

AGING AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE
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When an elder dies, an entire library goes up in flames.
-African Proverb

I want to begin this sermon by saying it's not really a sermon at all. It's a dialogue with three writers as they reflect on the spiritual aspects of aging. The first excerpt tells us about the amazing acts of mercy performed by a true elder, one who likely had no idea that her example live well beyond her years. The second is a funny, irreverent challenge to Baby Boomers who think they've earned the rank of senior citizen. And the third is a cautionary tale – a reminder that, for some, growing old is a license to finish, with zest, some very important business.

Before we begin, I want to offer a second introduction, this one shorter and even more to each author's point: the first excerpt is about *humility* in the form of service; the second is about *humor* in the face of mortality; and the last is about *hubris* in response to prejudice. Humility, humor and hubris. Off we go!

Robert Franklin, professor of ethics and black church studies at Candler School of Theology (Emory University), grew up believing that his grandmother owned no small portion of the city of Chicago. In an article that appeared in the January 23, 2007 issue of *Christian Century Magazine*, Franklin tells us why:

I was reared just a few miles from the University of Chicago on the city's South Side...I lived in Morgan Park, one of those "old-fashioned" neighborhoods common throughout America during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. I was born into an extended family network in that village. My grandparents were Mississippi migrants who found their way to the broad-shouldered city of Chicago after the Depression. They lived for years in the inner city until my grandmother Martha and her sister purchased a pair of two-story wood frame houses next door to each other at 118th and Watkins, one block west of Vincennes Avenue, the dividing line between white and black blue-collar Chicago.

...Our household always felt crowded. Two of Grandma Martha McCann's six sons, two of her daughters (one of them my mother) plus my father all lived together. That's six adults. Nearly every day one or more of my other uncles came by to visit or eat. My dad worked over 35 years at the Campbell Soup Company plant of Chicago's West Side.

Grandma was a church mother and home missionary at the St. Paul Church of God in Christ. She utilized her consummate culinary skills to do ministry throughout the city. I remember her loading my three brothers and me into our rickety 1956 green and white Chevy to drive into the inner city delivering pots of collard greens and corn bread. We hated having to ride that far in a non-air-conditioned car (except for the holes in the floorboard), even with the reward of a Tastee-Freeze soft ice cream on the way home. But we always felt gratified when people greeted my grandmother with shouts of joy. We saw little kids who lived in squalor and despair in those ghetto buildings – buildings our family had left behind just years earlier. Grandma did not forget the people she'd left behind. Now she had a garden and could give them fresh produce. This was the first generation of black people who had no land, she said, and they'd lost touch with the therapy of gardening and were forced to eat vegetables packed in aluminum cans.

Another memory is of the day a group of boys from outside our neighborhood showed up to visit a local girl. Several of the local boys gathered to prevent the visit and end the relationship. As their voices escalated, neighbors gathered to observe the muscle-bound urban gladiators. Suddenly, before a blow was thrown, my grandmother ran into the street with her apron flying and stood between the youths. She reminded them that she knew their mothers. "How would your mother feel if she heard that one of you was shot over nothing? I had sons in the army who were shot, and there's nothing like a mother hearing those words. You think about that!" Amazingly, these tough boys from the hood looked at her, looked at each other and walked away.

...When I return to the neighborhood today...I do so through the eyes of my departed grandmother...I long for others to have the experience of family and community that I've known, and memories that sustain them – memories like Grandma's fried chicken and lemonade, which were sacraments shared by a motley crowd hungering for community and care...

Robert Franklin's Grandma McCann made it out of the ghetto, yet felt called to serve those who had taken her place. There are people in this world that give out of the need to be seen doing good works. There are people in this world who give out of the need to be needed.

But there are also people in this world who give because they've been humbled. Humbled by poverty. Humbled by prejudice. Humbled by loneliness. Humbled by time. Who can say for certain the forces that drive some souls to give more than they take? Robert Franklin

may have credited his grandmother with a purer heart than was the case, but, like the ennobling Greek fable or the enduring biblical parable, we need not judge Grandma McCann's heart to learn from her example.

Scholars have spilled a good deal of ink over the ages regarding the role of elders in various societies. They seem to fall, more or less, into two categories. First are those that send their old into a "wilderness" where, after renouncing possessions and comforts, they will receive enlightenment. (Some stripes of Hinduism come to mind here.) Then there are those cultures in which an elder is expected to take a leadership role of one kind or another, using their accumulated experience and wisdom in the service of others. (Many Native American societies, historical and present-day, typify this norm.)

For my money, the two are equally valid, for feeding our souls doesn't stop just because our birth certificate is getting yellow. But since when did we get a free pass from the ongoing task of ministry to a groaning planet and its broken inhabitants, just because of age?

Grandma McCann is one of my heroes now, if for no other reason than because she knew that love means slinging fresh vegetables across town and refereeing street fights. She left behind a legacy of wisdom and service and moxie.

Frank Kaiser is a different breed from either Robert Franklin or Grandma McCann. Among other things, Kaiser tends a web site, complete with a photo of himself: www.suddenlysenior.com. Grinning like Barney Fyffe on crack, his latest column combines wit and withering criticism as he scolds the Baby Boomers who are just now entering the ranks of what Kaiser calls "seniordom". (I'll warn you in advance that the language may get a little rough for church, but there's no way to separate this guy's words from his message.) From his column, "Boomers Fear Getting Old":

Do you remember what they called geezers before they called them seniors? I don't. You don't either, I'll bet.

You and I were never going to get old enough to care. Fifty years ago, I remember thinking the then-popular euphemism for elders – Golden Agers – was a crock. Golden, my butt! The words geezers, codgers and duffers were around then, too. But like "old farts", those handles never gained traction. Let's face it, how many seniors do you know who would step and demand the "Old Fart Discount, please"?

Then, suddenly without warning, we were old farts ourselves. The phrase Golden Agers has morphed to Senior Citizens and finally to seniors, and when the time came, we accepted that rubric with aplomb.

I bring this to your attention, as it seems that aging boomers don't like to be called "seniors." According to the Second 50 Years Marketing Group, 50-something whippersnappers asset that the word "senior" isn't good enough for them.

Poor things. Couldn't you just sit down and weep for these woeful whippersnappers? After years of worshipping at the altar of youth and all things callow, to receive out of the blue that "Welcome to AARP" letter must seriously freak out the best of them. No wonder these former Wunderkind are now graveyard whistling.

Of course, marketers are alarmed. If they can't call these new seniors "seniors", what can they call them? Think about it. What else works with _____ Discount, _____ Living Guide and Free Stuff for _____?

Searching for a new euphemism to please ripening Boomers, focus groups were asked to react to a list of terms that might describe them. Here are the names the groups found least and most appealing:

Least Appealing

- **Older Boomers**
- **Elders**
- **Older People**
- **Third Agers**
- **Third Actors**
- **Retired People**
- **Senior Citizens**

Most Appealing

- **The Experienced**
- **Advisers**
- **Coaches**
- **Wise Ones**
- **Masters**
- **Seasoned Citizens**

Seems to me that marketers should take a cue from the acknowledged masters of flimflam: Washington politicians...Instead of "Coaches" or "Advisers", how about "Sages"? That's a word with muscle, wisdom and determination.

...Actually, the big question about these wannabe seniors is: Are they worthy of joining what for many of us is the best time of our lives?

Where the Boomers see wrinkles, we see character. Where they think old, we think experienced. And where they fear loss, we cherish reinvention. Seniors find friends in place of things, faith in place of fear, laughter in place of whining. Are these concepts too difficult for snotnose Boomers to comprehend?

To be truly deserving of the privilege of growing old – worthy to be called seniors – Boomers must appreciate that they are entering an age where they'll finally learn the true meaning of courage, beauty and wonder. And the limitless power of love and forgiveness, faith and gratitude. Understand that, and it won't matter a whit what people call you.

Sure, Frank Kaiser is overstating his case for growing old. It's true that joints start making noises on their own, hair migrates from one place to another, we can't remember squat and, as one poet observed, everything things moves a little closer to the ground. And to get even more real, these bodies begin to do tricks on us, disease unravels our hopes and outliving family and friends leaves us lonely. But, by my lights, Kaiser's rant is powered by nothing less than the most spiritual of all spiritual laws: *life seeks life*. In other words, in the face of all that we've come through so far, and all that awaits us, we are never too old to join the life within us with the life that surrounds us. And I think that grinning old fart with the goofy web site nailed it when he challenged my generation to chase life with life. How fortunate to be alive, today, chasing after yet more life!

It was Chief Justice Earl Warren who said, "Don't complain about growing old – many people don't have that privilege". As I look at the number of us here today that have made it to what Frank Kaiser calls "seniordom", I say congratulations. Aches, pains, fears, troubles, disappointments and sorrow be damned, we are the lucky ones. The fortunate ones. The laughing ones. The *blessed ones*.

Humorous diatribes against Baby Boomers are not the only fare at Frank Kaiser's web site. I found there an anonymous entry that is rife with hubris – that gutsy, earthy, cocky quality that serves us well as we wind our way through every stage of life, but is precious and rare in old age. From that anonymous entry comes the story of a college student and a student-at-heart:

The first day of school our professor introduced himself and challenged us to get to know someone we didn't already know. I stood up to look around when a hand touched my shoulder. I turned to find a wrinkled, little old lady beaming up at me with a smile that lit up her entire being.

She said, "Hi handsome. My name is Rose. I'm eighty-seven years old. Can I give you a hug?" I laughed and enthusiastically responded, "Of course you may!" and she gave me a giant squeeze.

Why are you in college at such a young, innocent age?" I asked. She jokingly replied, "I'm here to meet a rich husband, get married, have a couple of children, and then retire and travel."

"No seriously," I asked. I was curious what may have motivated her to be taking on this challenge at her age. "I've always dreamed of having a college education and now I'm getting one!" she told me.

After class we walked to the student union building and shared a chocolate milkshake. We became instant friends. Every day for the next three months, we would leave class together and talk nonstop. I was always mesmerized listening to this "time machine" as she shared her wisdom and experience with me.

Over the course of the year, Rose became a campus icon and she easily made friends wherever she went. She loved to dress up and she reveled in the attention bestowed upon her by other students. She was living it up.

At the end of the semester, we invited Rose to speak at our football banquet. I'll never forget what she taught us. She was introduced and stepped up to the podium. As she began to deliver her prepared speech, she dropped her three by five cards on the floor. Frustrated, and a little embarrassed, she leaned into the microphone and simply said, "I'm sorry. I'm so jittery. I gave up beer for Lent and this whiskey is killing me! I'll never get my speech back in order so let me tell you what I know."

As we laughed, said "We do not stop playing because we are old; we grow old because we stop playing... You have to laugh and find humor every day. You've got to have a dream. When you lose your dream, you die. We have so many people walking around who are dead and don't even know it!"

“There is a huge difference between growing older and growing up... Anybody can grow older. That doesn’t take any talent or ability. The idea is to grow up by always finding the opportunity in change. Have no regrets. [Most of] the elderly don’t have regrets for what we did, but rather for the things we did not do. The only people who fear death are those with regrets.”

She concluded her speech by courageously singing [Bette Midler’s] “The Rose.” She challenged each of us to study the lyrics and live them out in our daily lives.

At the year’s end, Rose finished the college degree she had begun all those years ago. One week after graduation, Rose died peacefully in her sleep. Over two thousand college students attended her funeral in tribute to the wonderful woman who taught by example that it’s never too late to be all you can possibly be.

It is quite possible to grow old but not wise; bitterness, spite, pride and shallowness are choices available to us at any age, any stage. And it is possible to grow old but not honest; deceit, lies, half-truths and false appearances can be practiced by all save the very young. No one’s suggesting here that just by spending a good deal of time on Earth makes one the Dalai Lama. (It was Abigail Van Buren who warned us that, “Wisdom doesn’t automatically come with old age. Nothing does – except wrinkles. It’s true, some wines improve with age. But only if the grapes were good in the first place.”)

Indeed, it seems to me that a long life does nothing more than give one the advantage of extra time; what we do that extra time is, for the most part, on us. Hubris – chutzpah, moxie, nerve – is often as not the difference between using time and merely marking time. Nobody’s saying that that kind of “oomph” is always easy to come by, only that the undaunted prospect of discerning and choosing life is what gives us a sense of *meaning*. Young, old or in-between.

So there you are, Nora friends: humility, humor and hubris. Grandma McCann, Frank Kaiser and Rose. We, courtesy of grace, have the holy option of aligning our hearts (if not always our bodies and minds) with that elusive force of life that is the God I, for one, imagine. What a challenge, what a ride, what a gift to be given time.

I want to close with a poem that I read to you not long after moving to this prairie hill. From where I sit in this amazing crap-shoot of life, Bettie Sellers’ “A Letter from Elvira” might be a tad short on the humility, but more than makes up for that with its humor and hubris:

*I saw your picture in the local news;
since you look like a nice lady,
I am writing you to find me*

*a princely widower, one who will appreciate
my three-college mind, the delicate lace
of my crochet, the gourmet taste of my cuisine.*

*He would need a house,
French provincial would be nice,
grey or maybe a forest green.*

*And a dog, too, but not a boxer –
I don't like the way they look at me,
like these Methodists here in Baysville.
The preacher said I was reaching too high
and who would marry me anyhow. Some of them
are in drugs, the Mafia, you know,
and most of the Baptists are perverts.
The Board of Education is worse; they say
I'm too old to be teaching their children.*

*I enclose my picture, and my telephone number.
Have him call anytime; I'll be here.
I remain, yours very sincerely, Elvira Wade.*

Here's to a long and good life. Here's to the spirit of the elder.