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A philosophy of aging should...

- *Flow comfortably from an institute's mission statement*
- *Acknowledge aging as a life-long process*
- *Acknowledge people as valuable for who they are, not just for what they do*

Toward a Philosophy of Aging

*by Catherine Keevey, Director of Health Services
Society of the Holy Child Jesus*



As we consider the importance of developing a philosophy of aging for our congregations that will guide our decisions and reflect our beliefs about growing older, it seems to me that one simple gospel statement will help to focus our efforts: Jesus advanced in wisdom, age and grace. These three themes are the strands that can help us trace the lived experiences that form our part of the universal web of creation. Consider with me the weavings of wisdom, age and grace and the actions they foster in our midst.

Wisdom... If we accept the premise that as we age, we have gained some degree of wisdom, then we should be desirous of surfacing that accumulated knowledge. Let the philosophy that emerges find its grounding in the lived realities of our members. We should be willing to listen to persons as they explore their life story, encouraging the process of life review. In this process we will see the threads of history that have formed and often literally held our communities together as the weave grew thin, encountered knots, possibly even joined with other strands, ultimately continuing to form the garment. Life events are seen in a new light.

Thomas Berry, CP, writes in *The Elderly: Their Creative Role in Human Community*, "The wisdom of the elderly is carried not fundamentally in moralizations or in any philosophical or even religious principles but in the structure of their own being which finds its finest expression in their life stories." He goes on to note that the stories are the archetypal experiences that reveal the depth of history of the human community. It is important, therefore, to actively create a variety of opportunities that will enable the sharing of our older members' stories so as to acknowledge the uniqueness of each tale as well as its contribution to creating the larger fabric of community.

Age... Surely you've heard the phrase, "Old age is fifteen years older than I am." It's a bit like the song that Sr. Andrée Fries referred to in the September issue

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Toward a Philosophy of Aging...

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of Engaging Aging, "... will you still need me, when I'm 64." Unconsciously, our thinking keeps old age at bay, especially when the average age of religious communities is 72. "Senior citizens" can feel and be treated as younger than their actual chronological age.

Recognizing that physical diminishment comes in a variety of forms, we need to be proactive in maintaining the optimum wellness for the later years. This involves addressing wellness issues over the life-cycle of each member. It involves a commitment to physical, emotional and spiritual growth so that choices made and finances allocated speak to the awareness of the interconnectedness of the mind-body-spirit. It also affirms that the elderly are not a burden but rather a visible sign of transition for all of us. We need to incorporate the realities of our physical bodies into the statements of philosophy on aging so that we remain grounded in the concrete needs that are a part of our lived realities.

Grace... Becoming fully human is the grace and the challenge we all face. If we accept that being fully human is our goal, we also accept the uniqueness of the individual and the need for older persons to exercise autonomy in decision making as long as possible. Let the appropriateness of their participation be grounded in their physical and cognitive capacity rather than in our needs for speed and efficiency. The religious who are today's elders are also the members who navigated a post-Vatican II church, took risks, and often made major changes to be true to their sense of Church. These are the members who have worked hard to understand their call in the light of an evolving world and church. The grace of their lives continues to shape our communities if given a chance to find its way onto the floors of decision making bodies.

If we are willing to listen, if we are willing to create opportunities for the elder voices to be heard, the voices of our "grandparents," as they are called among the native peoples, will offer religious communities the gifts of wisdom, age and grace as we move into the 21st century.



Where to Begin?

by Sister Andrée Fries, CPPS, Executive Director, NRRO, Washington, D.C.

In the late 1980's, the Tri-Conference Retirement Office (now known as NRRO) produced a series of educational videos on retirement issues facing religious institutes. Among those videos was a presentation by Catherine (Hamer) Keevey on developing philosophies of aging and retirement.

Catherine raised some questions to help individuals get in touch with their views on aging as they worked to develop philosophies. We think these questions are as pertinent now as they were then. Try using them as an exercise to tap your level of comfort with your own aging and that of your community's.

- *How do I feel about my own aging?*
- *How do I deal with (gut reaction) older persons who are struggling to make decisions about continuing a full time ministerial schedule?*
- *Am I able to encourage discussions about the implications of aging for the congregation?*
- *Am I able to face my own fears about change and dependency?*



Involvement of Members is Critical

by Sister Marianna Bauder, SCL, Community Councilor
Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas



Until a few years ago, our religious community had not focused intensely on the “aging boom” that would soon be upon us and what our attitude would be toward getting older in our religious life. Multiple factors accelerated this discussion, among them: the fact that we *were* aging; the need for changes in the delivery of our health services; and the consideration of renovations to the Mother House.

Three guiding principles influenced the evolution of what became our philosophy of aging and the steps that followed:

- Sisters should be asked for their input and feedback—because it is our lives we are talking about.
- Sisters should remain as independent as possible as they grow older.
- Wellness activities should complement the array of other senior services.

Extensive input sought from sisters

From the outset of developing our philosophy of aging and throughout the process of putting this philosophy into action, our Community Council sought and received invaluable feedback from the sisters. The Council developed a rough draft of a philosophy of aging. Meetings followed with sisters at the Mother House and Ross Hall, our skilled nursing facility, and led to revisions of this draft. We sent the next draft with a questionnaire to the entire community and refined the philosophy of aging based on feedback. The Council then circulated the final draft.

This philosophy was foundational for further development of our senior services. An early phase involved the study of nursing processes in Ross Hall, our 52-bed skilled and assisted living facility. This led to significant improvements in skill levels of staff and in nursing assessments. It has further resulted in guidelines to determine when a sister will advance from independent living to assisted living to skilled nursing.

In anticipation of renovations at the Mother House, we invited all resident sisters to participate in focus groups. Participants shared what they liked about the environment and what could be improved upon in the building layout and programs. Sisters voiced preferences for a walking trail, private bathrooms in their rooms instead of “community” restrooms, handicapped access to the front of the Mother House, and handrails along the hallways.

Within the next year, renovations began and incorporated this feedback into the design of the updated building and campus. The private bathrooms were among the most



Pictured above, Sister Regina Marie Allgaier, an advocate for and daily user of the exercise path

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Involvement of Sisters is Critical...

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welcomed feature of the project. With the focus on wellness, the Mother House renovation additionally included an exercise center with equipment, a wave pool and hot tubs. We also added another 17-bed wellness unit for assisted living in the Mother House.



Pictured Sisters Irene Hanley (L) & Ann Donovan

Mission statement developed

During this same timeframe, a small group of sisters developed a mission statement of the Mother House. The beautiful statement hangs in the main hallway and inside all elevators in the Mother House and Ross Hall.

The sisters take this Mission to heart:

“As the Mother House of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, our mission is to be a welcoming, heart-centered home where we witness and proclaim God’s love for all.

We commit ourselves:

- *To love and care for each other and for all those who enter our doors.*
- *To respect the dignity of all creation.*
- *To create an atmosphere of prayerfulness and joy.*

Another issue that needed attention was a driving policy related to aging. With representation from across the religious community, we formed another focus group to develop this policy. We started with a sample driving policy from the Christian Brothers and modified it to fit our needs.

Concluding thoughts

Reflecting on these significant changes implemented over the past six years, several things positively supported the development of our senior services. It was helpful that we took a step-by-step approach and built upon our successes. Involving as many sisters as possible through focus groups and questionnaires was very beneficial and key to the process. The Council worked well as a team as did our health professionals. We benefited greatly from the expert advice of consultants including Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, and Via Christi Senior Services Group, Wichita, Kansas.

We learned that working together we *could* make a difference and improve the quality of the lives of our sisters. We continue to strive to act in the spirit of our philosophy of aging that states, “We believe each sister is deserving of profound respect and reverence as an adult woman... We believe that transitions and change may be particularly challenging for older sisters and call for community support.”

NOTE: For copies of our philosophy of aging, driving policy, nursing assessments or other information, email us at seniorservices@scls.org.

Honk if You Love Aging

by **Sister Janice Bader, CPPS**

Project Director of Retirement Services, NRRO, Washington, D.C.



Recently I was driving through a small town. As I approached the one and only traffic light in town, the signal turned yellow, and I slowed to a stop. Immediately the car behind me began honking. “Can’t you see the light is red?” I grumbled. When the honking persisted, I looked into my rear view mirror and saw the driver gesticulating wildly. “What is your problem?” I thought. “Just chill out, lady.” Finally she stuck her head out of her window and began yelling. I rolled down my window only to hear her say, “Your gas tank is open!”

Every day we make assumptions about the motives and intentions of others based on our life experience. My experience of driving in Washington, DC (where some people tend to drive as though they are running the country) obviously has led me to form assumptions that do not fit the reality of Smaller Town, USA.



When it comes to the issue of aging, each of us has our own set of assumptions about that as well. We think we know what aging is, what it could be, and what it should be based upon our personal experiences, observations, hopes and fears. These assumptions may or may not agree with the assumptions of other members of our religious community.

The views of aging in any religious community probably cover the entire spectrum from Shakespeare’s pessimistic assertion that old age “is second childishness and mere oblivion sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” to Robert Browning’s upbeat invitation, “Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be.”

These varied assumptions may take voice in conflicting comments on a given situation: “He’s only 75 years old, and he’s in good health. He should still be working,” versus “Good grief! He’s 75 years old and still working. Some people just don’t know when to let go.” Without some common ground, rash judgments and “honking” can abound.

Developing a communal philosophy of aging may seem a non-essential task, just another politically correct exercise of putting words on paper and then onto the shelf. But as Sue Hammond recommends in the *Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry*, “assumptions must be made visible and discussed before anyone can be sure of group beliefs.” With the median age and life expectancy of most religious communities on the rise, it is critical that we articulate our shared beliefs about the later years of life. Only then can we develop consistent policies and on-going formation programs that are in concert with our espoused values. Our alternative is to continue “honking” at one another.

We know you’re overloaded, overbooked, overextended...

but please take a moment to send a copy of your community’s philosophy of aging to the offices of NRRO. We are trying to compile a resource file for communities seeking help with the process of developing a philosophy of aging. Contact jbader@usccb.org

Philosophy of Aging for Brothers of the Christian Schools, Baltimore, MD

Throughout its history the Institute has always shown a special regard for its senior Brothers. Recognizing that modern society has means whereby provision is made for retired persons, the District wishes to update its policies and practices with regard to its retired Brothers while at the same time assuring them of the esteem and respect which have always been a part of our tradition.

As Brothers we are committed not only to the apostolates of the District, but also to the Lasallian way of life to which we give assent at profession through the words “for all my lifetime” and from which one never retires. We also recognize that aging is a fact of life and that the human person represents an integration of spiritual, psychological, and physical dimensions. It is no different for us as Brothers. In fact, because of our way of life, aging presents us with some difficulties that others do not face.

Many Spiritual challenges face the senior Brother. Because of aging his faith in God may be tested in new ways, his hope in what is unseen may be tried as never before, and the ability to love his neighbor may become burdensome. The District and the Institute stand with the senior Brother as he comes to grips with these challenges. And it does so as a community of faith, hope and love proclaiming the Good News to its own members as well as to others. The Brothers of the Christian Schools affirm that the occasions for Christian witness are not diminished by age but that they merely exist in a new way because of it.

The stresses impinging on a Brother as he approaches his senior years can be many, hence the necessity of preparing for them successfully. A senior Brother may have to deal with questions of personal identity, self-worth, emotional insecurity and group-belonging in ways that have never occurred to him. At this time he needs to know that he is recognized as an important and cherished person within the total community of the District, no less valuable to or a part of the whole for reasons of age. We affirm that our senior Brothers are a living example of our belief that who we are is as vital as what we do.



We recognize that aging Brothers, as do all persons, eventually experience a declining energy level and tend to have an increasing number of medical problems. Every senior Brother will, therefore, have an adequate place to live, suitable to his needs, and such medical assistance as may be required. At the same time the District desires that the Brothers remain active in some apostolate for as long as feasible.

***Thanks to the Christian Brothers of the Baltimore District
for sharing their philosophy of aging!***

From the Editor's Desk...

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA



In light of the rather outrageous weather we've been experiencing lately, I have been giving serious thought to changing our masthead. The prospect of sending out a newsletter with sunflowers pasted across the cover just seems ludicrous considering the snow that is promised outside my window this April.

Seemingly equally bizarre, however, is this issue's focus on philosophy of aging in the face of the killings at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University that are being broadcast even as we go to press. How can one reconcile a focus on growing old with so many lives being ended before their adulthood ever began?

I don't know that sense can be made of insanity or order drawn from chaos in any other way than by reverencing the sacredness of life that is ours. Perhaps this is our chance to extend to the world a witness that counters the culture of violence surrounding us. By taking the time to intentionally address aging in our midst; to challenge our covert attitudes toward the elderly; to weed out the insidious influences of a culture that tolerates disregard for human life; perhaps then we will hold forth a life experience that speaks of reverence, valued participation, and vital community across generations.

Ours is a life that must proclaim hope, not in spite of our seeming decline, but because of it. Now, more than ever, we must engage one another in essential conversations about our lives together, and they must include



our hopes and fears of growing old. A process to develop a philosophy of aging will accomplish these dialogues and gift us with a guide for moving forward together.

United with all those who suffer any loss in the midst of life, may we look to the Easter candle: "...A flame divided but undimmed... may it always dispel the darkness of this night. May the Morning Star which never sets find this flame still burning."

Did you know. . .

The following WEB sites have information about reminiscence and life review processes, ways to engage the wisdom story and bring alive the collective experiences of the congregation.

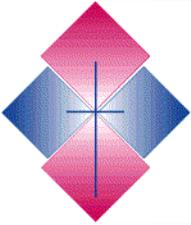
"Butler Reviews Life Review" by Robert Butler: <http://news.aarp.org/UM/T.asp?A910.52852.3530.5.1053149>

Autobiography as a Wellness Tool: <http://news.aarp.org/UM/T.asp?A910.52852.3530.6.1053149>

"Autobiography and Emotional Growth": <http://news.aarp.org/UM/T.asp?A910.52852.3530.7.1053149>

"Life Writing: On The Uses of Life-Review": <http://news.aarp.org/UM/T.asp?A910.52852.3530.8.1053149>





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The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these monies in grants to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs.

The National Religious Retirement Office supports, educates and assists religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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