



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Spirituality of Aging

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Consider the alternative. It's a popular phrase that makes light of growing old, and the title of the last chapter of author Nora Ephron's book, *I Feel Bad About My Neck* - an entire book that pokes fun at aging. In this chapter she doesn't sugarcoat death, which is really what the topic of aging asks us to consider. She writes,

I am dancing around the D word, but I don't mean to be coy. Death is a sniper. Your friends die, and you're left not just bereft, not just grieving, not just guilty, but utterly helpless. There is nothing you can do. Everybody dies.

"What is the answer?" Gertrude Stein asked Alice B. Toklas as Stein was dying. There was no reply. "In that case, what is the question?" Stein asked.

Here are some questions I am constantly noodling over (Ephron goes on): Do you splurge or do you hoard? Do you live everyday as if it's your last, or do you save your money on the chance that you'll live twenty more years? Is life too short or is it going to be too long? Do you work as hard as you can, or do you slow down to smell the roses? And where do carbohydrates fit into all this? Are we really going to have to spend our last years avoiding bread, especially now that bread in America is so unbelievably delicious? And what about chocolate? There's a question for you Gertrude Stein, what about chocolate?

Happy New Year, everyone. And welcome to our newcomers this morning. We tend to get a lot of visitors this time of year, when people are searching for answers to the question, how can I live my life better? At the beginning of a new year, it's definitely the question I'm asking myself. For you newcomers I have good news and I have bad news. Bad news first: this is a religion whose time-honored tradition is to ask questions. If you're looking for answers, you may not find those here. The good news is that we believe taking the time to home in on the right questions, and the process of doing so in a beloved community such as this one, is the answer. Asking the right questions can yield valuable insights that may change the way we live our lives. We believe that questions are more profound than answers.

About every other month, Jim Nelson, the Senior Minister, will ask me a question in our weekly meeting. "Hannah, how's your spiritual practice going?" I feel like a deer in the headlights when he asks me that. Well, I'll say, I'm hiking a lot, I hike at least twice a week, and my time on the trail always reconnects my mind, body, and spirit with the natural world. I listen to music, I dance and play with my children, I read - all these things are in the fabric of my everyday life and they inspire me, but I'm doubtful they can be elevated to the lofty title of 'spiritual practice.' I don't pray, I don't meditate. I wish that I did, that I had the energy, the discipline, that I *made* the time to do so. But I don't. Perhaps some of you are in the same boat.

There is one thing I do, though, one spiritual guide that I try my best to follow, and that's to think about my aging. How am I aging, am I aging right? I direct these questions to one of the best spiritual teachers I know, that is, my own death. I try to let the fact that I'm going to die someday be my teacher.

The journey of life is book-ended by these mysterious borders: the starting point is birth, separating life from whatever came before. The end point is death, where we encounter a similar boundary. Each of us is in the middle somewhere, faced with the question of what our lives mean. Fundamentally, we have no clue how we got here or where we are going. That is the context, it is our path, we cannot change it. And how we walk on that path is up to us. It is entirely up to us.

Those are some of the thoughts of Judith Lief, author of *Making Friends with Death, A Buddhist Guide to Encountering Mortality*. She writes,

Cultivating a personal awareness of death begins by cultivating an appreciation of our life as a whole. With this as our basic view, as we go about our business, whatever we do takes place within the context of that entire journey. So cultivating an awareness of death is at the same time cultivating an awareness of life. We are reconnecting with the experience of actually living a life.

I especially embrace this notion at the beginning of a new year, with the heightened awareness of time's passing. This year, my awareness is heightened further by the impending retirement of my father later this spring. He was born in '46, the leading edge of the baby boomers. Like many baby boomers these days, he won't be retiring completely, he's already got a part-time consulting gig lined up – it sounds interesting, but the need for the part-time gig is what you'd suspect: my folks don't feel like they have enough to retire on full-time. The investments that were doing so well took a turn. Regardless, my dad has reached a milestone, he is entering a new phase of life – you might say the last leg of his life's journey. It makes me consider: how will I feel when it's my time to retire? Will I have done everything I want to do? Am I aging right?

There are certain key words and phrases that come up when you reflect on the entire journey of your life, on your aging, and the inevitable end of your life. One is *dreams* and another is *generating wealth*.

As I spoke with friends and family about the matter of aging, a few themes definitely emerged. First - lest you think I'm going to stick exclusively to a positive spin on aging - aging, everyone agrees, basically sucks. More key words are *pain* and *loss*. Pain in the joints, loss of energy, loss of hearing and eyesight, loss of loved ones, even the loss of memories . . . we could spend all morning listing the ways we physically and emotionally experience aging as loss.

If there is a positive spin on aging, what could it authentically be? If aging is a crisis in slow motion, there is opportunity there - the opportunity of spiritual reflection. How might you cultivate an appreciation for your life as a whole?

My mother summed up the journey of life in three stages. She says you spend the first 25 years of your adult life dreaming of all the stuff you want to acquire. The next 25 years are spent actually accumulating all that stuff. The last 25 years are spent trying to get rid of all the stuff so you don't burden your descendants with all your crap. The only reason it's funny is because it's an accurate picture of our modern reality.

On a less material scale, this tri-fold of adult life could be thus described: the first third you are figuring out what your dreams in life ought to be; the middle third, where presumably most of us are now, you are either achieving those dreams, or, you are confronted with the reality of dreams unfulfilled. It is an act of courage, of spiritual courage, to consider where you are here. It goes without saying that most of us are in denial of our aging- we ignore it, we pretend it isn't happening. This is not nearly as tragic - dare I say, as sinful - as denying the actual state of our dreams' progress. Our dreams of not only what we wanted to acquire, achieve - any of those ambitious words that begin with a - but also our dreams of what we wanted to *create* with our lives.

The biggest question I want to raise today, that I want you to turn over and over in your minds long after you leave here, is, what does *generating wealth* really mean to you? And how it is connected to what you've dreamed of creating with your life? Generating wealth is a prime objective of the middle third of your adult life. We call them our productive years, the height of our careers, the generative years. And most would agree that, ideally, you are generating financial wealth. Because – the last third of your adult life, presumably, you will need that wealth to live on, all the while you are letting go of dreams unfulfilled, or enjoying the fruits of your labors, of dreams fulfilled. Most likely, it is some combination thereof.

Generating wealth conventionally means earning money, preferably lots of it. I'm not going to Pollyanna this, to age with resources is preferable for a variety of reasons. Fine. But the baby boomers aren't the only ones who thought they would have generated more wealth by this stage of their lives. Many of my friends of Generation X respond with disgust and sarcasm when they think about how much easier it's been for the baby boomers to achieve the American dream than it has been for them. They say they don't feel sorry for them. I do - it's just not what they expected. And with age expectancy rising and rising, I can imagine the anxiety.

It calls for a spiritual response. No matter what generation you belong to, it's wise to consider what generating wealth means to you, and at what point do you redefine it, if things aren't going as planned. This is not just a cultural question; it is a religious question. There are far more references to money in the Bible than to love - something like 30 times more. Ours is a religion of discerning our values, and then making choices. We empower ourselves by deciding these questions matter.

Many dreams transcend financial comfort, and point to a creative value. The dream of finding the right partner to create your life with, creating a family, creating community in which to love and be loved, the dream of fulfilling your potential to give the very best of yourself to this world. One cherished spiritual belief I have is that each of us are born with gifts, with talents, and one of the goals of our lives is to use those gifts to create some kind of difference in the world, be that small or big. Why else would we each be so unique? Not everybody gets to fulfill their potential, so it is a precious thing, it is one way we generate wealth, by having the privilege to contribute significantly to humanity and to our world.

If our dreams are not progressing as planned, it's often necessary to redefine them. I have a friend my age who's desperately trying to get pregnant - I think about her almost every day, and it's as close as I get to praying - please, let my friend get pregnant. But I know she's going to be okay, because she has a plan - if she doesn't get pregnant, she will adopt. She's hopeful, but it's not all or nothing for her, she understands it's the relationship that matters most. No matter what, she is going to generate wealth by creating a parent/child relationship - perhaps for a child who otherwise would not have it.

Everyone I talked to about aging concluded this - that relationships matter more as they grow older. Nurturing relationships is a form of generating wealth, and not just with family and friends, but with members of our community who otherwise may be forgotten. I'm fortunate that my grandmother is still alive, she's 89, and she lives in Davenport, IA at a retirement home with her husband, who is 95. She's too old to do this anymore, but she brings it up often, her memories of a special kind of community service - for many years, once a week she would visit women prisoners in the local county jail. She wrote me a letter before Christmas, quoting Matthew, "Ye fed me, ye clothed me, ye visited me in jail. The key to Christianity for me," she wrote. She probably didn't dream of visiting prisoners when she was a girl, but it's a small difference my grandma made in the world, and it generated a sense of well-being for her, that the choices she made of how to spend her time, matched up with her religious values.

The idea posed by Osho, in the reading I read earlier, that to let go of your "somebodiness" - your name, your fame, your respectability - is a good way to mature is a very challenging idea. It's extreme. My take-away from it is that we are often too attached to particular measuring sticks of achievement in our lives. I don't want to get to the end of my life, and realize that I chased after the wrong things, things that don't matter.

Regrets is another key word of the aging process. They are a part of life, but if we're thoughtful, if we take the time to do what Judith Lief suggests, to consider what we do in the context of our life's journey, we can minimize them. When I was in college, in that stage of figuring out what my dreams ought to be, I listened to the John Cougar Mellencamp song, *Check It Out*, rather fervently. It moved me. *Where does our time go? Got a brand new house in escrow . . . sleeping with your back to your loved one, is this all that we've learned about living? Is this all that we've learned about happiness?* I listened to this song as a nineteen year old, and I remember telling myself, I'm not going to let that happen to me, I'm not going to equate happiness with appearances, with sleep-walking my way through the American dream. It frightened me to realize, you can have it all, but still have little if you're not careful, if you don't "check it out."

This is the religion of checking it out. As Unitarian Universalists, what does generating wealth mean to you? Check it out.

The last thing I was told about aging is that it is a process of letting go. Letting go of who you wanted to be, letting go of the dreams that got away, and finally, learning to embrace and accept who you in fact are, and

feeling grateful for the life you created. My mother told me, "The task is to remain grateful, while also letting go of identity . . .

On the one hand there is profound gratitude for a comfortable, healthy late 20th century American life . . . and on the other the necessity of letting go."

In the end, it's okay to let go of your unfulfilled dreams, because in choosing what dreams to make real, you chose to live out your values. There's a line to a Green Day song that goes, "It's something unpredictable, but in the end it's right, I hope you had the time of your life."