

DEFINING THE LAST THIRD OF LIFE

By Quentin Holmes

[Author's Note: The following article draws heavily upon an Older Adult Ministry "Dimension"^[1] written by Rev. Dr. Henry C. Simmons of Union Theological Seminary/Richmond, Virginia]

The later years are gift, not burden. Not everyone who lives them understands them or welcomes them. This article is about the enterprise of embracing the blessings of this time and overcoming the burdens of it. By necessity, it will also touch on the spiritual tasks of later life.

Death and old age are not synonyms. Death can come anytime. A long life comes only to the truly blessed. The last third of life is a special period of life. But with it come all the fears and hopes of a lifetime. Growing older gracefully is about living into the values offered in every stage of life. We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.

One of the problems is that we don't have a standard vocabulary to describe the events, and changes that can be expected if one lives a full life from the time one retires until one dies. Unlike childhood, youth, or young adulthood, older adults cannot be meaningfully categorized by their age. It is useful to move away from *chronology* toward a vocabulary that identifies the transition or stable period that a person is living through. If we say that a person is in the process of retiring, or coming out of the dark times surrounding a spouse's death, or is struggling with a loss of independence we do get a lot of clarity. We may not know the person's age, but we have a good starting point for connecting with that person. The predictable transitions and stable periods which we will likely share in the last third of life are:

- Retiring (a transition)
- Extended Middle Age (a stable period)
- Uncertain Journey (a transition)
- The New Me (a stable period)
- Unwelcome Journey (a transition)
- While the Light Last (a stable period)
- Dying

Granted, there will still be individual differences. The differences stem primarily from factors such as: length of life, available patterns of relationships, year of birth and the social attitudes one carries from that era, personal and financial resources. We will cover each of the transitions or stable periods in turn.

Retiring

"Retiring" is the transition that marks the beginning of the last Third of Life. It is an active word and denotes a relatively short period of one's life of about a year's duration. Retiring has a *before*, a *during*, and an *after*. There is a *before*: the time of planning, meeting with the human resources staff tidying up projects, etc. There is a *during*: the actual retirement event itself, perhaps with a festive lunch, and promises to colleagues

that you will keep in touch. And there is an *after*: the weeks and months following when one starts to build a new rhythm of life, finds new things to do and people to do them with.

Retiring is not a small or insignificant transition. It involves life decisions about who I am now that I no longer am defined by my job, what I will do, and with whom I will do that. Nothing can minimize the psychological adjustment of leaving the world of work for the retired life. Work not only provides a sense of worth and prestige, but also valued friendships and opportunity for self-expression. The shock when that is gone cannot be measured. The transition from work to redirection can be one of life's great challenges.

Opportunities for Spiritual Growth:

In the losses that accompany retiring, we struggle to redefine life's agenda in light of some new and compelling vision. Retiring can be a spiritual event. It can be a moment that sets us on a new course toward wholeness of self and relationship with God. But where there is potential for growth, there is also peril. Personal length of days is an absolutely non-renewable resource. The awareness that we do not know our length of days brings the reflective person up short. Retirement makes us realize that we are dependent on God in ways we have not hitherto experienced. It is by faith that we will cope and grow.

There is little religious education for retiring. Retiring may bring with it a sense of uselessness, often marked by great bursts of activity. Retiring does not mark the end of human growth. A person has greater voice now than at any other time in life about how his or her time and resources will be used.

Women and men in peer relationship need to support each other in arriving at understandings of retiring that raise up a sense of promise, of vocation, of responsibility, of giftedness. Communities of faith need to take seriously the possibilities and importance of this doorway into the last third of life.

Extended Middle Age

Although it often takes nearly a year, people do get through the transition of retiring. They then embark on a time in life that we call "extended middle age." This is a stable period of life – with its ups and downs, and with its challenges, promises, hopes, dreams, and losses. This stable period of life is of indeterminate length: six months, five years, fifteen years, or twenty-five years. The indeterminacy is unnerving to many people. There are few or no clues about one's length of days in this period of life. There is a common wisdom that one ought not to waste these precious days. The day will come when you can't travel, or volunteer, or whatever it is you like to do. "Do it while you still can" is sort of a mantra for this time of life.

Extended middle age is much like middle age, except that work has been replaced by another set of activities. People see themselves as still in their middle years, but with opportunities for leisure they did not previously have. They do not relate to those further ahead on the journey of life. They look back to middle age rather than ahead to the uncertainties that will certainly come. People in extended middle age both are, and are

not, the people they were in their work years. To the extent that retiring was a deeply successful transition, they are engaged in a spiritual quest that makes this a new part of the human journey.

Opportunities for Spiritual Growth:

The meaning of this part of the journey emerges best through conversation among thoughtful, supportive, and highly-motivated peers. Those who have left behind the world of paid work are liberated to read, to learn, to develop, to strengthen social relationships. They can adopt a lifestyle of choice and chose to slow down. Devoid of the social pressures that once pounded upon their lives, they are free to think for themselves and to challenge the prevailing ethos of endless consumption.

Some might argue that communities of faith have no particular responsibilities to structure opportunities for such groups — individuals have their own responsibilities and opportunities for insight and faithful service. This sounds plausible. However, it misses the complicity of communities of faith in devaluing aging. For example, many ministers come to retirement with a great sense of failure and guilt because they failed to “grow young churches.” This reflects an unspoken assumption in churches that church growth is only valid when there are increasing numbers of people under thirty-five years of age, not increasing numbers of people of any age. Unfortunately, most churches opt into a very socially specific view of the last third of life.

Uncertain Journey

Extended middle age ends in a loss. With or without warning, one begins, unwillingly, an “uncertain journey” whose outcome cannot be predicted. A major loss interrupts one’s life. Your world is turned upside down. Typical losses are: death of a spouse, disabling illness of self or partner, a one-sided divorce, a dulling of cognitive ability, or a realization of the need for a more supportive environment.

During extended middle age people sometime worry about what this transition in their life will look like. There may be a sense of dread: “What will happen if my spouse dies first?” Yet when reality hits there is an element of shock or surprise. “Just yesterday we seemed to be doing so well...”

The uncertain journey is very much a betwixt and between experience. In a year or less one goes from a sense of self that is clearly consistent with one’s previous life, to a sense of self that is forced to look forward to the real limits of one’s future. It is a threshold experience. And the threshold is not a threshold one would willingly choose. But there is no choice. There is only the struggle to cope, to stay strong, to hold true to one’s core values, and to grieve one’s losses in a healthy way.

Opportunities for Spiritual Growth:

The wilderness of change that is the uncertain journey can reveal the shallowness of a socially sanctioned death that denies spirituality. A community of faith can be powerfully supportive if it is able to walk with individuals in that wilderness — but only if it recognizes the absolute mystery of loss and death. This is a puzzling and painful time. It can feel as if there is a great emptiness at the very center of one’s being.

Loss and death are not subject to logical explanation because they are part of the awesome mystery of creation. When we attempt to alleviate their terror by rationalization and analysis we destroy the possibility of a personal encounter with God because neither God nor God's creation can be reduced to a logical formula.

The uncertain journey must be endured. Life will not return to what it was. There may be light in the future, but the person who comes to that light will find their former sense of identity must be renegotiated. From outside the uncertain journey we can only stand in awe at the resilience of the human spirit during this transition.

The New Me

There is nothing to do but pick up one's losses and begin to build a new stable life structure that has its own sense, its own integrity, and ultimately its own joys and sorrows. There are new routines to set up, new or renewed relationships to be formed, new tasks and projects to be fulfilled, and above all a new sense of self, a "new me," to be discovered. For example, if one's partner has had a debilitating stroke or injury life does not simply go on. Every facet of every day has to be invented anew.

Even when there is a clear sense of consistency and continuity with the goals and commitments of one's earlier life, these goals and commitments will be shaped differently. What was "normal" cannot be reclaimed and a new sense of "normal" must be constructed. When the loss that creates the uncertain journey is one's own health, or the loss is the incapacity of a spouse who will now need constant care, there are limited resources left to turn outward. For some, this is a time of a new sense of the spiritual. The shock of loss breaks open a lifelong belief in the importance of the physical, material world. As patterns shift, reconfigure, and develop, there can be a new awareness of the Unknown, the Mystery, the Divine. It can be a privileged moment of grace – painful, costly, but ultimately rich in mercy.

Opportunities for Spiritual Growth:

The "new me" phase of life is a stable period that can last for years. Chronology doesn't help much. For months, and years – in some cases twenty or more years – people will create new visions of themselves and live within these visions, intentionally making and keeping promises, honoring themselves and others, and finding life-sustaining relationships. A deepening love affair with God is part of the abundance of life-sustaining relationships.

A community of faith has a role to play – providing opportunities for people in this stage of life to flourish and contribute. To do so it must move from being focused on the *problems* of aging to a dawning sense of agency for individuals in this group. It is only when a community of faith grasps and lives the truth that God's promise and human vocation is for the whole of life that this time of life can be seen as a time of growth, freedom, and responsibility.

Reluctant Journey

The “reluctant journey” from independence to dependence is the third transition in the last third of life. The reluctant journey may take as long as a year as people teeter on the edge of not being able to make it on their own (physically, emotionally, or mentally). The actual tipping point can often be identified: a sudden fall, an accident, stove-top fire, getting lost close to home. The previous stable period of a revised lifestyle has come to a dreaded point: coping with the ins and outs of daily life is no longer possible without help. Some ordinary task of life can no longer be accomplished on one’s own: toileting, eating, bathing, getting from bed to chair – all are activities of daily living that we mastered as very young children.

Home may become a strange place. One gets turned around going to the bathroom. Or the basement stairs may seem too steep. Control of bowels and bladder becomes unpredictable, and going out becomes unthinkable. A walker or cane is no longer enough help to get from bed to chair. Preparing meals and even the act of eating becomes arduous. Taking a bath or shower is felt to be dangerous and lifelong habits of hygiene give way. However it plays out, persons in this stage of adulthood cannot get by on their own. They are going through a transition that we can hardly imagine for ourselves.

Some have adult children, grandchildren, or nieces or nephews to ease the terrors of this reluctant journey. When the burden falls on a spouse this may tip the balance for that person. Some few plan, and execute, a move ahead of this transition to a life-care community or other place of assisted living.

More likely, however, people hold on well past any reasonable hope of being able to manage on their own. Fierce independence can lead to a downward spiral of increased immobility, poor nutrition, or poorly-monitored medications. Family members who get called in at the last minute to help are often appalled at the filth and squalor people endure rather than accept help or move to a care facility. This is especially true for a generation that prides itself on self-sufficiency. However, for those who do plan ahead and accept care, there are more options than were available even a decade ago. This is the good news. The bad news is the cost of care – frighteningly high for those who do not have insurance or personal wealth.

Opportunities for Spiritual Growth:

This transition tests faith. The later years, however, reveal the paradox at the heart of the 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.” A stark example of how difficult this paradox is to live is seen in the lives of those whose reluctant journey ends in a nursing home. Whatever the benefits of physical care, the human spirit is likely to be stifled by anger towards one family and God, a sense of uselessness, and a highly personal feeling of loneliness. Anger toward family and God is almost inevitable. Anger towards the family comes from a profound sense of abandonment.

And yet the new nursing home resident has to adapt – has to come to the point of being thankful for being in this facility. This is an arduous and lonely struggle. It involves a

new relationship with self and new ways of relating to others. It involves making new friends – quite unlike any friends the person ever knew before. And it involves learning how to relate to God all over again. These are tasks accomplished in the depths of one's heart and soul.

All too often the community of faith is too threatened to interact appropriately with people going through this transition because “any one of us could someday end up in this same place.” The truth is these people do have a future in the last stable period of life we call “while the light lasts.” And they have a final journey to take, dying, without which the whole human project is not understandable.

While the Light Lasts

This stable period of indeterminate length has stark boundaries; the reluctant journey into dependence, and dying itself. It is a period of life with a *beginning*, a *middle*, and an *end*. One enters in dependency and frailty, one ends in dying. Between, there may be months or years – even many years – of a life that needs its own goals, promises, struggles and hardships, joys, friendships, freedoms and meaning.

“While the light lasts” has its own integrity, variations, and distinctiveness. It has integrity because it is a human life, lived in continuity with the whole of life. It has variations because the losses that shape this period may be physical, cognitive, or emotional. It has distinctiveness because it has moved beyond the normal process of aging and is dominated by some biological or mental pathology. Giving and receiving care are the realities of this period. Some environments of care – individual or institutional – are person-friendly, some are simply dreadful, and most fall somewhere in between.

Opportunities for Spiritual Growth:

“While the light lasts” can only be understood in the context of a whole life, and it is most certainly best interpreted to us by people who are themselves in this stable period. There are two psychological mechanisms that people use to keep themselves “okay.” The first mechanism is selecting goals that are realistic in relation to their present lives, and by getting help for tasks they cannot do on their own. The second mechanism involves learning new ways of managing. Instead of choosing a goal and going for it no matter what, they leave more time for tasks, changing tasks, or letting someone help them with things like bathing and dressing. The spiritual dimension of these strategies goes to a core belief, namely that one is okay, not because of what one does but because life, God's gift, is worthwhile and precious. Paradoxically, even in the face of diminishing time, people in this time of life can take time. In accepting help where needed, they let go of that icon of adulthood, independence, and point toward the truth of adulthood, interdependence, and where necessary, dependence with dignity. It is a wonderful basis for healthily reaffirming one's dependence on God. There is no time in one's declining years when the human growth process is at an end.

Communities of faith can learn from the spiritual struggles of people in this period of life. The astonishing reality of this stable period of life is this: While the light lasts is not as dark or as bleak as we might expect or dread. Indeed, some people who are quite sick,

frail, and dependent are nevertheless happy, committed, generous, satisfied – in a word, “okay.” This is a word of witness and good news that needs to be heard and believed by the community of faith.

Dying

Dying refers to the actual transition from life to the silence of death. Unlike all other transitions and stable periods of life, no one can tell us about the experience of life’s denouement. Dying is a process, a transition that ideally takes time.

It is not always clear when life’s balance tips irrevocably toward change. Something happens. For reasons that may not be physically clear a person is “unto death” and the final transition has begun. There is a series of developmental tasks that begins with completion with worldly affairs and ends with surrender to the transcendent, to the unknown, to God. The business of life – the focus of so much energy until now – is handed over to others, and formal social and legal responsibilities are brought to a close. Only a clear sense of the approach of death could bring a person to give up what has been worked for so hard all life long.

The person turns inward to try to come to a sense of meaning about life. Failures, wrongs, and things left undone may take on power. But so also may a sense that much good has been done. The individual needs to own the good and forgive the bad. This requires the experience of the love of others. People can only truly forgive themselves when they know forgiveness from others. The person must then bring to completion relationships with family and friends. This is a time to ask forgiveness, accept forgiveness, express love, acknowledge self-worth and say good-bye. The final steps involve acceptance that it is okay that one’s life is coming to an end because there is a transcendent. In the surrender to the transcendent, to the unknown, the final task is completed: one lets go actively. Here, little remains of the ego except the volition to surrender.

Opportunities for Spiritual Growth:

The task of the community of faith is to reclaim dying as “sacred dying.” Mainstream American culture no longer thinks of death as “sacred dying.” Nor are people who are dying treated as if they were in the midst of an important, life-defining spiritual journey. Death is either medicalized, or death is secularized so that the good death is one that is simply quick, uneventful, and painless,

The spiritual nature of dying is transparent. Worldly goods were never meant to be the be-all and end-all of life. There is much in each life to celebrate and to regret; there is an irreplaceable need for forgiveness and the expression of love. When all is said and done, it is only the Transcendent, the Mystery, God who can draw us, in love, into the surrender of our ego. Death is ultimately too deep for tragedy. The “dying of the light” can be a dawning, a requiem, a rainbow. We do not rejoice in some starless night, but suggest that one cannot see the stars save by night.

Conclusion

These then are the transitions and stable periods that give shape to the last third of life for those who do not die an untimely death.

“Aging is a moral and spiritual frontier because its unknown, terrors and mysteries cannot be crossed without humility, and self-knowledge, without love and compassion, without acceptance of physical decline and mortality and a sense of the sacred.”

(Rev. Henry C. Simmons)

- ^[1] Henry C. Simmons, “Old Shoes, New Souls”: Transitions and Stable Periods in the Last Third of Life, *Dimensions of Older Adult Ministry: A Handbook*, Edited by Richard L. Morgan, Witherspoon Press (2006) pp. 26-41.

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