

Presbyopia and other milestones: Relinquishment

by [Gaylord Noyce](#) in the [October 13, 1999](#) issue

Older people take us by surprise. All of a sudden one day, they are us. This happened to me recently. Having been retired four years, I was asked to meet with a class of seminary students because, I was told, I would be a real, live sample of an older person. I hadn't sought the honor.

Pastors need to understand older people, I thought, so I came to terms with my new role and agreed to come. When I met with the class, I began by writing a number of dates on the blackboard: 1969, 1984, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1996. Then I told the class a little about what these dates represented in my life.

The first date was the time I lunched with an optometrist after church one Sunday. I happened to complain about the difficulty I was experiencing in reading before breakfast in the morning. "You are 43," he said to my surprise. I didn't realize that he knew my age. "You have presbyopia." "Old man's vision" I translated, and I winced, letting go my pride at seeing well, imagining for a split second the whole world closing in on me, with nonbeing just around the corner. By the next month I was wearing glasses.

There were other milestones in the process of aging: hearing a neurologist diagnose my Parkinson's disease, experiencing my father's death, my encounter with serious cancer and the subsequent chemotherapy, the death of my first sibling, the death of my mother, my retirement and the move from a house to a condominium. I summarized this process for the class and provided an implied interpretive framework for it. The summary word I used was *relinquishment*. In that mixed-age classroom we conversed about the experiences in which I relinquished something, then discussed the experiences of others.

An obvious word might have been *decline*. Most older people are declining in both physical strength and life ambitions. But decline is not an adequate term for the experience. This change process belongs, in part, to us. We are not called to be

passive victims. Relinquishment names something we do. It interprets the process with a spiritual gracefulness that parallels many emphases in religious tradition, from Jesus's words about yielding self-centered righteousness and possessiveness, to Luther's "Let goods and kindred go," and to the popular piety that urges us to "Let go and let God."

In pastoral care, we do well to listen for this theme of relinquishment in the stories older people tell us. The loss may be of a career, of a house and its yard and garden, of children who move far away, of robust health beginning to wane, of friends who have died. The impact arises not because events like this haven't been experienced earlier, but because these events accumulate and grow in number.

Erik Erikson gave me the second theme for my "back-to-school" day. In his writings on the eight stages of the human life cycle, Erikson suggests pairs of personal attitudes that stand in tension at each phase. We typically work through a stage according to two attitudes: one that is constructive and forward-moving, or its opposite, the destructive attitude that will defeat us if it dominates.

Thus the infant develops a basic trust or a basic mistrust of the world around it. How that struggle turns out influences that infant's life through adulthood. The adolescent, meanwhile, struggles for identity against the danger of identity or role diffusion.

Erikson's pairing of terms for the older adult is profound and helpful. He suggests that the older adult's struggle is between *integrity* on the one hand and despair or disgust on the other. Any pastor who has come close to a parishioner who is losing this battle knows the tragic reality it points to. Someone who has lost hope, who is neglected by family or who has none, and who feels rejected in the physical, social and psychological experience of aging, is a heavy pastoral burden for any minister.

The students asked me, "Where does integrity come from for those who discover they are given some measure of it?" I confessed I did not know, beyond God's grace. It is a gift of the Spirit, which to a considerable degree blows where it will. Erikson is helpful in his insistence that the dimension of struggle emphasized in any particular stage also influences every other stage. Each builds on the preceding ones. Immediately preceding that eighth stage comes one that parallels it and prepares us for it—the struggle of the middle-aged adult between generativity and stagnation or self-absorption. If one's life is absorbed in oneself, then the decline of powers is a

hopeless experience. On the other hand, if one can focus on others, one can begin to relinquish space to another generation more graciously.

Ideally, a change of interests accompanies aging, a shift from material concerns toward the spiritual. In a secular, achievement-oriented culture, that change is not easy. I was once present when a religious social-activist friend described three older aunts who had aged so much, he said, that "they might as well be dead. They can't do anything any more." I found myself saying, "But they can still pray!"

The third summary term that I introduced into the classroom discussion was *pain*. Healthy younger pastors can easily forget the subtle accumulation of aches that goes with years. Every older adult I know can name some such discomfort. When an elderhostel first convenes, nearly everyone looks healthy and buoyant. By the second evening at dinner, as a friend of mine says, the pills come out. At a weekly condominium coffee klatch, my friends and I often rehearse some pain or illness before going on to the other events of the day.

For pastors, awareness of pain helps in many ways. They learn not to sit on hospital beds. They grip arthritic hands gently. They are not surprised when they ask, "How are you?" and get a catalogue of complaints in reply. They will listen to anger aimed at them because they represent for the parishioner both God and fate.

In spite of our themes, or because they were on target, the classroom mood was upbeat and positive. The meaningfulness of relinquishment and mature integrity as part of the spiritual legacy of the elderly sustained a discussion that was like a woven tapestry, rich in color. Both younger and more mature students contributed to a discussion that was over too soon. It introduced students in this course on life stages to the more systematic possibilities of geriatric studies. And it helped me move along with learning my role as an older adult.