

Spirituality of Aging

BY MARK A. PETERS

As we grow in Christian faithfulness through our later years, we continue to be linked with others in community—aware of others, helping them, and learning from them. We draw not only upon our own wisdom, but also the wisdom of the faithful community that forms us. This sort of spirituality for aging has importance not just for the old, and may be even more necessary for the young.

Since spirituality and aging usually have been examined separately, books that bring them together must cover substantial ground in two specialties. Christian spirituality involves the way we are formed inwardly by the gospel to have new concerns, ways of seeing ourselves and the world, and attendant emotions and reactions. Studies of aging focus on the changes in persons and their relationships in the later years of life. Books on spirituality of aging must bridge theology and these social studies of the lives of older persons.

These works often look very different depending on their writers' primary discipline, and we see some of this variety in the three books under consideration. Such variety can be positive in that it provides many different approaches to an important subject, or potentially negative because readers may feel a bit overwhelmed as they attempt to choose a book that will be a helpful resource for them.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE

The selections in *Affirmative Aging: A Creative Approach to a Longer Life* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1994; 141 pp., \$14.95), edited by Joan E. Lukens, approach the spirituality of aging from very practical angles. Topics include intergenerational relationships, providing ministry opportu-

nities for older persons, the church's response to aging, and the church as family. Nancy Roth's "Meditation and Prayer" (pp. 41-57) is an especially helpful essay. Many people assume that elders who have been in the church all of their lives have mastered these disciplines. It is often the case, however, that elders find traditional ways of praying less helpful in later years. Roth covers a variety of types of prayer and meditation and offers model prayer exercises. Like all of the essays in this book, a study guide that facilitates individual and group reflection follows the essay.

Charles J. Fahey's "Ethics and the Third Age" (pp. 12-22) particularly struck me. He argues ethics and spirituality (or, as he prefers, "holiness") are inseparable. Because of this unity, Fahey suggests that an ethic of aging must have a social as well as a personal element. This is an important point to remember because those who seek to help "third agers" often concentrate on the individual dimension, seeing elders only in social terms when they receive care from the community. Emma Lou Benignus nicely picks up the importance of this theme in "Challenge to Ministry: Opportunities for Older Persons" (pp. 23-40) when she observes, "when asked what they wish, rather than what they need, many older persons say, 'To make a contribution,' 'To let the remaining years count'" (p. 23). Personal spirituality too often withers if it is not in touch with its social counterpart.

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS

Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998; 108 pp., \$11.00), edited by Andrew J. Weaver, Harold G. Koenig, and Phyllis C. Roe, is a different book altogether. As the title suggests, these essays are mainly individual reflections growing out of the writers' personal experiences.

Several writers interweave their personal reflections with themes that emerge from passages of Scripture. "For Everything There is a Season" (pp. 79-87), by well-known biblical scholar Gene M. Tucker, is a brief and highly readable survey of Old Testament attitudes towards aging. The Bible does not always present its views for easy discernment on topics of interest to us. Tucker garners from the Old Testament passages their sometimes positive, but other times negative, points of view on aging. William Willimon takes a text from Ecclesiastes, a book often seen as having one of the gloomiest views on old age, and one from Revelation to craft a sermon reminding us that retirement "is a whole new life" ("Retirement: A Whole New Life," pp. 89-95). Other contributors draw from passages in Genesis and Romans.

Monica Furlong's "A Spirituality of Aging" (pp. 43-49) haunts us with her opening statement, she "is not too sure that there is such a thing as a 'spirituality of aging.' There is simply the sort of spirituality that may, or may not, have helped us during the rest of our lives, and in old age we must do the best we can with the wisdom and knowledge we have cobbled

together..." (p. 43). I do not personally agree with her claim that one advantage of aging is that our lives become simplified because we have fewer choices. Yet, her opening statement is a warning to us all. Gerontologists, those who study aging and the elderly, like to say that the older we get the more we become our true selves. If this is the case, then we cannot start too soon to work on developing a spirituality that encompasses aging

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so we will not have to rely on what we have merely "cobbled together." Indeed, this is another good argument for the social aspect of spirituality that Fahey recommends. Being in community calls us to be aware of others, to help them, and to learn from them. Thus, it is not only our own wisdom we draw upon, but also the wisdom of the faithful community that forms us. This notion

is central to Kathleen Norris's "It's a Sweet Life" (pp. 103–8), drawing as it does on her communal experiences within the cloistered, or monastic, life.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Kathleen Fischer's *Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998; 210 pp., \$12.00) delves more deeply into the spirituality of aging. Where the essays in *Affirmative Aging* and *Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth* can be read in any order, picked up for momentary meditation and set down to come back to later, Fischer's book demands more sustained time and attention. *Winter Grace* deals with many of the same themes that we have seen in the other books, moving from the general topic of "Spirituality and Aging" through issues of "Memories" and "Dependence and Independence" to "Loss," "Dying," and "Resurrection." Fischer, a theologian and counselor of older adults, loves to tell what she has learned through stories, often poignant stories of people she has encountered in her years of counseling, sometimes interweaving these stories with her thoughts on biblical texts.

The theme of Christian spirituality possessing both a personal and social dimension is embedded in nearly every chapter of Fischer's book. We find it in the obvious places, such as her chapter "Dependence and Independence," but also in less obvious places like "Humor and Hope," where she observes that "laughter at its best is always social. A good joke cries out to be shared" (p. 127). Even the startling chapter "Resurrection" de-

velops this theme. In the section on resurrection and community, after briefly discussing the Bible's concept of the body, Fischer proclaims "since resurrection faith means that what happened to Jesus will also happen to us...this includes a communion with all persons which is deeper and more extensive than we have known.... The New Testament makes clear that resurrection is a community experience" (p. 192).

Fischer is also aware that a spirituality for aging is a lifelong process. "As we grow older we become more like ourselves," she notes, and later observes that a "spirituality of aging has importance not just for the old. It may, in fact, be even more necessary for the young" (pp. 14, 17). Why?

Because we are all aging together, the challenges and blessings of the later years are ones we all share. We all struggle with questions of self-esteem, longing to find our ultimate worth in who we are rather than in what we do. We all know grief, loss and failure, face limitations and the final limit, death. We puzzle over our purpose in life and the lasting value of our products. And at every age we also stand in wonder and gratitude at the beauties of creation and discover new dimensions of love and friendship (p. 19).

If Fischer's observations are correct, and they most assuredly are, then a spirituality of aging should begin at the earliest age possible. The problem is that older adults, with their wisdom, are often segregated, sometimes physically, from the rest of the community of faith, and few people will venture to cross these barriers to learn from them.

These books face a common difficulty. Their biggest problem is their cataloging—primarily as books on "Aging," and secondarily under the category of "Spirituality." Perhaps we will know that we have made progress in including the whole life cycle in the journey of faith when books such as these start appearing under the category of "Personal Growth and Development," for they truly speak to all of us.



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