

Where You Don't Wish to Go

I found her in the beauty shop of the facility. There was an empty chair and I sat down. I nodded to the beautician who was cutting strands of hair around the curlers and said, "I guess there's nothing you can do for my hair." The beautician gave only a tiny shake of her head, and smiled. While her hair was taking shape I chatted. "I can't remember how long ago your husband died." She told me, and I continued, "How long had you been married?"

She told me and then continued to talk about her rehab therapy. She said, "I'm quite sore today. With broken and bruised ribs, everything I do seems to hurt. And yesterday I had quite a workout. But I guess if I'm going to recover from my fall, I have to grin and bear it."

When I saw her the next week, she was lifting weights. The physical therapist working with her in the rehab room said, "Sir you can't be in here while she's working. We'll stop now, and you can take her back to her room and talk." We slowly made our way down the hall three doors to her room. When we were alone she said, "I'm so glad to see you! I'm glad to see anyone from the outside. I feel like I'm in prison. I can't wait to get out of this place, and back to my own apartment."

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's so difficult to do all those exercises, especially with broken ribs. And, lifting weights, of all things. That must be awful."

She said, "I feel like they're just pushing me through a program. I don't know anybody here, and no one seems really interested in me. They got me up this morning and gave me a bath. And then they dressed me before I was even dry. I feel awful. And my hair is wet. I'm hoping to get back to the beauty parlor soon so they can dry it. I'm afraid I'll catch cold on top of everything else."

I sat quietly with her, and after a while said a prayer with her, promised to come back, and left. It was obvious: that was certainly a place she didn't wish to be. And I remembered something about that in the Bible.

The final scene in the Gospel of John describes the disciples who have been fishing all night but have caught nothing. Just after daybreak the Risen Christ calls to them from the shore, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat." When they obeyed and caught more fish than they could haul in, Peter recognized Jesus and jumped into the lake making for shore.

When they had all come ashore, dragged in the net full of fish and shared breakfast, Jesus said to Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times he asked the same question, and each time Peter responded, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus commanded: "tend and feed my sheep." The thrice repeated question, the answer and the command seem to be a restoration scene for the Peter who had denied Jesus three times in the last hours before his death.

Then Jesus says: “Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” In the ancient world to stretch out the arms meant crucifixion and many people think Jesus’ words are a prediction not only of Peter’s death but of his eventual martyrdom. The church legend is that Peter was crucified upside down in Rome under the emperor Nero.

For those of us who read this story today, martyrdom is not really an option, even though it is very real for Christians in some places in this violent world of ours. But though we don’t face martyrdom, aging itself often has a way of taking us where we don’t wish to go.

We lose our independence when we give up driving, we leave our homes when we move into a health care facility, and we may find much of our accumulated wealth dissipated in costs for health care.

It may take a village to raise a child, but Massachusetts surgeon, Atul Gawande, in his insightful book *Being Human*, shows that it also takes a village to help us navigate the troubled waters of aging, of serious illness, and of final arrangements. We tend to think that medical professionals can take over this responsibility for us. But he shows that it takes a partnership of effort to clarify exactly what our final wishes may be, to understand just where it is we don’t wish to go. He writes:

“This is a book about the modern experience of mortality, about what it’s like to be creatures who age and die ... our ideas about how to deal with our finitude have got the reality wrong Lacking a coherent view of how people might live successfully all the way to their end, we have allowed our fates to be controlled by the imperatives of medicine, technology, and strangers” (Atul Gawande, *Being Human*, p. 9).

“It is not death that the very old tell me they fear. It is what happens short of death, losing their hearing, their memory, their best friends, their way of life ... Old age is a continuous series of losses” (p. 55).

“People with serious illness have priorities besides simply prolonging their lives. Surveys find that their top concerns include avoiding suffering, strengthening relationships with family and friends, being mentally aware, not being a burden to others, and achieving a sense that their life is complete ... The question therefore is ... how we can build a health care system that will actually help people achieve what’s most important to them at the end of their lives” (p. 155).

Gawande’s book is excellent and I recommend it to all of you. End of life issues are, of course, closer for older adults and we are forced to take them more seriously than we did in younger years when we still cherished the illusion of immortality. The Christian faith helps us do that because it takes up ultimate concerns. Life together in the church can help us face our own mortality, and do so in hope.

Madeleine L'Engle gives food for thought in her book, *Two Part Invention*, as she watches the slow deterioration of her husband in the hospital with liver cancer. During his long hospitalization everything that could go wrong does go wrong. Reflecting on Jesus' words from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" she writes,

"I am grateful that Jesus cried out those words, because it means that I need never fear to cry them out myself. I need never fear, nor feel any sense of guilt, during the inevitable moments of forsakenness. They come to us all. They are part of the soul's growth" (Madelein L'Engle, *Two Part Invention, The Story of a Marriage*, p. 96).

Moments of forsakenness leading to the soul's growth, she is so right. With the wisdom of age and experience, my friend Flossie Hamilton once said to me in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, "Life sometimes requires us to be bigger than we want to be."

Madeleine L'Engle continues, "I hear different people tell of some good or lucky event and then say, surely the Lord was with me. And my hackles rise. My husband is desperately ill, so where is the Lord? I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights."

"It is when things go wrong, when the good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to have been lost, that God is most present. We do not need the sheltering wings when things go smoothly. We are closest to God in the darkness, stumbling along blindly (p. 124).

I find her words helpful. A friend who is Parish Associate in my Pennsylvania home town reflects upon his own process of aging in the light of Jesus' words to Peter. The friend is a year younger than I and thinks about aging as a gift. He writes:

"Our culture encourages us to resist the journey of aging. The cultural slogan is Look ten years younger. And the truth is that sometimes aging is a literally a pain, but it's also a gift. Aging can give us the wisdom born of experience, the maturity of a calm focus that often eludes us in our energetic youth."

"Aging is a journey of acceptance, receiving life as it is, not as we wish, or try to make it. It invites us to let go, to release the illusions of power and control, no longer defining ourselves by what we can do."

"Aging reveals our souls. We can be less attached to power, security and self-image. We are less defined by our outer nature and more by our inner, where strength is resilience and perseverance, not force; and beauty is presence, not appearance. Our youth-oriented culture sees lives as objects-bodies, really-but with age we see our lives as stories."

"As our bodies are aging and even if they become frail, our souls age as well. We come more wholly to inhabit our inner nature which is love. It is the vibrancy of our

inner nature that gives our outer nature its beauty, even in old age. Our stories make even our wrinkles and grey hairs beautiful.”

“At age 77 I’m not old yet. But a birthday reminds me to embrace the journey as I care for my outer nature, to become more truly my inner nature. No matter how the outer nature ages, the inner nature only gets better.”

I’m aware that in the struggle to age gracefully, I’m finding help from a lot of people: a friend in rehab, Atul Gawande, Madelein L’Engle, a Pennsylvania minister, and many of you. I know I don’t have it all figured out. I’m also aware that it will probably be over before I do put the issues of aging in a coherent pattern. But in the meantime, I’m grateful for all those people who help. And my hope for you is that no matter how the outer nature ages, your inner nature may continue to get better and better.