁰

It is this inner conviction that I come from God and that ultimately I will return to God that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. This is the foundation for our confidence and hope.

⁵ Fischer, Kathleen. Winter Grace, P15

⁶ d’Apice, Mary. Noon to Nightfall, p177

⁷ The Holy Bible, NRSV. 2 Corinthians 4:16

⁸ Quoted by Fischer, op.cit., p166

⁹ Tournier, Paul. Learning to Grow Old, p233

¹⁰ Quoted by Burton-Jones, Julia. Now and Forever, p110

Our life is part of God's loving purpose and our ultimate destiny is with God. Aging is part of our journey and death a natural process through which we all must pass to return home to God. This conviction runs through the Scriptures like a golden chain.¹¹

A GOOD DEATH

I suggest that a good death means to die at peace – at peace with God, ourselves and others. Above all to be assured of the accepting unconditional love of God, to be confident in God's great mercy. June Higham says, "The main thing is to know that God loves you, whoever you are and wherever you've been."¹² This leads to the peaceful assurance and anticipation of death that Margaret Dunn speaks of, "that whatever is next is good, it is to be anticipated, not feared."¹³

This confidence and trust was expressed most beautifully by an Indian friend who knew death was very near. When I came to her bedside she said, "The Heavenly Father is calling me home".

Lord Soper expressed his faith

"I find my comfort not in any precise plan of eternity, but in the confidence that the God of creation and of providence revealed by Jesus will be 'there', just as I believe he is 'here', and I shall be a member of his family. I will be content with that."¹⁴

Both June Higham and Margaret Dunn mentioned that it is important for people to be in touch with their relationship with God. June spoke of God as 'friend and companion', my Indian friend knew God as "Heavenly Father". People know God in different ways and that is valid – it is the sense of a loving trustworthy relationship that is important.

Nouwen stresses the importance of being aware that we are sons and daughters of God and having that confidence and trust that enables us to put ourselves in God's hands – to let go and take the step of faith through the doorway to God. He writes:

"Once we have come to the deep inner knowledge – a knowledge more of the heart than the mind – that we are born out of love and will die into love, that every part of our being is deeply rooted in love and that this love is our true Father and Mother, then all forms of evil, illness and death lose their final power over us and become painful but also hopeful reminders of our true divine childhood."¹⁵

The strong affirmation of the apostle Paul that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord¹⁶ expresses the confidence and hope that we would like to share with others.

¹¹ The Holy Bible. NRSV. Genesis 1:27, Psalm 22:9, Psalm 139:13, Isaiah 43:1, Isaiah 46:3-4, John 14:2-3

¹² June Higham, Chaplain, Eventide Home, Hamilton

¹³ Margaret Dunn, Spiritual Director, Albany

¹⁴ Burton-Jones, op. cit., p115

¹⁵ Nouwen, Henri, J.M. Our Greatest Gift, p33

¹⁶ The Holy Bible, NRSV. Romans 8:38

ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY

I am deeply indebted to the work of Mary d'Apice, Kathleen Fischer and Margaret Guenther as well as Henri Nouwen and Nouwen and Walter Gaffney for insights into a spirituality of aging. I feel Kathleen Fischer expresses the paradox of the Christian faith very clearly.

“From the perspective of faith, the later years provide the most intense and vivid revelation of the paradox at the heart of the Christian Gospel : that in losing our lives we somehow find them; that loss can be gain, and weakness, strength; that death is the path to life.”¹⁷

A Contemplative Stance

Underlying all that happens in the journey through the years of late adulthood and late, late adulthood is the movement from doing to being. This may be experienced very abruptly as with retirement from full time work or a sudden severe illness that brings permanent loss or diminishment or it may occur gradually as our body slows and other changes take place in our lives.

This shift in emphasis from doing to being is an opportunity to develop a more contemplative stance to life and “to meet each person and situation with greater care and attentiveness.”¹⁸ It is a valuable opportunity to deepen and strengthen our relationships with God, with others, with creation and with our deepest selves. At this stage of life it is most helpful to continue to evolve, and maintain the patterns and structures that support these relationships.

Fischer writes about prayer in the context of the loneliness that many experience in old age: loneliness that may result either from the absence of interaction with others or from the absence of activity.

“The pain of loneliness can be an invitation to increase our dependence on God. At its deepest level all loneliness reflects our common experience that no created goods fully answer our inner yearnings; loneliness is rooted in a longing for God. It becomes solitude when the voice of God can be heard in its stillness. Contemplation can fill the empty silence with the reality of God’s presence.”¹⁹

Fischer offers very helpful suggestions regarding centering prayer or prayer of the heart and praying with Scripture in the chapter “A Heart of Wisdom”.²⁰

The Prayer Of Reminiscence

One of the most important tasks of aging is to review the whole of our lives and deal with any unresolved issues. This is the time to truly find peace with God, ourselves and others as we come to an ever deepening understanding of God’s great mercy and unconditional love which does not depend at all on either our failures or successes.

¹⁷ Fischer, op. cit., p19

¹⁸ Ibid, p26

¹⁹ Ibid, p32

²⁰ Ibid, p25-40

This is a time to offer our feelings of regret and failure to God and know that we are forgiven. It is a time to offer hurts and resentments and find the healing that enables us to let them go. A time to seek reconciliation with others and also to forgive others for what they have done to us. It is also a time to accept ourselves and our life journey, the choices we have made, what we have done and not done. It is a time to offer our intentions and deepest desires to God and to trust that our lives are being woven into God's good purposes.

Part of the looking back will be the recalling of pleasant occasions in our lives and this can bring a sense of wellbeing and of deep satisfaction. We can be encouraged and affirmed by recalling happy days and times when we received love and respect and by remembering the many different ways in which we have contributed to the lives of others.

d'Apice writes very beautifully about how looking back on the journey becomes a prayer of reminiscence. She gives the example of the two men walking to Emmaus and how Jesus came to them in their sadness and confusion. Jesus explained to them the meaning and significance of his life, death and resurrection as revealed in the Hebrew scriptures. d'Apice says that the aged also need to invite Jesus into their memories of the past. "It is he who will open up the scripture of their lives, will throw light into the dark recesses of the past, will show the gains which first appeared as losses."²¹

d'Apice points out that remembering the past in this contemplative way leads to a deeper understanding of ourselves. We begin to see our life as a whole and find meaning and recognise God's mercy. Our awareness of God at work within us and of our role in being part of God's purpose is deepened.

In her book, *Winter Grace*, Kathleen Fischer has a very helpful chapter on memories in which she discusses four aspects of the religious meaning of memory: memory and religious identity, the joyful mysteries of our lives, the healing of memories and ritual as a way to remember.²²

Fischer emphasises the importance of a faith perspective if reviewing our lives is to result in integrity and peace and not in despair and disgust. Through remembering God's presence and provision in the past new courage and hope are kindled. I feel this is a very important aspect of remembering. As Fischer says

"Remembering is the biblical way of appropriating the past and the basis of religious identity. At each key juncture in her life, Israel retold the story of what God had done for her, how God had remained faithful in the midst of her infidelities, how God's presence had sustained her in times of trial. By remembering, she made God's love present again with power. Out of these memories arose new courage and hope that God's promises would again be fulfilled. Like Israel we also tell and retell our stories, since they have levels of meaning that cannot be completely captured in a single telling."²³

²¹d'Apice, op. cit., p240-241

²² Fischer, op. cit., p45-60

²³ Fischer, op. cit., p49

Darkness

Darkness may be experienced by the aging in many different ways. Retirement may bring a loss of identity and self worth and a sense of meaninglessness. Because of the tendency of society to segregate the aging there may be the darkness of isolation. There is the darkness of grief and isolation with the gradual loss of loved ones. Associated with this may be the feeling of a loss of identity with no one close to us who really knows our past.

Pain and suffering may bring deep inner questioning and a sense of darkness. There may be the gradual stripping away of energy, mobility, space and personal possessions as we grow older and frailer and perhaps are even limited to our room or a hospital bed.

Despair and a sense of abandonment may also be experienced. I suspect this may come at a time of great suffering or when death is near. Reflecting on the suffering and death of Jesus may help at such a time. Jesus experienced desolation and a sense of abandonment but finally accepted death in a trustful commitment, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."²⁴

There is also the darkness that may be experienced as the "perceived absence of God". Kerrie Hyde of Canberra has applied the Dark Night poem of St John of the Cross to the experience of aging and suggests that "Our task as we age is to negotiate these dark nights so that ageing draws us into a 'third dark night', a time before dawn where we are free and ready to find rest in divine love".²⁵

LISTENING TO THE STORIES

Barry and Connolly describe Christian spiritual direction as "help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship".²⁶

John North commented recently, "Spiritual direction is really about one person telling their story, reflecting on it and seeing that it is valuable".²⁷ It is through the reminiscing and the sharing of stories from a contemplative stance that we begin to be aware of someone beyond who loves us unconditionally and in some mysterious way is touching our hearts and minds and who gives a sense of purpose and meaningfulness to our lives.

I suggest that as we work with the aging in formal and informal ways of spiritual direction it is most important to encourage 'remembering', looking back and sharing memories in a contemplative way and encouraging reflection on such questions as Where was God? What was happening? What is God saying to me now? What is the invitation?

Our role is that of listener – "patient, attentive, receptive".²⁸ Guenther says, "We can bring the gift of time and patience, listening to the stories and acknowledging by our compassionate presence that there are no quick fixes or easy answers".²⁹ To that I would add

²⁴ The Holy Bible, NRSV. Luke 23:46

²⁵ Hide, Kerrie. Spiritual Growth Ministries Newsletter Winter 2000, p15

²⁶ Barry, William A. and Connolly, William J. The Practice of Spiritual Direction, p8

²⁷ John North, Baptist Minister and Spiritual Director, Auckland

²⁸ Guenther, op. cit., p135

²⁹ Ibid., p137

we can gently seek to create and provide ways and opportunities for the aged to grow in awareness of the presence of God.

ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Very few older people from 65 to 70 years upwards receive spiritual direction in the traditional pattern of a regular one to one monthly meeting with a director. With increased awareness of opportunities for spiritual growth and people living longer and enjoying better health it is likely that the number of people receiving spiritual direction will increase but even so probably only a very small proportion of the Christian community would be touched.

I have been exploring other models of using spiritual direction ways to help people grow in their awareness of a personal relationship with God and deepen that relationship. In particular, I have considered the value of small groups.

I have found the work of Tilden Edwards and Gerald May very useful. These men have worked together at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington. Gerald May's book, *Pilgrimage Home*, summarises their work and learnings of the Shalem Institute up to the time of publication.³⁰ Although May is specifically writing about the conduct of contemplative practice in groups whereas I have been thinking more of the value of 'reminiscing' and working through the 'stories' I found much useful material for my own personal growth and for working in spiritually formative ways with small groups. Edward's Chapter 7 on Group Direction was also very helpful.³¹

SMALL GROUP MODELS

1. The Good Companions

After consultation with our clergy team I invited older people in our congregation who attend the mid-week communion service to join a small group to encourage one another by sharing their experiences of how God touched their lives over the years. My prayer was that by sharing in this way their relationship with God would strengthen and deepen. I named the group The Good Companions.

Initially we had nine weekly meetings after the mid-week communion service and morning tea. We met in the church lounge. Due to certain constraints we sometimes had only 30 minutes together but I feel 45-60 minutes would be best. After the 8th meeting the group answered a short questionnaire.

All seven people who attended four or more meetings asked for the group to continue but fortnightly or monthly. We now meet twice a month. Patterns are evolving. At present I begin with a short reading from the scriptures or from a suitable book and this flows on to sharing experiences and feelings. We close with a brief prayer or affirmation and say the grace together. This experience has convinced me that such groups can be very helpful in increasing people's awareness of God's presence and grace and in deepening their relationship with God.

³⁰ May, Gerald G. [Pilgrimage Home](#)

³¹ Edwards, T. [Spiritual Friend](#)

2. The Discussion Group at Wilson Carlisle Home

The Rev Lesley Hyde, Chaplain at the Anglican Social Services Wilson-Carlisle Home in Hamilton, offers a fortnightly discussion group for residents. They meet after morning tea for about 45 minutes.

Recently I was privileged to be present at a meeting attended by nine residents comfortably seated in a sunny corner of the recreation room. Hyde has been reading the book, *Soul Survivor* by Paul Hawker with the group. After the reading, skilful questions and comments led people on to tell their stories. Some shared personal insights and experiences of God protecting and transforming. I noticed that the group seemed very open, attentive and relaxed. Most people contributed one way or another, perhaps simply a word of affirmation. Hyde commented that the way people do begin to talk is quite wonderful.

3. A Meditation Group at Windermere

The Rev Isobel Probert described a group she led at the Presbyterian Support Home at Windermere in Christchurch in 1982 as part of her exploration of the spiritual needs of older people.

Six or seven people in their late 70's and 80's contracted to attend the series of six weekly group meetings for the residents of the flats at Windermere. Isobel called the series Life... Growing and Discussing and through meditation and journaling led the group to reflect on the past, present and future. Some of the group had no specific Christian connections or experience of meditation and prayer. Isobel sought to develop an awareness of being loved, cared for and valued. She waited for group members to introduce the God dimension and this occurred naturally. Isobel found that the group responded amazingly well and people were helped.

4. Quiet Mornings

The Rev Jean Cotter offers monthly quiet mornings at her home in Hamilton from 9.30am to 12.30pm. The usual pattern is a gathering for the introduction to the theme, music as a background for reflection, moving on into silence and the opportunity to find a space alone for reflection and finally gathering again to share experiences and insights.

OTHER MODELS

1. Pastoral Care

The majority of aging people live in the community. Many live alone or with an aging spouse or partner. However, although they have been enabled to live in their own homes through provision of special care and help, they may not be able to go out independently to attend worship services or to attend groups and other activities. The provision of adequate pastoral care for this rapidly increasing group of people is very important.

Spiritual direction skills can be used in just being present and giving time, in listening attentively and giving gentle encouragement to share their stories and to affirm and explore their awareness of their relationship with God. Andrew Dunn tells of the older woman in his parish who was encouraged to keep a journal and whenever he visited she brought out her journal and shared her experiences and insights over a cup of tea.³²

³² Andrew Dunn, Spiritual Director, Albany

2. Alternative Worship Services

Some churches provide a service especially designed for older people who prefer a more traditional and quieter service with well loved hymns and a familiar version of the Scriptures. While such services do meet a real need the importance of intergenerational contact and worship should be kept in mind.

“Grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren – they all make the whole of our lifecycle visible and tangible to us at every moment of our lives. They offer a healing expectation as well as a healing memory.”³³

3. Special Events

I attended a retreat with an 80 year old and we met again at a workshop on contemplative prayer. There is no reason to think that older people will not enjoy or benefit from quiet days, retreats, workshops and so on and as long as their health permits I believe they should be encouraged to attend such events.

³³ Nouwen and Gaffney, op. cit., p117

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Barry, William A. & Connolly, William J. The Practice of Spiritual Direction. Harper: San Francisco, 1982.

Burton-Jones, Julia. Now and Forever. Triangle: London, 1997.

d'Apice, Mary. Noon to Nightfall. Dove: Australia, 1995.

Edwards, Tilden. Spiritual Friend. Paulist Press: New York, 1980.

Fischer, Kathleen. Winter Grace. Upper Room Books: Nashville, 1998.

Guenther, Margaret. Toward Holy Ground. Cowley Publications: Boston, 1995.

Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. The Wheel of Life. Bantam Press: London, 1997.

May, Gerald G. Pilgrimage Home. Paulist Press: New York, 1979.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. Our Greatest Gift. Hodder & Stoughton: London, 1994.

Nouwen, Henri J.M. & Gaffney, Walter J. Aging. Image Books, Doubleday: New York, 1976.

Peck, M. Scott. Denial of the Soul. Simon and Schuster: London, 1997.

Seymour, Robert E. Aging Without Apology. Judson Press: Valley Forge, USA, 1995.

Shamy, Eileen. More than Body, Brain and Breath. ColCom Press: New Zealand, 1997.

Tournier, Paul. Learning to Grow Old. SCM Press: London, 1972.

PAPERS

Beehre, Ngarie. Spiritual Care of the Frail Elderly with Alzheimer's Disease. Spiritual Growth Ministries: New Zealand 1999.

Hide, Kerrie. So The Darkness Shall Be The Light. Spiritual Growth Ministries Newsletter: Auckland, Winter 2000.

INTERVIEWS

Margaret Dunn, Spiritual Director
The Rev. Loris Eyre, Minister, Anglican Church
June Higham, Chaplain, Rest Home
The Rev Lesley Hyde, Minister, Anglican Church
The Rev Isobel Probert, Minister, Presbyterian Church