

## Monastery Aging 2

There are many metaphors we use to describe aging – including journey, golden years, over the hill, winter, December, 2<sup>nd</sup> childhood. Most of these are negative images of the last third of the life course.

This afternoon I will talk about how I envision aging as a form of monastic life – a kind of ‘natural monastery.’

I’ll talk first about the person’s basic need for meaning, then , after a brief history of monasticism , I will discuss these questions:

1. Why does a relatively young person choose to live in a monastery?
2. What is monastic life like and how does it facilitate the person’s search for meaning?
3. How is aging like a natural monastery?
4. How can an older person adopt the image of aging as a natural monastery and live in it in his or her own time and place? Are there any resources?

Let’s talk about the search for **meaning**:

It has been said by many that old age is “The best of times and the worst of times.” But even in the best of times we sometimes feel left out of the mainstream of life, not as attractive to the young, not as useful to society. Yet we struggle to stay connected with the world in a meaningful way. This connection can fairly easily be made when we are in good physical and cognitive health, but how can we enjoy our lives and contribute to the well-being of humanity when illnesses cause debility and frailty? One of the tasks of later life is to find the meaning of one’s life at this stage in the life course, even when frailty or some disability interferes with what we normally do. I am personally involved with this issue as I am 65, recently retired from a medical school teaching career and 2 years in remission from stage 4 non-hodgkins lymphoma which left me with congestive heart failure. I had had no plans to retire so early, but my body dictates otherwise.

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, writing from his experience as a Nazi prison camp survivor, tells us in his book Man’s Search for Meaning that “He who has a Why to live can bear almost any How.” He saw three possible sources for meaning: in work – doing something significant; in love – caring for another person, and in courage during difficult times. He goes on to focus on the difficult times and says “Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it. He writes that a person “may remain brave, dignified and unselfish, or in the bitter fight for self-preservation he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing – your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You

cannot control much of what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you.”

## **Monastery**

For millenia, one way that people have tried to make meaning of their lives is through the search for God or ultimate Reality. A few people have become so focused and passionate about the search that they have devoted their entire lives to this pursuit alone. They have chosen to live in isolation from others or in community. They are called monks and nuns and they typically live either physically alone as hermits or in supportive communities called monasteries. Their way of life is called monasticism, the root of which is the Greek word, Monos, meaning alone.

The first monks were **Hindus**, living before 600BC. Most lived solitary lives, rejecting worldly values, and goods and living lives of dedicated poverty. Around 600 BC the **Jain** monks emerged from Hinduism and gathered together to live in communities called ashrams, devoting themselves to reducing the spiritual burden of karma. Also beginning in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, **Buddha** organized his followers into communal monastic order called Sangha. The monks of this order, which continues today, circulate in society teaching, preaching, and begging for their daily food.

In the first century BC, **Judaism** provided the earliest known order of monks in the Middle East – called the Essenes who lived very regulated lives of prayer at dawn, practical tasks, meditation, and study of Torah. There is some thought that John the Baptist had been an Essene.

The first group of **Christian monastics** began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, when St. Anthony left his worldly life, sold his inheritance, and went to live in the desert to separate himself from the sinfulness he found in the society of his day. He attracted followers, but they did not live in communities – they remained solitary hermits, but lived close to Anthony, sought his advice, and gathered together for religious services once a week. It was a monk named Pachomius, a contemporary of Anthony, who formed the first organized monastic community. He also built a convent – the first organized women’s community. These two early models of monasticism have been recognized for at least the past 1700 years and continue to this day. Monks who live alone are called hermits, anchorites or eremites. Cenobites are monks or nuns who live together in a community called a monastery. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are currently monasteries connected to a wide variety of world religions and philosophies. If you go to the

religion section of large bookstores you will find books such as “The Monk Within,” and many web sites reflecting a rapidly growing interest in monasticism in our culture.

**Islam** does not allow the practice of monasticism.

**Why do people join monasteries in this day and age?** There are many reasons, some of which include:

1. To devote their total living experience to God or Ultimate Reality
2. To live in a setting that has fewer distractions and responsibilities from all the good and not-so-good things of the secular world
3. To have more time for solitude in order to deepen the relationship with God
4. To have the support of like-minded others
5. To help God repair the world through the ascetical disciplines of prayer and intercessory or redemptive suffering
6. To witness to society that there is a radically different way to be a ‘productive’ member of society

**In practice, how does the monastic life enable a person to accomplish these objectives?**

Primarily through a rule of life and the taking the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and stability. How do these vows work?

The vow of **poverty** helps the monk to relinquish attachments to material, social, physiological, emotional and even spiritual things that hinder the search for God. Monastic life requires the monk to live in a community of people not of his/her choosing, people she or he may not actually like and may not naturally desire to spend time with. For example, monks are not allowed to own personal property, thus freeing them from the complex responsibilities to material things as well as to the temptation to collect things. (think about how much time we spend dealing with or electronic and other ‘stuff’) Poverty also calls for the giving up of excessive sensual pleasures – physical comforts, privacy, stylish clothing, elaborate food and the freedom to choose one’s favorite foods. Monks cannot even control the use of their own time; the day is ordered for them and is spent in prayer, study, and some work.

The vow of **chastity or celibacy** releases the person from overwhelming responsibilities to spouse, to children, and to the often distracting issues of extended family and intimate friends. Chastity curtails freedom of genital sexual expression, both individually and in partnership.

The vow of **obedience** requires the relinquishment of the monk’s own will, preferences, and desires to the needs of the community as interpreted by the superior or abbot.

The vow of **stability** requires that monks stay in the same monastery for the remainder of their lives. This enables them to commit deeply to the needs and persons of one place, while freeing them from restless desires to wander to communities more to their liking.

Monastic life enables monks to live lives of **social marginalization** and identification with the poor of the world, due to the monks' lack of financial productivity and useful 'good deeds'. Lack of emphasis on personal achievement and recognition facilitates ego diminishment.

**What happens 'naturally' in later life that corresponds with life in a monastery?** The above intentional, desired spiritual practices of the vows and the way of life adopted freely by monks and nuns are very similar to the unintentional interpersonal, psychological, and material losses of later life. Let's take a look at the monastic vows in the context of aging.

#### **Let's look at poverty first.**

1. Beloved property must be relinquished. One's house may become too burdensome, expensive, or inadequate to one's physical condition, requiring relocation to smaller and smaller – often less desirable- spaces. The person must give up items of emotional attachment which may not be brought to a retirement or nursing home.
2. Enjoyment of physical comforts and pleasures diminish or is taken away. One can't digest preferred or fancy food, may have dietary changes that restrict enjoyment of meals (lo-fat, low-salt, -non-spicy foods). One may have chronic pain due to arthritis or other illnesses (this may be worse than the old practices of self-mortification because of lack of personal control over the pain).
3. Control of one's time is in the hands of others – due to the schedules of those providing care – MD, nursing home aids, family caregivers – or even medication schedules.
4. Privacy is non-existent. There are few private rooms in hospitals and nursing homes – and there may be a stranger living in the bed 3 feet away. One is often unable to choose the people with whom to interact and is at the mercy of therapeutic regimens (bathing, physical, and occupational schedules. Humbling, embarrassing procedures such as toileting and bathing are done by strangers)
5. Individuality is lost, especially in a nursing home setting. Identification with ego and achievement occurs (mortification of the institution – Goleman). One is often cared for by strangers who come and go, not ever learning who one had been when in the mainstream of society. One needs to learn mindfulness' – to find contentment in the present moment rather than in memories of past identity. Skills and talents may become obsolete to the current needs of society. Interests and hobbies may need to be given up due to loss of skills or materials.

### **What about obedience?**

In later life one must learn to become obedient to one's physician, health insurance plan, director of the nursing facility and even to over-solicitous children.

### **And stability?**

In terms of the vow of stability, one experiences a diminished ability to change location at will. One's driver's license is taken away or must be given up; one experiences an inability to ambulate due to physical frailty; no one may be available to provide transportation. And when there is need for specialized care such as nursing home, one may never be able to walk around the building or grounds at will.

### **And the vows of Celibacy and Chastity?**

**Chastity** refers to genital sexual expression:

1. Opportunities for sexual intimacy may end due to illness or death of a beloved partner
2. Sexual activity may end due to lack of interest from others or because of one's diminishing sexual appeal
3. Illnesses such as diabetes may prevent genital sexual activity
4. Pain from chronic illness such as arthritis may interrupt sexual interest
5. Sexual interest may diminish with the aging process itself, due to hormonal changes.

**Celibacy** refers to the unmarried state:

1. Personal, special relationships become fewer or even non-existent
  - One's spouse may leave, fall ill with dementia, or die
  - Children may move to different locales
  - Children may be too busy to visit, even when living close by
  - Best friends die, become ill, or develop dementia
  - Best friends move to warm, sunny climates or close to their children far away
  - Best friends may not be able to leave their homes to get together
  - Best friends may become hearing impaired and unable to use the telephone
2. Sensory and cognitive losses diminish the ability to interact socially
3. Illness may make one homebound
4. Intimates who can provide personal care may be few or non-existent, cause one to rely on members of formal and informal care system, some of who one may not like.

**And Social Marginalization:** In frailty, one often finds oneself no longer of any 'use to mainstream society – at least in the eyes of the world.

**Consider this:** Younger people speak of feeling called by God to life in the monastery to wean themselves from all attachments other than the attachment to God. Could God be offering us older people a way to use our physical and other diminishment to prepare us for the gift of a deeper, stronger, more intimate relationship with the God who is Love itself?

**Perhaps God is saying to the aged soul:**

**My Dear Child,**

I have gifted you throughout your life with loving people, beautiful vistas, warm comforts, interesting work, and pleasures of all kinds. You have known me through these gifts – and perhaps you have loved the gifts more than you have loved me. I understand – my creation is full of delights! Now, however, as you are coming closer to the end of your life, I would like you to know me intimately, to feel how deeply I love you, before we meet face to face.

I want to give you the gift of Myself; I want you to know me as I am, as Love itself, I don't want any of my other gifts to entice you away from me, to come between us. I am inviting you to interpret your natural diminishment as a way to shed all the barriers to my love for you. Use this time to prepare yourself to receive me as your gift of gifts. I am with you in the midst of your losses and your pain, and the fullness of my love will follow you and be with you into eternity.

If anyone is interested in pursuing the idea of aging as a natural monastery, the new web site developed by Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister called Monasteries of the heart is an excellent way to dip ones toes into the ideas of monasticism. This website enables a person to enter into a virtual monastic community, the monastery of the heart, where the intention to offer one's life to God is enabled by her daily readings, Bible quotations, and even on-line small groups. Dr. Robert Weber and I also have a web site called Contemplageing, which offers readings on the topic.

Spiritual practices – listening – phone call, presence

Writing letters, cards, email