**The Secrets of the Aged**

“Life gets simpler as you get older,” I boldly declared to a friend who had celebrated almost as many birthdays as myself. That assertion drew a chuckle as he launched into a long recital of his ailments: arthritic joints, inability to climb two flights of stairs without getting winded, embarrassing memory loss, putdowns from younger colleagues at work and, worst of all, a general *tedium vitae*. When I tried out the same remark with another person, it evoked an even longer list of woes.

As a Jesuit priest who has reached his 80s, I’ve experienced many of the same symptoms my friends described. Metro-cards for the New York subway at a discounted rate, seats for the disabled–these are reminders of our age and our condition. Senior citizens, or just plain old “seniors”, is what we’ve grown to become, entitled to the sympathy and respect of the younger and more active set. But there’s so much more to old age than this. Don’t we have something to share with those youngsters who are hanging onto the subway straps because we have taken the seats for the elderly? Here’s what I’d share with them.

***Relax and Let Instinct Take Over***

When the young and the earnest declare that they are struggling to “figure out” their lives, we older people can smile sympathetically. We recall how, long ago, we shared their concern as we tried to decide on our college major and our career path. But how do you tell these earnest seekers that the most important things in life not only emerge, but they take control of you in a way you would have never thought possible when you were younger?

The truth is that we seniors recognize that we have never been in charge of our life in the way that we once thought we might have been. Most of our life-altering “decisions” can hardly be called that at all, since they are not the product of our own choices. My decision to enter the Jesuits after high school? It wouldn’t have happened if my uncle had not insisted that I enroll in Canisius rather than the Christian Brothers high school I so badly wanted to attend. The decision to volunteer for Micronesia, where I’ve spent almost all my adult life? Impulsive rather a cool-headed decision. But are “impulse” and “instinct” simply words for something more mysterious at work?

“We old-timers have learned to run on instincts,” I used the tell the young Jesuit Volunteers in Micronesia who came to seek counsel. When they asked what I meant by that, I’d explain that we were learning to put the purely rational and prescriptive in its proper place. We’re constantly being handed formulas for everything–prescriptions for finding happiness, losing weight, coping with stress, managing an office, and raising a family. Then there are those formulas for belief presented as church teachings. Such formulas may be nice starters–sheet music for the untrained–but they are a derivative, a map of the chords that doesn’t even begin to describe the music itself. Why turn to the sheet music when we have the melody throbbing in our head? The young may need their formulas for a time, but as we age we find ourselves called on to trust our intuitions to guide us through life. With each passing year, we can hope, they will be better honed.

***The Big Choices are Really Simple***

If life becomes simpler with age, at least in the thinking of a person who now regularly reads obituaries, why can’t we say that life *choices* are simple as well? People my age would like to believe that unifying principles simplify existence, just as scientists are forever on the lookout for the unifying principles of energy and motion and matter itself. My experience with a wide ethnic variety of human beings–Pacific Islanders, Asians of every stripe, Americans and Europeans–suggests that all of us, whether believers or not, are called to make one fundamental choice in our lives: whether there is some spiritual presence that accompanies or guides us, or whether we walk alone. This doesn’t necessarily translate into theists and atheists, since that spiritual presence might not be translated as “God” by many.

Another way of putting this is that all of us, equipped as we are with wider horizons and greater hopes for ourselves and the world, have to decide whether these are deceptive or whether there is some legitimacy to them. Each of us has to decide whether we will reach beyond the narrow confines of our limited self-interest to something richer and more beautiful that guides us to a form of self-surrender. Perhaps something like that is what Karl Rahner meant by his assertion that all of us are called to, and ultimately judged on, our readiness to say yes to the divine invitation from within. What could be simpler, or more universal, than that?

***We See Better with Our Hearts***

As we age, our vision blurs. We see men as trees, and Indians as Iraqis, and Europeans as Africans. Or perhaps our vision is actually improving. The hues of ethnicity and the tones of language seem much less important than they once were. In fact, they become almost incidental. As our mental and physical powers decline, our heart grows large enough to embrace the whole world, it seems. “*Cor ad cor loquitur*” can mean not just the conversation between God and myself, but the strange bonds that develop between myself and any other human being, even the frauds and cheats of the world.

Sympathy also comes more easily. But why shouldn’t it when we’ve developed callouses on our rumps from landing on them so often? We, who have prodded so many others into battle, have in time acquired the sores and scars to remind us of what we’ve been asking of others. No wonder we old-timers change tack and find ourselves whispering encouraging words so much more often than shouting challenges. Half-way measures may be incomplete, but they can be understood as honest attempts to do the right thing. Good intentions don’t just pave the road to hell; they are the substrate of the path to heaven. Old age is wonderful, if only because we become more forgiving, more understanding, more tolerant. Why couldn’t we have learned all this earlier?

You can argue, I suppose, that as our minds become feebler, our judgments are necessarily less demanding. Still, I like to think that our perspective is simply so much better the further down the road we move. As we age, we begin to see the world from a greater distance, as if the camera is moving out from a small part of a town to the state, and further out into space until we can see the entire globe. Our view of the world and our life, very fragmentary at first, should become ever fuller as we grow older.

***As Life Lengthens, the Ego Shrinks***

The long perspective we take on life also has a way of shrinking our own ego. The sense of self-importance that we had when we were young diminishes in old age. We seem to have less concern for ourselves, our reputation, people’s approval of what we say and what we do. Sometimes this comes across as crankiness or the inflexibility of the old–perhaps a hardening of the aged brain. On the other hand, it might be the beginning of the freedom that we have prized all our life. Some of us begin to experience the lightness of spirit that we have always sought. We begin to see our life and all we’ve done as a gift of the Lord rather than a list of accomplishments in which we can take satisfaction. We learn that the loss of ego is a blessing. Good riddance.

“Now I live–not I, but Christ who lives in me.” For years I thought of this as pious drivel (although I would never have admitted this to my novice master). But age and experience has brought a change of heart. The once nagging question of who I am and what I am capable of becoming seems unimportant these days, no doubt because the process is nearly complete and the end product is clear for all to see. Those same spiritual writers whom we once dismissed as inhabiting an alien universe may have been right after all. Once the fascination with ourselves drops off, we discover that we can become absorbed in Christ in a way that I used to think was reserved only for the saints. Evidently, this happens to the not-so-old as well, to lay people as well as to religious. What else would explain the three searching conversations on prayer and self-surrender that I once had in a single week with fellow seekers?

***Prayer is a Warm-up for Life***

For years I had thought of prayer as an exercise, much like pushups or sit-ups or laps around the track. It was training, a test of endurance that would sometimes end in a warm but short-lived feeling that we called consolation. In any case, the warm feeling at the end was unimportant; we were developing spiritual muscle and strengthening the fiber of the soul. I could never imagine how one could possibly “live a life of prayer” as the saints did. Wouldn’t this mean a life in the gym doing pushups and sit-ups from morning to evening without respite?

Once again, age brings insight: we old-timers now know that what we once called prayer is just a warmup, not the real game. So, I have come to regard as prayer not just the 45 minutes in the morning when I twist myself into the semi-lotus on my bed, but the whole day. A “life of prayer” no longer means to me that I am actively engaged in the act of praying from morning to night. It means that I now see my whole life as one long prayer to the Lord. The most poignant moments most often come not when I’m engaged in the conditioning exercises that are usually called formal prayer, but while warming up for basketball, taking a shower, or driving to the store. So, you see, once again the ancients were right–it just takes time for us to recognize their wisdom. Those exercises that we once thought of as prayer are really just the warm-up for a life of prayer.

***Our Hearts Expand As Our Expectations Contract***

What about those great deeds we meant to do? Once upon a time, I shared the fondness of knights on horses that seemed common among Jesuits: Canisius High School’s teams were the Crusaders and McQuaid’s the Knights. We all aspired to do great things, I suppose–win over kingdoms and do battle with evil–just like our founder Ignatius. But over the years, as our hearts expand, our expectations shrink. The demons we fight can take strange shapes. What are we to do when we find them within us? The battles are not jousting contests, easily decided when one of the combatants is unseated, but long and painful campaigns in which it is not easy to tell whether you’re winning or losing.

We old-timers may be battle-weary and sore, but at least we’re still swinging our swords. To put it another way, we have the same blemishes and shortcomings, the same rough edges and pettiness as ever, but somehow this just doesn’t seem as important as it used to. While regretting we’re not better than this, we can integrate it all into our offering to the Lord. So it is that, increasingly as the years go by, my prayer is simply “Lord, kindly accept the little that I have to offer.” No dragons slain, no heads of enemies hanging from the belt, but we’re still in for the whole campaign, however long it takes.

Life become simpler as we age? What could be simpler than thatཀ So, maybe we elders have something to say to younger people, after all. I just wish I could remember what it is.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ

2011