

August 2013

Home before dark

Advancing age is a time when people look back over the way they have come, and consider the essence of a lifetime on earth. But it is also a period of looking forward – to the homeland to which God calls the faithful to return

A few days ago a neighbour called with news about a local “old folks” party. “And bring your own cup and plate.” It was then I realised how deep in denial I was about my age. A recent survey published by ‘Help the Aged’ reveals that one in five people have lied about how old they were.

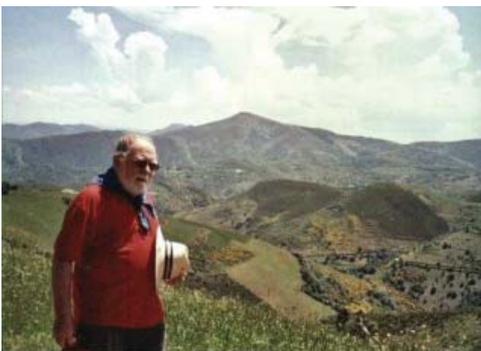
There is often little grace in the way we regard our final years. We see them as the last, threatening, empty lap in the race of our lives. Our legs are tiring. The ground is rising. The applause is muted. The crowd is departing. There is a sense of loneliness, almost of abandonment. We rarely see those years as the welcome threshold of our final homecoming.

In John’s gospel, Jesus speaks about one day bringing us with him to our home in heaven. There is always a strong emotional charge in the notion of “coming home.” One day I asked my mother about the most vivid moment in her life. (I had presumed, as you do, that my birth would have been her most unforgettable experience.) It was, she said, the morning she awoke to the sight of the Kerry hills, along the southern Irish coast, when, after years of work in the US, the homecoming ship drew close to Cobh harbour in 1920. Her heart nearly burst with happiness that morning, she said - and 75 years later, the tears of memory still welled up in her eyes. Old age is like the elephant in the living room even of the middle aged. It is anxiously perceived as a time of loss.



This most vulnerable time of our life has no real catechesis to take away the edge of fear. Part of a preparation for growing old would remind us of the eternal energy that never leaves us; a kind of energy that sleeps, neglected, within us while we are relentlessly obsessed with the driven routines that must be melted down again in retirement.

Negotiating our advancing years is like pausing on a mountain top to look back at the way we have come. There is a sense of being able to blow away the chaff of many things, so as to reveal the essential wheat of our time on earth. Now only the essence remains. Ideally, the final decades will have a purity about them, a pared-down core that shines with a recovered innocence.



Shortly before his death Michael Mayne wrote about the cantus firmus of his life, the enduring melody that never left him. But Michael’s beautiful soul had first to be surrendered to the terrible blows of the carver’s hands, before it rediscovered the eternal music of his youth. In his magnificent “The Faces at Braga,” the poet David Whyte suggests the harvest of such surrender. Our faces would fall away until we, growing younger toward death every day, would gather

all our flaws in celebration to merge with them perfectly, impossibly, wedded to our essence, full of silence from the carver’s hands.

Finding out who we really are is like a personal, lifelong Passover. Too many tapes from the past have labelled us too soon. They have tricked us into a false identity. The final phase is the time when the mirror is clearest, revealing, maybe for the first time, our authentic voice and our own name. We begin to see with the sure eyes of Jesus. We finally whisper our “yes” to the mystery and miracle of who we really are, and always were.

At the moment of death, some people's faces light up with an astonished look of recognition. They go home with shining eyes. John O'Donohue refers to this transition through surface diminishment as a sacramental moment. The ultimate fragmentation and peeling away can reveal what was too long concealed. Old age can be compared to a time of theatre when the bare bones of advanced years are the actor's ultimate disguise.



Within that old body lies pure distilled essence, the *unum necessarium*, a still untapped well now ready to let its life-giving waters flow free. Your life is a Eucharist and you are the priest that gathers, transforms and celebrates it. It is not the amount of work, or length of your days that matter; it is their consecration. This eukharistia of our lives is our gratitude for them.

In *A View from the Ridge* Morris West repeats what Meister Eckhart had already suggested, that once we reach a certain age there should be only one phrase left in our vocabulary – “thank you.” With every birthday, gratitude should deepen until it colours every aspect of our life. Ronald Rolheiser adds, however, that only forgiveness sets us free to say that word in its essential power. All of this is the inner work of the soul at its most fruitful. It may have little to do with institutional rituals.

In old age we have permission to move beyond the once-useful, now debilitating boundaries that fence in what the poet Mary Oliver calls “our one wild and precious life.” This is the time to stand outside all that has confined and defined us over the decades – false traditions, soulless systems. Joseph Campbell asks us to look for that part of us which is no longer “beholden,” that stands outside the normal structures that have settled so heavily on us. We are made for more. It isn't the illusory achievements and promotions that matter in the end, Henri Nouwen believed. It is the depth of our humanity, the experience of being loved. “The time is indeed growing short for me,” he wrote, “but that knowledge sets me free to prevent mourning from depressing me. (It) can now deepen my quiet desire for the day when I realise that the many kisses and embraces I received today were simple incarnations of the eternal embrace of the Lord himself.”

A new homeland draws into view when, as senior citizens, we start living from within. Our souls are always young. They have preserved, in a safe place, the fields of dreams that once lay beautifully across the landscapes of our childhood. It is in these fields, and in no other, where the seeds of our God-like beauty were first nurtured, that our eternal harvest will be reaped. We do not outgrow our childhood. We grow into it more fully as we grow older. And it is only in heaven that we will possess it completely. No matter how old we are, we still have time to let the light in, to break down the barriers we once erected between us and our truest self. Nothing is so sad as regretting, on our deathbed, our un-lived lives, our untold stories, our unsung songs. Yet, in God's extravagance, during those last times, everything lost – the dream, the innocence, the melody – can all be restored. And if, one of these summer evenings, you faintly hear again your mother's voice calling you in because the night is coming, your eyes will start to shine because, as the house of heaven draws ever closer, you will recognise it, with astonishment, as the home you never left.

And, of course, that is why God took a human body.

