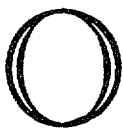


OLD AGE AND RETIREMENT

By THOMAS KILDUFF



OLD AGE is not just a state of mind. It is an experience, and a painful one at that. Retirement comes as the salient event of this stage of life, precipitating a search for meaning. As an experience, old age takes its meaning from its proximity to the end of life, just as youth takes its meaning from its nearness to the beginning. The pain of it all is that meaning is discovered by way of losses. The whole thing has the appearance of a diminishment, a reduction in worth deeply affecting the human person. Our culture sees the experience this way, so much so that Abraham J. Herschel found it necessary to remind us that 'after all, to be retired does not mean to be retarded'.¹

However, if the losses of the ageing process can be changed into newly found freedoms, a new life begins, and the elderly enter into the realization of their new dignity as role-models in society. They face that aspect of life in which a new set of values emerges. What is more, these personal values are not only made evident; they are embodied.

We know that going into retirement is not just the beginning of a long vacation. Its deeper significance is that a person passes *from doing to being*. What a person *is* is more important than what a person does. The value of person comes before the value of a task. It is not difficult to subscribe to this truth. But the passing from doing to being by retirement is not only a difficult experience, but also creates the milieu wherein the person is tested and challenged to find happiness in new areas of appreciation. The temptation at this juncture, as A. J. Herschel points out,² is to trivialize existence by suggesting over-indulgence in recreational activities; to distract rather than to deepen; to soothe rather than to challenge. At this point, bringing back the joy of life and the ability to celebrate all creation may mean a complete change of attitude, a leap from withdrawal and pessimism to the affirmation of all that is, a conversion if you will. And then you not only teach the value of person; you embody it. This embodying of the basic value of the human person is an achievement that we elderly can bring about in

a unique way, even though other areas of achievement are no longer open to us. As those who embody the value of person in this age, we elderly have become unintentional role-models. Gerontology is such a young science, there is a surprising absence of data about what is normal about growing old. By and large doctors have given short shrift to the subject because it lacks the glamour of potential breakthroughs. So the old themselves have to fill the blanks. Ronald Blythe, in his sensitive study of ageing english villagers, calls us old people 'the first generation of full-timers'.³ So we are learning how to grow old as we learned how to be adult. We are pioneers in ageing, destined to become role models for generations to come.

For now, and for the foreseeable future, we elderly will battle 'ageism', the process of systematic stereotyping and discriminating against people because they are old. Just as racism and sexism bring about stereotyping and segregation with a focus on skin-colour and gender, so ageism discriminates against the elderly because they are old, and dumps them into geriatric ghettos where long life becomes a punishment. Let us look long and hard at what may be termed the 'rejection mode' of life in which we elderly find ourselves, and the faith challenge we face as a result. When the rejection pattern is pushed to present lengths, society begins to lean in the direction of approved euthanasia. An Associated Press, London release mentions the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, renamed EXIT, that publishes a booklet advocating suicide by painless means. And in the United States twenty-five per cent of the suicides occur among those over sixty-five.⁴ A more startling note is the increase of abuse of the elderly. It stands to reason that, in a culture that rejects older and retired members of society as useless, those who feel that they are burdened with the care of senior citizens may sometimes turn on them with contempt and resentment. George Anderson⁵ points to the many incidents of abuse now occurring. A report entitled *Elder abuse: an examination of a hidden problem*, was published by the Select Committee on Ageing of the House of Representatives in the spring of 1981. The report was the result of hearings in various parts of the United States over a period of several years and it notes that this form of family abuse has come to public notice only in the past decade. No one would deny that in some cases the elderly become crotchety and cantankerous, and bring upon themselves maltreatment. Old people are not necessarily saintly, nor are the abusers without remorse and guilt. Nevertheless, our culture has constructed the rejection mode as a reaction to what is characterized as a non-productive segment of

society. It was Dr Robert Butler who coined the word 'ageism' to designate the cultural ostracism of the elderly. 'At first I thought it was a race thing or a class thing' he recalled. Then he realized that it was much deeper. This was when in Washington, D.C. in 1968, the city planned to turn a highrise apartment building in Butler's neighbourhood on fashionable Connecticut Avenue into public housing for the elderly, and Butler's neighbours fought the plan bitterly.⁶ We elderly were masters yesterday; we are outcasts today.

The spirituality of the elderly has to be hammered out on the anvil of one's own hard experience. It would be easier to give in, to succumb to the inevitable, for to be old in our society is to be the social equivalent of the terminally ill. Other groups discriminated against are in a position to better their situation. Minorities gradually obtain recognition of rights, and women overcome the prejudice of male chauvinism. But the elderly are condemned to dependence upon social services and to what sociologists call degradation ceremonies. What makes ageism different from racism and sexism is that, within our culture, old age is a period of inevitable loss and decline. Our world finds us elderly 'in the way'. We are not only not needed, but what is worse, we are not wanted. Society does not know what to do with us.

We elderly must frankly admit that the losses of the ageing process come as a painful surprise. We have very little training for losses in life. On the american scene, we have the great illusion of being winners. Loss is a setback we are ill-prepared for. So, as the ranks of family, community, and friends thin out by death, as health diminishes and we watch changes and developments in what we might be inclined to call 'the good old days', we cringe and are tempted to draw back from the trauma of loss. Kübler-Ross points out that the first reaction to the news of terminal illness is denial.⁷ We not only deny ageing, explicitly at times but implicitly always, but we spend more on eliminating the signs of ageing than we do on research for some remedy for cancer. Yet we are all terminal, and we need to assign a meaning to this fact. How do our losses fit into the spirituality of the afternoon of life?

In the search for meaning and a basic spirituality we elderly live out a surprising paradox. We experience a unique sharing in the paschal mystery. Jesus said: 'Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' (Mt 16,24). This saying, and the freedom with which Jesus himself lays down his life, give us the clue to the mystery of the losses to be sustained in the

ageing process. 'The Father loves me for this: that I lay down my life to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down freely. I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again' (Jn 10,18). How is this experienced in the later years of a person's life? Our focus here is the painful paradox of growth and sanctity through positive disintegration. The expression 'falling apart' is a common description of what we feel. Strange as it may seem, in order to reach a higher level of maturity a person needs to go through a positive kind of disintegration, a process which involves the dissolution of lower functions and structures so that a higher level of integration can be achieved. This moment of positive disintegration is accompanied by an intensified experience of negative feelings and sensations, with all the fear, threat and pain of loss. These so-called negative experiences can be seen as signs and symptoms of a need for dying to a present level of integrated being. In such technical or psychological terms the reason for the experience of loss, the falling apart of the elderly, is sometimes set forth. Put in the language of faith, it says quite simply that people reach a crisis in which everything seems to collapse around them; the support of family, friends, health and hope. Even prayer is more difficult because it feels empty and senseless. God seems so far away. This depressing experience is not so much a question of losing faith as of reframing it. In the language of John of the Cross this is our Dark Night. It is death and resurrection — the dying and rising of Jesus. There is perhaps no life experience that brings home so poignantly the paschal mystery as the final years and struggles of an old person. The key to happiness in old age is the willingness to accept limitations, conditioned autonomy and freedom. All growth presents a quality of open-endedness, and the process of ageing is no exception to this. Development here implies a willingness to die. 'He who would lose his life for my sake, will save it' (Mt 10,39).

The final-option theology of death of Karl Rahner makes a lot of sense to an old person. The elderly get used to choosing losses as a gradual passing into autonomy and personal freedom. And this freedom is ultimately the breakthrough into heaven. Death is indeed the final option, not just an impersonal separation of body and soul. Rahner conceives time and eternity strictly in terms of freedom. 'Time is primarily the mode of becoming of finite freedom'.⁸ In this sense eternity is the product of time as its own matured fruit. We might even turn the 'disengagement theory' of the sociologists around, and say that the old person comes to terms with his own

achievements and disappointments and breaks through into the freedom of completion and personal individuation — to positive acceptance of death.

There seems to be no reason why the personal construction of the 'new heaven and the new earth' (2 Pet 3,13) need be delayed until after death. There is a sense in which the new heaven can be worked out now by what the present writer would call the 'restoration of the dream'. The prophet Joel describes us old men as dreamers. The abundance of the Spirit makes us that way. 'Your old men shall dream dreams' (Joel 3,1). And Isaiah describes the dream, 'Lo, I am about to create new heavens and a new earth' (Isai 65,17). We have always seen this as happening in Christ but realized in some indefinite future. However, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican II envisions this restoration as already begun:

Therefore, the promised restoration which we are awaiting has already begun in Christ, is carried forward in the mission of the Holy Spirit, and through him continues in the Church. . . .

The final age of the world has already come upon us (1 Cor 10,11). The renovation of the world has been irrevocably decreed and in this age is already anticipated in some real way. For even now on this earth the Church is marked with a genuine though imperfect holiness.³

For the elderly, restoration of the dream proceeds by way of healing on various levels. First, there is the relationship with the Lord, in which the guilt of infidelity that has plagued the old person as a relic of the past is gradually changed into a new confidence that experiences God as one who loves us. And the experience of being loved by God is the experience of being forgiven. This is not based on any false presumption that one is less sinful than others; it is rather the result of a deepened awareness of the goodness that makes Jesus take the initiative, offering the 'white as snow' (Isai 1,10) reconciliation as an experience of his love. Only the person faced with the life-review of later life can fully appreciate what this experience offers in the way of personal freedom and renewal.

The openness that acknowledges the need for personal forgiveness in later life, in its turn experiences a further need to extend this forgiveness to others. No family is perfect and everyone, it seems, realizes that relationships could have been more affective, more loving. Now in later years is the time for restoration of the dream. It matters little that those who may have been in conflict

with us are now with God. The new heaven and earth can begin *even now* in our recognition of truth and love in Christ. Take the relationship with one's parents: who doesn't have regrets about gaps in communication and failures in expressing one's true feelings? But these feelings can be made known now as we restore the idyllic bond we always dreamed of: like the elderly physician in Ingmar Bergman's beautiful movie *Wild strawberries*, whose dreams and visions concerned his past as he changed from remoteness and selfishness to closeness and love. True, the full realization of this awaits us on the other side of the grave. A brother or sister with whom we always wanted to be close can be told now of our desire for true relatedness, and intimacy can now be recaptured. We are communicating with people who are very much alive and even closer to us than in the first instance of manifested love. Friendships can likewise be restored in a communion not previously enjoyed to its fullest extent. We older people need to have this anticipated joy of reunion and recognition. We need the dream, not just the memory. And the dream is our heaven. 'Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Cor 2,9). The happiness of having forgiven and thus healed a precious relationship can turn enmity and bitterness into magnanimous joy. 'Setting it right' is thus the experienced spirituality of older people who open their minds to the total reality of the human situation, as the Holy Spirit carries them into a recognition of a new heaven just beyond the horizon.

One of the most difficult elements of this restoration is the disheartening realization that life did not evolve as planned. Paul Tournier urges the elderly to adopt the attitude of a *positive acceptance of non-fulfilment*, not as a salve for hurt feelings and frustrations, but as an aggressive faith approach to what has been a thwarting of cherished hopes.¹⁰ Before the inevitability of the ageing process one might object with a what-else-can-I-do fatalism. But this recommendation of Tournier means more than passive resignation. It is a positive appropriation of losses and limitations in a hardy realism. Partial realization, non-fulfilment, limited accomplishment, even failure, are part of the warp and woof of our time frame as human beings, and we need to be able to celebrate all creation in humility and good humour. Then leisure becomes the anticipated experience of the new heaven and the new earth. 'Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. The moment is the marvel' Abraham J. Herschel comments.¹¹

We come to this stage of our development as we come to prayer — empty-handed. Thus retirement or disengagement from work should not be a severing of a vital role, but the transition to a new range of human growth where letting-go is itself a step into a new world of value. Letting-go is a contemplative habit that we elderly are in good position to enjoy in its renewed range of pleasure, its freedom and love.¹² At the end of his superb appraisal of the situation of the elderly in America, Robert Butler writes 'The tragedy of old age in America is that we have made absurdity all but inevitable. We have cheated ourselves. But we still have the possibility of making life a work of art'.¹³ For the elderly who have transcended limitation and suffering in the joy of the risen Christ there is a growing sense of coming into one's own. T. S. Eliot describes this beautifully:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight. . . .
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.
Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, and the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ Herschel, Abraham J.: *To grow in wisdom* (Speech at University of Utah, 11 May 1963).

² *Ibid.*

³ Blyth, Ronald: *The view in winter* (New York, 1981), p 5.

⁴ Cf. *Time Magazine* (10 October 1977), p 26.

⁵ *America* (10 December 1983).

⁶ Anderson, George: *Why survive?* (New York, 1975), p 11.

⁷ Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth: *On death and dying* (New York, 1970), pp 34 ff.

⁸ Rahner, Karl (editor): *Theological dictionary*, p 461.

⁹ *Lumen gentium*.

¹⁰ Tournier, Paul: *Learn to grow old* (New York, 1972), pp 174 ff.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p 20.

¹² Kerr, Walter: *The decline of pleasure* (New York), p 232.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p 422.

¹⁴ Eliot, T. S.: *East Coker in Four Quartets* (New York, 1943).