

Declining with Grace

BY ROBERT C. AND ELIZABETH V. ROBERTS

When facing the losses of old age, some people “handle” the change from competency to dependency with serenity and composure, others with bitterness and disorientation. Gratitude and generosity—two virtues that acknowledge we are not all strength and independence, but also (and very basically) weakness and dependency—prepare us for better adjustment in situations of loss.

George and Steve are two men whom Elizabeth served when she was working as a hospice social worker in Illinois. Shortly before Elizabeth met George, he had moved to Arizona, to an active retirement community where he expected to live a vigorous life with his new friends. He had left his daughter and her family in Illinois and was trying to get some emotional distance from his failed marriage; now he was ready to settle into some real living. When a brain tumor sneaked into his life, landing him back in Illinois and reducing his world to a nursing home, George had no resilience. He had fully expected to be in control of his life, and the idea of being disabled had never even flashed across his radar screen. He felt ambushed. All he could do was mutter, “How could this happen to me?”

Steve was shocked by his diagnosis of stomach cancer, but it did not leave him entirely without resources. In the weeks following the diagnosis he and his wife lived with the hope of good days, even of many good days to come. But they were also aware that they couldn't count on that, and they rearranged their priorities. They spent time with their children and

grandchildren. They worked on legal and financial affairs together. On days of needed rest they enjoyed watching the birds in their back yard. During one of Elizabeth's visits they showed her their travel pictures of Europe on the big-screen TV in their living room. You had the sense that in the face of disability and death, life was going on and was still basically good.

THE HUMAN SITUATION

Human lives have two aspects—dependence and independence—and the task of living well and maturely is to integrate and balance them. When we are born, we are in a state of such dependency that we would die immediately if we weren't in intensive care by round-the-clock caregivers. We humans remain in helpless infancy longer than any other organism on earth. But then we grow to be relatively independent, active rather than passive, strong, able to care for ourselves and for others, and in all likelihood we do take care of others when they are helpless. However, after gaining such "self-sufficiency," we may again have periods of weakness and dependency. Accident or illness may reduce us to a state almost like that of a small child. And then, in most cases, we recover our strength and become active and independent again. But sooner or later, if we live long enough, we go into physical and mental decline, and may revert to a weakness very much like the infancy from which we emerged.

Of course, even in periods of life when we are most self-reliant, our dependency clings to us. That very competence, that ability to be intelligent, independent, active decision-makers, depends on our having had a minimally decent upbringing; we are never-endingly indebted to our early caretakers for our basic abilities and well-being. A spouse and circle of friends continue to be a key to a well-lived life, as recent studies seem to show. And think how we depend on food-suppliers, technicians, trades people, transporters, merchants, information-givers, spiritual counselors, and a thousand others for the supporting infrastructure of our supposed self-sufficiency.

We value independence and strength, for ourselves and for others. Some people prefer not to have children because the little ones are such a full-time job, and we often hear older people, looking ahead to their disability, say that they don't want to be a burden on others. They wanted to have their "own" life when they were young, and they want the same for their children. This is often said out of genuine love. So they try to arrange things so that their children will never have to be inconvenienced by them. But being weak, dependent, and a burden on others is as much a part of life as being strong and independent, and people who go all-out to avoid or deny this side of life are not affirming their full humanity. If we are blind to one side of life, we're likely to be blind-sided, like George. It is as though he lived in terms of only half his reality, with the result that the

other half destroyed the half he lived. But George is perhaps a slightly extreme case of a spiritual problem that we all face.

GOD AND WEAKNESS

The Apostle Paul seems to have struggled against the tendency to love too much his own strength and independence. He says that he besought the Lord three times to take away a “thorn in his flesh,” but the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in

The Apostle Paul is “strong” when he is “weak” because, in frankly admitting and accepting his dependency on the Lord, he is reconciled to the dependent aspect of his self, and becomes properly dependent on the Source of all that he is and has. He becomes a more “whole” person.

weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). And Paul seems to have begun, at least, to deal successfully with his power-hunger, for he says that “I am content with weaknesses...for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). Paul is “strong” when he is “weak” because, in frankly admitting and accepting his dependency on the Lord, Paul is reconciled to the de-

pendent aspect of his self, and becomes properly dependent on the Source of all that he is and has. He becomes a more “whole” person. His weaknesses—that “thorn,” but also “insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” (12:10)—remind him that he is not self-sufficient and encourage him to turn to Jesus for support. So these adversities have a good side, and can become an occasion for thanksgiving.

Anybody can see, just by considering how things go in a human life, that we are not all strength and independence, but also (and very basically) weakness and dependency. But the Christian has a special reason for emphasizing and personalizing this side of our nature. We believe that God created us and that Jesus has redeemed us. God created us out of the dust of the universe, and Jesus redeemed us from sin and death. (Both pretty impressive kinds of weakness!) All of this is by “grace,” not what we deserve in our strength and merit, but something we need in our weakness and bankruptcy. The daily practice of the Christian life is to remember these things in prayer and meditation. Our aim, in such devotional practices, is to shape our minds and hearts to these facts about ourselves and God. If we remember these dependencies and the God who supplies our every need in both plenty and want, success and failure, health and sickness, and throughout life and in death, we will not feel ambushed when confronted with the brain tumor and a bed in a nursing home. An impor-

tant function of a congregation of Christians is to remind one another regularly of our need for God and each other, and to facilitate our serving one another and graciously accepting that service from one another.

In her work with older people, Elizabeth has observed that people facing the loss of function and seeing death on the near horizon “handle” the change from competency to dependency in very different ways, some with serenity and composure, others with bitterness and disorientation. And she has noticed that two virtues, which especially take dependency and weakness into account, seem to make for better adjustment in such difficult times. People whose earlier lives have been characterized by these traits do best in situations of loss. These virtues are gratitude and generosity.

GRATITUDE

Gratitude is an eye for the good in life. The intensely grateful person is just a little bit blind to the downside of life—doesn’t tend to dwell on it, doesn’t notice it quite as much as the rest of us do. But gratitude is more than “looking on the bright side” of events. It is a personal—or rather, interpersonal—attitude. To be grateful is to be related to a giver; it is to be grateful *to somebody*. The grateful person is one who is well disposed to *receive* good things *from* somebody.

So the grateful person is not just a “positive thinker.” But she is also not what we might call a “deserver.” A person with the self-sufficiency attitude might be glad to receive a good thing from somebody, on condition that he (the receiver) deserves it. Some people have a strong sense of entitlement to what they have, and some even feel a sort of repugnance for having what they are not entitled to. They may be very glad they have what they have, and even glad to have it from somebody (for instance, when they inherit a fortune from a father they love), but they also have a sense of being entitled to it (“I am the son, after all.”). The truly grateful person, by contrast, has a sense of not deserving the good she receives, and above all she does not insist on deserving all that she has.

The grateful person also differs from one we might call an “exchanger.” People whose minds are oriented by the ideal of self-sufficiency and independency are always a little uncomfortable in the role of a real receiver. That is, they hate to receive something they really need, but are not in a position to “pay back.” They feel that such a receiver is in a one-down position, and is demeaned. Often they don’t mind giving to others, but they don’t much like to be on the receiving end of the relationship, unless they can reciprocate pretty soon in a way that matches or overmatches what they have received. So the test of gratitude, as a character trait, is not whether we enter gladly into “gift-exchanges” and other reciprocal relationships of equal giving and receiving, but whether we are able, with “grace,” to accept the *significant* gift that we *cannot reciprocate*.

The personal side of gratitude also distinguishes the grateful person

from one we might call “the grubber.” The grubber is just glad to get stuff, and doesn’t mind where it comes from. If it comes from somebody, by a generous action, the grubber doesn’t mind, but also doesn’t take this origin much into account. (It’s not that he doesn’t *know* how he got the good thing, but rather that this fact doesn’t *mean* much to him. He doesn’t *care* where the benefit came from, as long as it’s a benefit.) The grateful person, by contrast, is attentive to and glad in the combination: giver-and-gift.

The Christian is in an ideal position to become genuinely grateful, not merely a positive thinker, a deserver, an exchanger, or a grubber. We noted earlier the basic Christian beliefs that we are created by God and redeemed by Christ. These beliefs set the stage for a life of gratitude, because now every good we have, both material and spiritual, is from the hand of a personal God who has given us these things without our deserving them. We are in no position to pay God back, and in no position simply to be heedlessly grubbing up all the goods we can.

This eye for the positive, this willingness to be unentitled before and dependent on a Personal Benefactor, is a wonderful preparation for the losses and dependencies of old age. Jimmy Dorrell, in his November, 2002, newsletter for Mission Waco, writes:

There is a woman on our Board of Directors who is such a thankful child of God. She has no financial pull with foundations or influence with corporations. She has lived in poverty most of her life. As a grandmother, taking care of four others, she lives in a housing project in Waco. She is living with cancer and goes three times a week for grueling kidney dialysis. She has plenty of reasons to hold her fist up to God and say, “Why me, God?” But she doesn’t. She just thanks him each day for another day of life to bless others until he calls her home. Across town there is a man whom I have met with on several occasions. He is a nice man who has amassed a good fortune and “built bigger barns” in this life. But his heart is thankless. He is angry at God and others for the setbacks he has experienced in life. Each time we meet, I notice how his life gradually becomes more “futile” and “the truth is suppressed” because of his selfish hurts and disappointments. He has worked so hard to be happy and now lives a miserable existence.

GENEROSITY

Dorrell’s spiritual diagnosis of these two people—the one functioning well in loss and adversity, the other functioning poorly despite wealth and successes—focuses on gratitude, but also suggests the relevance of generosity. The one lives a life of giving to others, the other a life of acquiring and trying to get happiness for himself. Let’s think for a moment about what generosity is and how it prepares us for the losses of old age.

Generosity is the other side of gratitude. If gratitude is a disposition to *receive* graciously, generosity is a disposition to *give* graciously. Both of these virtues are interpersonal and involve the acknowledgment of dependence. Just as the grateful person receives without a sense of entitlement, the generous person gives freely from the heart, without a sense of the pressure of obligation. Just as the grateful person has a loving attitude to his benefactor, so the generous person has a loving attitude toward his beneficiary. Just as gratitude can be a whole way of life, pervading a person's consciousness of all that he has and is, so generosity can be a fundamental way of thinking and feeling about what one has and is, in relation to others.

The grateful Christian will be generous. It is hard to imagine a deeply generous person who is not grateful, or a deeply grateful person who is not generous. The reason is that these two virtues take the same philosophy of life to heart. This philosophy says that everything ultimately belongs to God, who showers us with his grace; if we are to be like him, we must become little showers in our own right. If you think that you are not entitled to what you have, but that it comes by grace from the hands of another, it is not likely that you will cling to it tightly and use it only for yourself. The practice of giving away, of sitting loose to one's possessions and time, and of seeing regularly beyond oneself to the needs and interests of others, is a kind of practicing-up for the inevitable losses that await us. It is a practice of detachment from ourselves that prepares us to move on, freely and gladly, to whatever God has in store for us.

It seems probable that George was not in the practice of seeing life in this way, and that his focused concern to have a good time in his retirement narrowed his vision so that he couldn't realistically anticipate that something like that brain tumor was a real possibility.

The generous person, by contrast, lives to a significant extent outside of himself, taking concern and, very likely, joy in the well-being and interests of others, raining consideration alike on the just and the unjust. In doing so, he partakes, to a small extent, in a perspective of eternity, a God's-eye view in which financial setbacks and cancer and kidney failure are not quite disasters.

Seeing regularly beyond oneself to the needs and interests of others is a kind of practicing-up for the inevitable losses that await us. This practice of detachment from ourselves prepares us to move on, freely and gladly, to whatever God has in store for us.

These days, we hear a lot about long-term care insurance, insurance that buys us care when we can no longer care for ourselves. To buy or not to buy, that is the question. (Another question is when to buy, if we buy.) People who are actively seeking answers to these questions show some spiritual maturity: at least they seem to be facing their potential for weakness and dependency. Maybe they are less likely to be blind-sided by an unexpected decline than those who are in “denial.” But there is another way to prepare ourselves for the future while we are still strong and young, a more directly spiritual and Christian way. Elizabeth has noticed that older persons who have ingrained in themselves, by long practice, the patterns of gratitude and generosity, handle disability better than the resentful and the grasping. They have better relationships with their caregiving children and other caregivers. While the ungrateful continue grubbing for attention to the end, myopic in their self-concern, the grateful and the generous are happy to have the attention they get and keep deriving pleasure from the good things that are going on in others’ lives. This, it seems, is a kind of long-term care insurance that we can practice every day of our lives, as is natural for those who are daily growing up in every way into him who is the head, our generous Lord Jesus Christ.



ROBERT C. AND ELIZABETH V. ROBERTS

Robert is Distinguished Professor of Ethics at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Elizabeth, LMSW-ACP, works with the Area Agency on Aging of the Heart of Texas Council of Governments as the Managing Local Ombudsman for long-term care residents.