

THE WAY OF LIFE IN A RETIREMENT COMMUNITY

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WHAT IS *SPIRITUAL* about moving into a retirement community? If spirituality is about the love of God and the love of neighbour, what difference does it make in someone's spiritual life to downsize living quarters, dispense with many old possessions and adapt to new surroundings? When my wife, Jackie, and I decided to sell our home of thirty years in Glendale, California and move thirty miles east to La Verne, neither our galaxy nor our solar system was very much affected. The move, however, made a positive spiritual difference in our lives.

There is something biblical about making a big move. Figures such as Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, Rachel and Jacob, Naomi and Ruth made many decisions to fold up their tents and wander nomadically from one oasis to the next. No doubt there were farewells to friends and neighbours that the matriarchs and patriarchs had to say. They had provided hospitality to others and probably received it from other tribal leaders and wandering bands. As we migrate through life, the goodness and the providence of God are experienced in old relationships as they are more wistfully appreciated, and new friendships as they spring up to surprise us.

Divestment and Discernment

We started with the books. As two academic people, we had accumulated a large number of books and files, most of which would have to be gone through and eliminated. We relived a good deal of our past as we filled boxes with books that had had some importance for us at different stages in our long careers. Most of the filed material was quickly discarded. Indeed, some files had been neglected over many years and were full of



duplicate and triplicate material. The St Vincent de Paul Society sent a truck that came to the door several times to cart away dozens of boxes of books and articles of a religious and philosophical nature.

Who suffers grief or separation anxiety over the loss of old books? I did. In fact, one year on from the big move, I have repurchased some of the titles that I had discarded. But for the most part, I am sure, I shall never remember the vast majority of the books I have given away. And, the clothing! We must have reduced our wardrobes down to about one third of what they were. A happy thought: all of the clothes that were so well known to our Glendale friends looked quite new to the eyes of new friends in La Verne.

Guidance is necessary in making a move of this kind. There are people who know how to do it. We enlisted the help of a company called Gentle Transitions, which helped us eliminate things, drew a floor map of our new residence and advised us on exactly which pieces of furniture to take, and which to discard. When we first became serious about making our move, Hillcrest invited us to a series of workshops on the art of doing it well. One event, I remember, was a sort of auction, in which various items were held up and bids were made from the audience, not with a view to purchasing the items, but rather voting *yea* or *nay* on whether these things should be saved or shed immediately. Dusty straw hats, roller skates, cracked vases, soccer trophies and faded plaid sports jackets were voted down. Decades-old children's toys, we were told, are usually passed on to charity shops and thence, probably, to the dump. In the process we

learnt to laugh at our common foibles and predicaments, at the many shared symptoms of ageing, and at ourselves. We were not alone in facing what we had decided to face.

Only a few months before our move, Jackie's sister Nancy had passed away. Part of the reason, or one of the reasons, we felt ready to make our move was that now we were free to move further away from Nancy's house. She was eleven years older than Jackie, and we did not want to move away from her because she lived alone in a very large house with stairs and steps inside, she had trouble with walking and balance and was suffering from increasing dementia. When Nancy passed away, her children were left with the immense task of sorting and disposing of her impressive library, elegant and well-stocked wardrobe, thousands of photographs, furniture and many valuable objects.

Sorting out your own stuff before you die is a great gift to your children, heirs and executors! In general, nothing you have is of half the value to your surviving loved ones as it is to yourself. Unloading a lifetime of accumulation is spiritually purging for yourself, generous to them and useful to whoever will acquire the things and use them after you. 'Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return' (Job 1:21). It is also possible to arrange your own funeral, design the liturgy of farewell and write a last will and testament that is generous and thoughtful to others, including your favourite charities. All of this is a generous, responsible and spiritually enriching thing to do.

To what extent or in what ways was our deciding to move a process of spiritual discernment? Discernment of spirits requires faith, prayer, hope, a sense of humour, and a keen awareness that God is taking care of us, even when God seems almost arbitrarily to be demanding cruel things of us. It requires a careful sifting of experience in the hope of finding God, finding God's will, finding God's care plan for ourselves and for the ones we love. What happens to each of us affects everyone else.

Of course, in our prayers, we first placed before God our inclinations to leave our former home, and then we noticed the growing strength of our wish to join a retirement community. We visited several such communities, to gather data and to draw pictures of them in our minds in order to compare them to the one we eventually chose, Brethren Hillcrest Homes. Hillcrest was always foremost in our minds because we had known about it for many years through friends and former colleagues who had moved there.

Spiritual considerations are of primary importance when making such a decision as whether or not to move into a particular retirement community. Is God calling you to be part of this community? Will your spiritual needs be nurtured there? Will you grow spiritually? Will you be able to serve as friend and minister to others in your new environment? Do you have a history with other people in this community? Such a history serves as a foundation on which to build an enriching experience of life. Is God calling you to find God and God's grace in this place as you go through the ageing process, sharing time, space and grace with others?

Spiritual discernment looks for hints of divine guidance. Hillcrest was part of our past. We had worked at the University of La Verne, had lived in the city, and maintained contact with La Verne through one good friend in particular. Now, in the present, a home at Hillcrest that we liked had come on to the market. We were both retired and neither of us wanted to continue with the care and maintenance of an older house that required continual fixing up. I had recently undergone a hip replacement and, although I was now completely healed, I knew that our house, built on a slope, would be problematic if either of us developed mobility problems. The only downside of the decision was the distance, some thirty miles east of Los Angeles and Pasadena, where we had lived and worked, and where many family members and friends resided. Even so, with cars and freeways what they are in California, the distance was manageable.

So, with the help of the hints we could discern, coming from the past, the present situation and the probable future, we bit the bullet and made the decision: move to La Verne. Parallel to our own decision was the situation of a close friend, Jill. A near-lifelong friend of Jackie, and long-term friend of mine, Jill had been diagnosed with Shy-Drager Syndrome. This progressive and irreversible disease involves multiple system atrophy, the gradual wasting away of all the body's nerves, much like ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease. Jill needs friends who are close by. At the time of writing, she lives in the skilled nursing part of Hillcrest, and we see her every day. Jill's life is a gift to all her friends, as she brings out of us the best in us, of who we are, and the best of what we have to give.

Dignity and Independence

There is dignity in making one's own decisions. There is indignity in having one's life, especially in its personal and private aspects, decided by others. At Hillcrest great efforts are made to help people keep as much dignity and individual self-determination as possible for as long as

possible. But, paradoxically, we need others to support us as we try to keep our independence. Doing your own sorting out and cleaning up is an act of independence. It is great to know that you are directing your own decision-making and not waiting for others to take care of things. It is great to be among people—indeed, to live in a community—that supports us in the task of keeping our independence and preserving our dignity.

The enemies of joy and happiness that are found in some retirement communities are depression or discouragement, isolation and feelings of helplessness, uselessness or irrelevance. We are fortunate that, with the many opportunities for involvement and for maintaining our interests at the Hillcrest community, these dangers are staved off effectively. Entertainments abound. There are musical and theatre events here on a regular basis. There are films to watch. We have an art gallery, poetry readings and musical events that are put on by the residents. There are adequate staff to assist residents who have problems with mobility. There are committees to join and opinions to hear about improving our community. Residents may have a small dog or cat for companionship.

There is a movement in some urban areas that is called Ageing in Place.¹ It is a fine movement with fine intentions to create a network of care and assistance among the elderly. Even so, there must be times when someone in a situation of need ‘falls through the cracks’. Living alone, an elderly person may not be able to be in charge of his or her own care, especially in an emergency situation. Friends and neighbours may not be able to give the care and attention needed by a participant in the programme.

At Hillcrest, residents are asked to *call in* every morning, phoning a certain number between 5.00 and 10.00 a.m. If they miss the call, they receive a reminder. In each room of every home there is a pull-cord to summon assistance in an emergency. The facility has a duty of care to its residents, with stipulations established by state law. Nearly every day, paramedics can be seen arriving. So, we are constantly reminded of the transience and fragility of life. Death is never routine, but it is regular and frequent at a continuing care facility for the elderly. There is a special table in our campus lounge area where neatly framed photographs of the recently deceased are placed. Each month, there are three to four such pictures displayed. The pictures remind us to say a prayer for the person who has died.

¹ See <http://www.ageinplace.org/>.



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Old Age, Forgiveness and a Sense of Humour

Living in a place like this is to become a minister of sorts or, at least, it develops habits and attitudes of being helpful to others. We are constantly aware that the medical conditions of people whom we meet almost every day are ones that we ourselves might be facing tomorrow. The devotion of the spouses of disabled people is remarkable, even heroic. In order to live in a place such as Hillcrest, one must have a heart that readily goes out to other people. Those who are seriously troubled by the presence of the disabled, or by frequent sightings of wheelchairs and walking frames, should not move here. We must remember to be cheerful. This is not artificial; cheerfulness is therapeutic for people who are living with pain and limitations of mind or body.

I hope Elijah (Elias) (1 Kings 18–19) had a sense of humour. I picture him prostrate under his biblical broom tree, having fled from the threats of Jezebel into the wilderness, ready to give up completely. He said: 'Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors' (1 Kings 19:4). The biblical writer *did* have a sense of humour. He knew that Elijah would be told by God, after having been provided with some water and a hearth-cake, to walk for forty days to the mountain of the Lord at Horeb. Still today, the Lord may extend our lives, often beyond the limits of what we think we can bear. Jill likes doughnuts. If bringing her a glazed sugar doughnut can help her get through one day, it also helps me understand the story of Elijah, even if I cannot understand the plan of God that keeps Jill alive. She cries a lot. To keep his faith in God, Elijah must have had a sense of humour. An exhausted and totally discouraged prophet and mystic making a forty-day journey on foot in the blistering desert heat? With a single hearth-cake for sustenance? Seriously?

In his old age, Moses stood atop Mount Nebo and watched Joshua lead his people into the Promised Land. No doubt, it was good to watch this great event take place. But, again, why could Moses himself not have been given the joy of walking through the parted waters of the Jordan River? He had long before offended God in a way that disqualified him from fully enjoying that moment. Did Moses have the thought that God really keeps score, that God's mercy is 'measured out with coffee spoons', as the poet might say? No: Moses let go of all resentment, or—I like to think—he was so happy for his people that he forgot his own reason for complaining.

Old people are challenged to let go of regrets and resentments. I can really say that people at Hillcrest live happily, or at least acceptingly, in the present. We can say prayers that heal past injuries. We can learn to give the past to God, with its unsightly scars and still-open wounds. Maybe prayers, which have validity in eternity, can effect change in things that happened then. We can pray back into the past for someone who offended us long ago. We can hope that God not only forgives, but uses our past sins and slights to others to bring good effects later on. As we forgive others and pray for them, we can learn to forgive ourselves as well.

Ecumenism and Cooperation

Ecumenism is a word that can be defined in many ways. Generally, it should suggest attitudes and actions that show respect and mutual support between different religions and their denominations. The spirit of ecumenism is a vital part of Christian spirituality. At Hillcrest there are retired ministers from several Christian denominations, and there is respect and friendliness between these denominations. The spirituality of Hillcrest is incarnate in the many stories of friendship and mutual support among its residents. There is an intense community life here; we are interconnected. Although we do not have formal group discernment, our committees, our administrators, our casual get-togethers are not without the movement of the Holy Spirit, and not without clues dropped from heaven.

Is it luck or is it grace-filled providence that brings people together into groups that serve the needs of one another and expand into the wider community with greater service? Many members of the Hillcrest community belong to the Church of the Brethren. Indeed, Hillcrest was founded some seventy years ago as a place of refuge in retirement for

Brethren ministers and missionaries. The campus still has its Brethren chaplain, a subtle Brethren spirit and ethos, and a lovely interfaith chapel.

The Church of the Brethren is one of the Peace Churches, along with the Quakers and the Mennonites. There is a lack of competitiveness and a strong spirit of cooperation among the Brethren. They educate men and women in ministry, but have a strong tradition that respects the priesthood of all believers. They sponsor and operate several universities across the United States, and their ethos is rural and countrified. The nearby University of La Verne, also Brethren in origin and inspiration, presently serves a population of largely Hispanic students. Its chaplaincy is also interreligious in focus, although its chaplains are ministers of the Church of the Brethren.

People at Hillcrest are reserved about their religious beliefs, but there is a pervasive atmosphere of favour towards church membership and participation. Roman Catholics have mass in the chapel once a month, but also attend the weekly Brethren vespers, and participate in a local parish community that is a vibrant model of twenty-first-century Catholicism. Anyone who has a religious message to share can volunteer to speak at vespers.

The Brethren are rooted in a Pennsylvania Dutch heritage that is known for its frugality, ingenuity, skill in crafts and simplicity of life. Our community runs a charity shop, which is located on the edge of the campus. Anyone who wants to contribute can bring donations, which are sorted and priced by a cadre of dedicated volunteers who take pride in the recycling of reusable items of all descriptions. The charity shop is also a place where members of the community can mix with neighbours from outside Hillcrest. There are community members who can fix anything from broken chairs and tables to mobile phones and other electronic devices.

Jackie and I have become members of the Hillcrest marketing committee. As residents advance to greater levels of care, the homes or units they no longer need must be resold and refilled in order to keep revenue coming in. The marketing committee befriend people visiting the campus, answer questions and encourage guests to contact people in our sales and marketing office. Membership of such a committee helps residents to get to know one another, and to extend welcome to prospective new community members. Jackie is also a member of the ethics committee, which offers advice to the administration on matters of ethical concern.

In the early years of our lives, perhaps after leaving college, we are concerned with marriage, raising children, maintaining a home, earning as much as we can and acquiring the things we need. Being busy all the time and fulfilling many obligations, we are perhaps not as reflective, contemplative, philosophical and prayerful as we might be. It seems that for most people any quiet moments or times of leisure have to be squeezed in among the hectic activities of surviving and flourishing in the workaday world.

It takes time, in retirement, for leisure to happen. We still need to appear busy, important and occupied with significant matters. We still need to stay engaged and to feel relevant, but perhaps we can learn to do so in a lower key and with less intensity. This latter condition is the advantage of living in a retirement community, creating our own best balance between private concerns and involvement with others in common projects. We find here both the luxury of pursuing personal interests and the wise poverty of shedding not just unnecessary possessions, but many pressing cares as well.

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