
The Spiritual Advantages of Later Life

Sue Sweeney, MPH, MA

Chair, Aging Studies Department



Reflection

- <http://www.gratefulness.org/brotherdavid/a-good-day.htm>
- Brother David Steindl-Rast
 - B. 1926
- How are you changed?



Inevitabilities of Aging – in U.S.

- Time perspective altered
- Lifetime of experience
- Physical decline
- Ageism



Change Is Inevitable,
except from a vending machine.

Inevitabilities of Aging – in U.S.

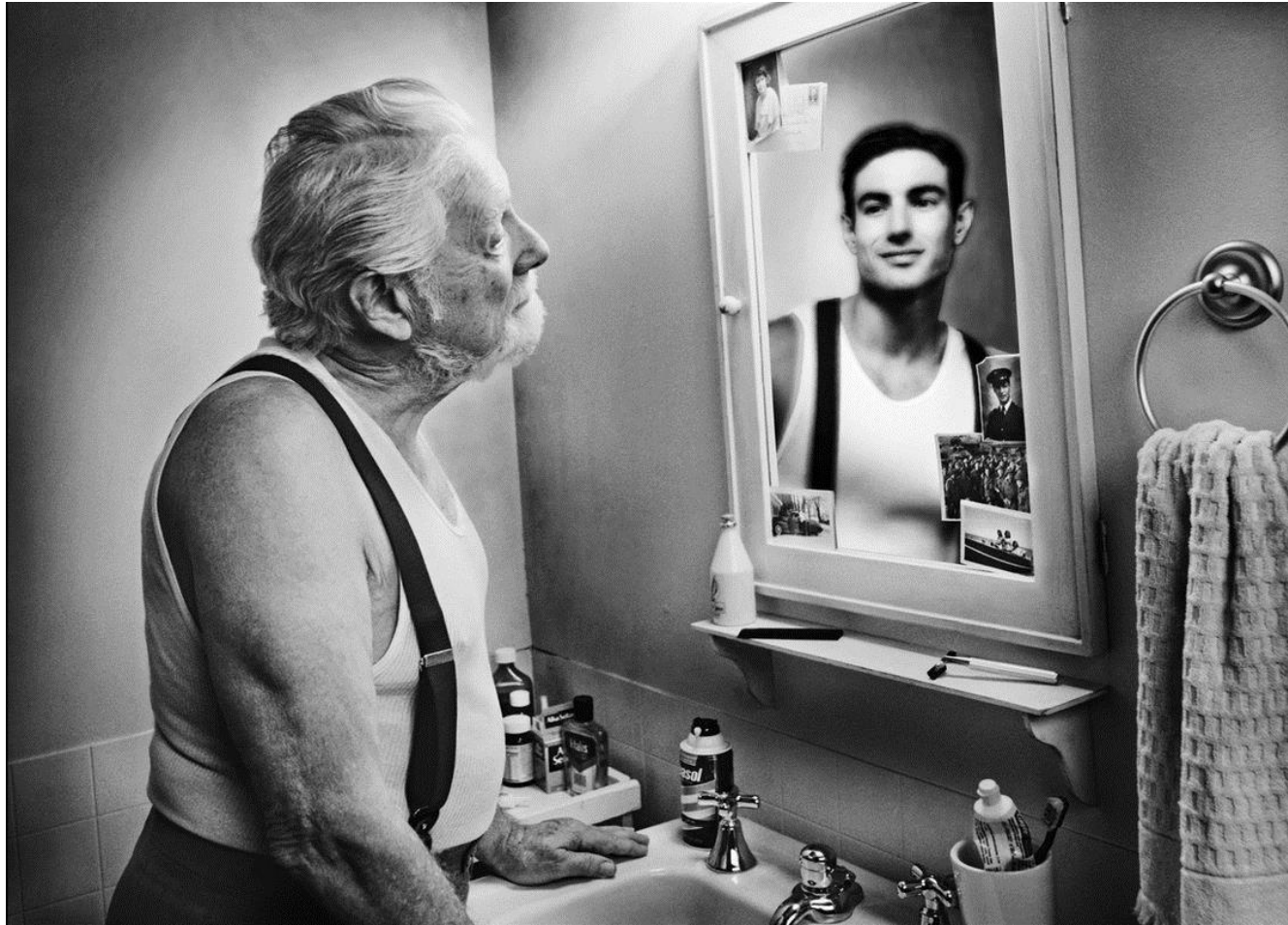
- These inevitabilities invite several developmental tasks



Developmental Tasks



Self-Esteem Regulation



Self-Esteem Regulation

- A challenge because of:
 - External and internalized ageism
 - Loss of social roles
 - No clear expectations of people in this phase of life



Opportunities

- What have I become?
- Who am I without the social roles?
- How can I express my essence?
- How can I harvest my experiences and further contribute to Life?



Opportunities

- Other roles we can assume:
 - Encourager, Supporter
 - Mentor, Guide
 - Listener, Witness
 - Anchor, Safe Space
 - Source of Unconditional Acceptance
 - Truth Teller, Limit Setter



Tools

- Life review
- Journaling
- Write a later life resume
- Study group
- Book club
- Listen to your gut, what moves/touches you
- Contemplation, prayer, meditation



Sharing

- How can you harvest the experience of your life to this moment?
- What gifts have you cultivated?



Manage Fore-Shortened Time Span



Manage Fore-Shortened Time Span

- Know how quickly time passes, how rapidly things change
- See that there's less time ahead than behind
- Don't know how many healthy years remain
- Each moment becomes precious



Opportunities

- Deceleration
- Go deeply into each moment
- Appreciate creation
- Share perspective



Tools

- Be present to the moment
- Listen with your whole self
- Cultivate awareness
- Walking meditation



Sharing

- Be present in this moment: attend with all of your senses
- Practice giving others your full attention



Come to Terms with Decline



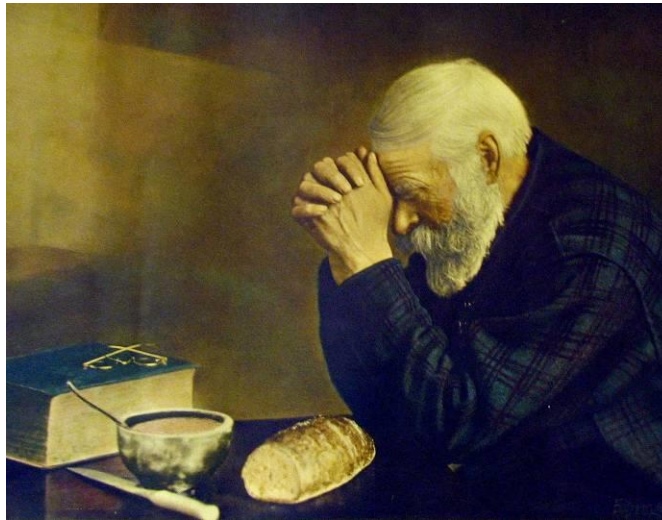
Come to Terms with Decline



- At some point nearly everyone must confront dysfunction and disability
- The choice:
 - Accept and engage with the reality
 - Find spiritual benefit in the confrontation
 - OR
 - Become bitter, depressed, resentful, jealous

Opportunities

- Cultivate gratitude for what we do have
- Acknowledge we are souls with bodies, not bodies with souls
- Affirm the worth of the person as a being, not as a doing



Tools

- Give thanks every time something goes right
- Inventory the blessings of the day, last thing at night
- Look for the spark of divinity in those with limitations



Sharing

- View this video:
- <http://soundcheck.wnyc.org/story/200150-treating-dementia-music/>
- Did your view of Henry change from the beginning to the end?
- Share what you conclude from that with another



Deal with Dependence



Deal with Dependence

- Dependence of others on us: eldercare, child care
- Our growing dependence on others
- US is very individualistic
- Hard to give up control



Opportunities

- Growth from adversity: patience, tolerance, a broader perspective
- See oneself as part of a larger group
- Give up control, surrender to God's will for us
- Find creative ways to serve others and Him



Tools

- Ask, “What really matters here?”
- Relax standards
- Move from a demand to a preference
- What can I contribute to this situation to make it better?



Sharing

- Think of something that you can shift to a preference, and describe it to another



Face Death



Face Death

- The older we become, the more losses we will have
- We know that we ourselves won't live forever
- Quality of life may diminish, inviting us to relinquish attachment



Opportunities

- Examine your beliefs and fears
- What are you attached to? What would you miss?
- What do you want to do with the time left?
- How can you make it easier for loved ones?



Tools

- Study group
- “Death dinners”
- Bucket list
- Family conversations
- Sort & give away

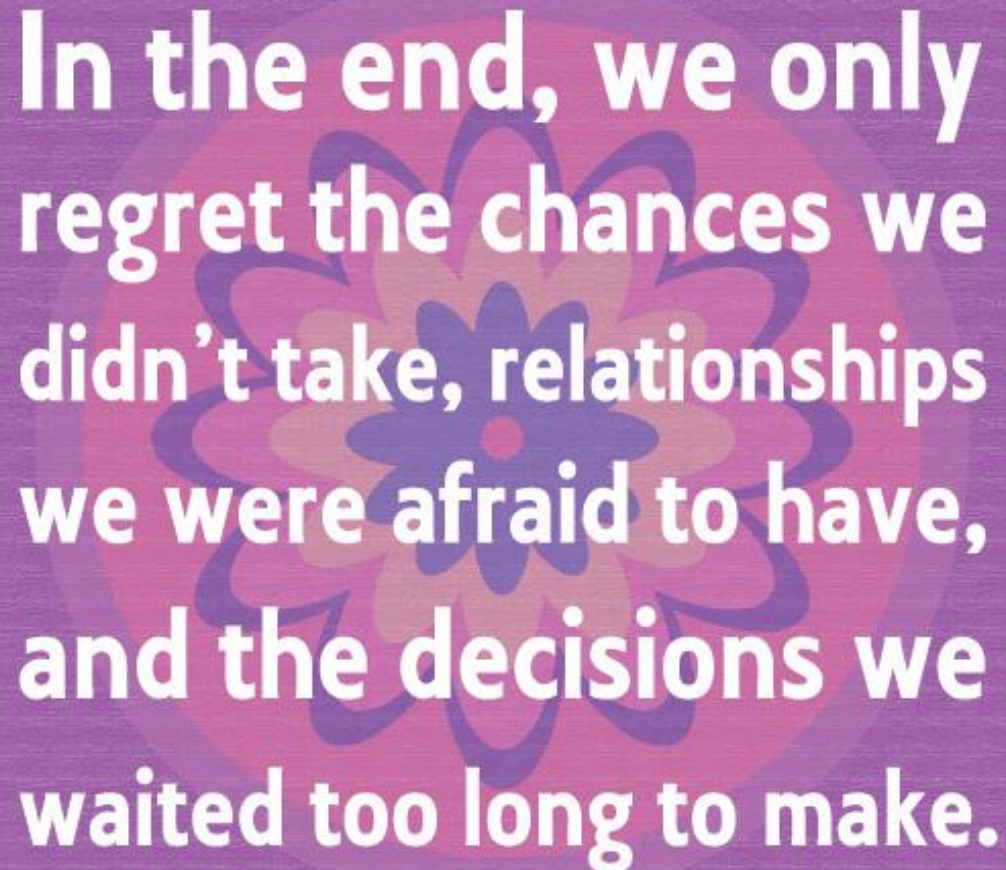


Sharing

- Write something you've always wanted or needed to do, but haven't taken the time
- Describe it to another, and receive their encouragement or suggestions



Relate to Unfinished Business



**In the end, we only
regret the chances we
didn't take, relationships
we were afraid to have,
and the decisions we
waited too long to make.**

WWW.LIVELIFEHAPPY.COM

Relate to Unfinished Business

- Opportunity to forgive, release old hurts
- This may mean forgiving ourselves
- In so doing, we regain estranged parts of ourselves
- It's not necessary to have the other present to release the hurt



Tools

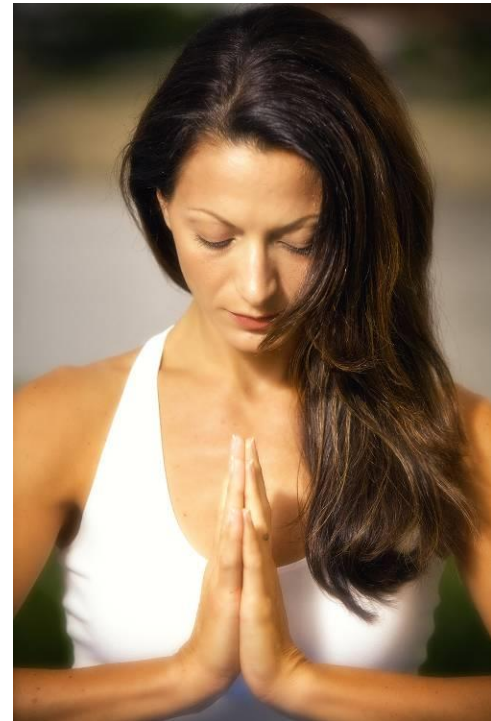
- Soften the heart around grudges, disappointments
- Extend blessings and pray for self and others
- Make gifts in another's name



Sharing

- Think of someone who has harmed you by commission or omission
- Extend a blessing to them
- How does it feel?

Namaste: I honor the
divinity within you



Leave a Legacy



Leave a Legacy



- The need to be remembered
- Not just money or physical assets
- Wisdom, role model, guidance, life lessons
- Vocation, avocation, roots/family history
- Form: journal, video, family stories, audio tape, recipe book, photo album, memory quilt

Opportunities

- Explore what will be left of you after you die
- Notice how you feel about what you discover
- How do you want to be remembered?
- What do you want to leave behind?
- In what form can your legacy be transmitted?



Tools

- Journal
- Family discussions
- Family project



Sharing

- What have others left to you as a legacy?
- What meaning did their legacy have for you?

Great grandpa loved scouting; so do the next three generations.



Spiritual Growth

- When we are older we are invited by life to reassess, review, reconcile, and restore.
- We can share our accumulated gifts in new ways
- We can shed pettiness and gain a higher perspective on others and life
- We can transcend



Resources

- Chittister, Joan. 2008. *The gift of years: Growing old gracefully*. Karonah, NY: Bluebridge.
 - A reflective expression of the advantages of aging, especially for spirituality.
- Levine, Stephen. *Healing into life and death*. 1987. New York: Anchor Books
 - Explores how individuals can work with illness and suffering to reach more peace and inner healing.

Resources

- Lustbader, Wendy. 1993. *Counting on kindness*. New York: Free Press
 - Explores the experience of dependence, inviting the reader to develop empathy for those who are dependent while gaining insight into positive aspects of the phenomenon.
- McLeod, Beth Witrogen. 1999. *Caregiving: the spiritual journey of love, loss, and renewal*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
 - One woman's caregiving journey and her spiritual growth as a result.

Resources

- Meditation Oasis. No date. Walking meditation. <http://www.meditationoasis.com/how-to-meditate/simple-meditations/walking-meditation/>
 - Provides simple instructions on how to use a 20 minute walk to be mindful.
- Neeld, Elizabeth Harper. 2005. Tough transitions: *Navigating your way through difficult times*. New York: Warner Books.
 - Outlines a reflective process to follow to find one's way through adversity; filled with peoples' stories.

Resources

- St. James, Elaine. 1995. *Inner simplicity: 100 ways to regain peace and nourish your soul*. New York: Hyperion.
 - Pithy suggestions for altering one's daily life to a more gentler and more peaceful experience.
- Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman & Miller, Ronald S. 1997. *From ageing to sageing: A profound new vision of growing older*.
 - Explores the concept of spiritual eldering, contributing to social transformation through mentoring, social action, and healing.

Resources

Madonna Aging Studies Community Blog

www.madonnaugerontology.wordpress.com

Follow on Twitter @MadonnaUAging

ssweeney@madonna.edu

