

Keep working on love



This year's Social Justice Statement from Australia's Catholic Bishops focuses on the value and dignity of older people. In her address at the launch of the Statement, Good Samaritan Sister Patty Fawkner asked: "what do the elderly of our world teach me for the journey of life?"

BY Patty Fawkner SGS

When John Ferguson [Executive Officer of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council] invited me to speak today [September 6, 2016] about the "spirituality of ageing", I told him I wasn't qualified and suggested others. John persisted and I thought, perhaps I have some ageing qualifications. The average age of the members of my congregation is 75; I've lived with many elderly people; my mother is 94; last year the Commonwealth Government told me I am officially aged; and I've just learned that I fall in the category of the "young-old".

An African proverb says, "The death of an old person is like the loss of a library". The Australian Bishops concur that the wisdom and lived experience of older people are priceless treasures. Briefly, I wish to share some stories from the library of elders I know, and the wisdom I find there for our human journey which is, of course, a spiritual journey.

Have you noticed we seem to want a long life but don't want to become old? In preparation for this talk I interviewed five Good Samaritan Sisters who I think have made a good job of becoming old.

Three things struck me about these women whose average age is 87. Though they struggled with their diminishment, they accepted it. They were all still working on love and they were overwhelmingly grateful.

Morris West wrote his autobiography at 80. West says, "Once you reach a certain age, there should be only one phrase left in your vocabulary: thank-you! With every birthday, gratitude should deepen until it colours every aspect of life".

I visited another sister who'd taught me. She was 98 and fully alert. "I have a gift for you," I said. She said, "I don't want it". With age comes wisdom and graciousness, but as Oscar Wilde observed, sometimes age comes alone.

Lesson number one: be grateful.

The Bishops acknowledge the stereotyping and demeaning of the elderly in a culture besotted with youth, sexual attractiveness, status and productivity. We use the word "old" pejoratively: "old codger", the sexist "old woman", and "old fool".

Richard Rohr says that if we live long enough we'll all become old fools, but that we have a choice about what kind of "old fool" we become. We can become a "pathetic old fool", an "embittered old fool" or we can, he says, become a "holy old fool", one who accepts their age and diminishment without pathetically clinging to the past and without bitterness.

My mother, Betty, has had dementia for ten years and it gets inexorably worse. Betty doesn't think about the future and she's lost all memory of the past. She lives in the NOW. She reminds me that any fixation on the past or the future prevents me from giving my full attention to the present moment. How hard it is to be present in the NOW.

The heart of the present moment is where God is. God, reveals Godself to Moses as I AM, not I will be, or I was, but the enigmatic I AM, the One who speaks a word of love to me in the here, in the now.

Betty wears no masks; plays no roles; has no duties. She is simply herself. I'm mindful of May Sarton's poem:

*Now I become myself.
It's taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other peoples' faces.*

Betty's treasure is not what she does, nor what she produces, but who she is.

Growing up I was somewhat awed by my mother and, sadly, there wasn't a great deal of obvious affection between us. I was Dad's girl. Betty's older age has released the affection genie between us. I can't tell you how grateful I am that when I visit her I can cup her soft-skinned face and say, "I love you, my darling Mother". She used to be able to say she loved me too, but not now. She doesn't know who I am. But she affectionately smiles – generally.

Teilhard de Chardin says, "It is absolutely necessary to keep smiling. The essential and doubtless most fruitful gesture is to smile, with something of love in the smile".

There was an elderly man in Mum's unit who must have been a ball-room dancer in his earlier life. Helmut would always be tripping the light fantastic a la Fred Astaire. My ageist mother used to say, "Look at that silly old bugger" (she never used to swear!). But Helmut was great. The dancing seemed to transport him. The lesson I learn from Helmut is: cultivate your interests now, don't wait till tomorrow.

I think Helmut would have approved of Mary Oliver's poem, titled "When Death Comes". She says:

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

Live life to the full now. Even when life gets precarious, diminished and fragile, give it your best shot. Or, as Bryce Courtenay said towards the end of his life, "If you're skating on thin ice, you may as well tap dance!"

Some people tell me that they will never allow themselves to get to the stage Betty is now. "Just give me the end-it-all pill," one says half joking. They don't romanticise old age and quake, as I do, at the thought of loss of control, total dependence, incontinence, a ravaged body and a memory that's shot. And none of us wants to be a burden on others. As the actress, Bette Davis is reported to have said, "Old age ain't for sissies!"

But the elderly expose the myth of total independence and narcissistic control. We live in an utterly inter-dependent world. It is not all about ME. Our newest minted Saint Teresa of Calcutta says, "If we have not peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other". We must make room at the table and, I truly believe, be prepared to stay at the table of life.

The elderly bid us to have the strength of soul to look into the face of suffering and diminishment, our own and each other's. It takes incredible courage to let go, to be dependent (the Bishops speak beautifully about the grace of dependence), to be vulnerable, to allow my weaknesses of body and mind to be exposed.

It takes humility not to be jealous and resentful of the young. It is humbling to allow myself to be cared for and to realise that sometimes in our helplessness, brokenness and passivity, we can give something deeper than we can with our strength and achievements.

Many of us don't age well. I encounter anxious, angry and depressed old people. We're all in good company with St Paul who throughout his life struggled with some physical, psychological or moral brokenness. Christ reassures Paul and us that it's actually OK that we never fully get our act together. "My grace is all you need; my power comes to its full strength in your weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

What do the elderly of our world teach me for the journey of life?

- Be grateful.
- Don't just visit this life.
- Develop interests now.
- Become a holy old fool.
- Be present in the present.
- Humbly accept diminishment.
- Smile.
- Let go.
- Be married to amazement.
- God's grace is all I need.

And the one lesson that sums up all of this – the core of Jesus' whole life and teaching: keep working on love. Keep working on love.

This is the text of Sister Patty Fawkner's address delivered at the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops' 2016 Social Justice Statement "A Place at the Table – Social Justice in an Ageing Society"

(<http://www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au/publications/social-justice-statements#SJS2016>).

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