

Spirituality of Adults: Falling Upwards

Matthew 5:1-10

July 30, 2023 *Growing & Growing Up: Exploring Spirituality Throughout Life*
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When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the
Kin-dom of heaven.*

There are so many articles about aging and growing old. Just the last few weeks in the NYT

[Why Sunscreen Is the Only Anti-Aging Product You Need](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/15/well/live/sunscreen-aging-skin-care.html?searchResultPosition=6) - The sun's rays cause the majority of skin changes as you grow older. Here's how sunscreen helps prevent the damage.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/15/well/live/sunscreen-aging-skin-care.html?searchResultPosition=6>

[Sleep Better At Every Age](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/07/07/well/live/sleep-better-age.html?searchResultPosition=8)

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[Blood of Young Mice Extends Life in the Old](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/27/health/mice-blood-aging.html?searchResultPosition=10)

Infusions of youthful blood led older mice to live 6 to 9 percent longer, a new study found.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/27/health/mice-blood-aging.html?searchResultPosition=10>

There is a comment that I often hear from older people who spend time in the hospital or have some kind of medical episode. They will look me in the eye and with all seriousness declare, "Whatever you do, don't get old."

When they say it, I'm never sure what they want me to do. I have every intention of getting old, and prefer it to the alternative. Lord knows, the years are marching on for all of us. I think we are all praying for durability and the continuing ability to bounce rather than break. As the Psalmist says to God in Psalm 71, "You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again." (71:20).

It is good to have a lot of mentors who have offered good advice. Keep walking as long as you can, they say. Enjoy what you eat, but don't eat as much of it. Start doing crossword puzzles

and Wordle to sharpen the brain. And if you're going on a long trip, never pass up a restroom. These are all helpful tidbits.

Psalms 71 has some holy advice to add to such wisdom. It seems to have been written by somebody sensitive to the aging process. "Don't cast me off in the time of old age," he says in verse nine. In v. 18, he adds, "Even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me."

We don't know if David wrote this Psalm, although he wrote many. We know David lived to be a senior citizen. According to the first book of Kings, when he "was old and advanced in years," he couldn't keep warm. The servants covered him with blankets and clothes, but he was often chilly. And when David died, the official chronicler of the kingdom declared, "he died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honor." (1 Chronicles 29:28) By the way, anybody want to guess what his ripe old age actually was? King David died at seventy years of age.

Thanks to medical advances, good nutrition, and fewer battles with the Philistines, a lot of us are lasting a lot longer. Once it was extremely rare to know someone who is a hundred years ago. Not anymore. Yet, as all of us know, with longevity comes trouble. Financial stability, health challenges – balance, arthritis, change in eyesight, cancer, and more. Longer lives mean more medical bills. People we love die and there is an empty place in our hearts.

So aging is a blessing and it is hard. We have been looking over the past few weeks about spiritual formation throughout life. How do we look at aging and spiritual formation? Richard Rohr has some wisdom for us. He wrote a book a few years ago titled, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*.

Rohr writes - The phrase "two halves of life" was first popularized by Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist. He says that there are two major tasks. In the first half of life, you've got to find your identity, your significance; you create your ego boundaries, your ego structure. This is called "the creating of the container." Questions like – What makes me significant? How can I support myself?

But that's just to get you started. In the second half of life, once you've created your ego structure, you finally have the courage to ask: What is this all for? What am I supposed to do with this? Is it just to protect it, to promote it, to defend it, or is there some deeper purpose? We need to find the contents of this container and what is meant to hold and deliver. The search for meaning is the task of the second half of life, at which can begin at any age.

Rohr uses the term "Falling Upward" to describe aging and that we grow by falling down. He writes - I thought it was a perfect title because it conveys a sense of paradox. The first part of the title (about falling) isn't about what you expect. In fact, most of our concern in the first half of life is about rising, achieving, accomplishing, performing. I tried deliberately

to use a somewhat shocking or controversial phrase, implying that there is a necessary falling that comes into every life. It's not like you have to manufacture or create the falling; it will happen. If you can find grace or freedom in and through that falling, you find that it moves you forward, upward, broader, deeper, better—to growth. That's just the opposite of what you first think when you fall, fail, or lose.

There is a gravitas in the second half of life, but it is now held up by a much deeper lightness, or “okayness.” Our mature years are characterized by a kind of bright sadness and a sober happiness...

He writes - The Eight Beatitudes speak to you much more than the Ten Commandments now. I have always wondered why people never want to put a stone monument of the Eight Beatitudes on the courthouse lawn. Then I realize that the Eight Beatitudes of Jesus would probably not be very good for any war, any macho worldview, the wealthy, or our consumer economy. Courthouses are good and necessary first-half-of-life institutions. In the second half, you try instead to influence events, work for change, quietly persuade, change your own attitude, pray, or forgive instead of taking things to court. (1)

Those teachings from Jesus can have greater and deeper meaning in the second half of life as adults and in our later years. They are part of a moral compass, an ethical framework by which we discern right and wrong, just and unjust.

What if we reflected on them as a way to live rather than words to say? As one translator reminded me, use “Honored” in place of “Blessed.” These are words of deeper truths, not warm devotional sound bytes, a way of describing a life of falling upwards, the pursuit of the good life, noble life, integrity, a vision of lifting up ourselves and others when we are hurting or seeking justice.

Life is much more spacious now, the boundaries of the container having been enlarged by the addition of new experiences and relationships. You are like an expandable suitcase, and you became so almost without your noticing. Rohr, Richard. AARP Falling Upward (p. 119). Kindle

So maybe the invitation is to be open to this deepening, to be with each other as we discern what is in our container, how we face death and how we deepen our awareness of God's loving presence and our calling to be people of compassion.

I will close with a few words from Anne LaMott. She wrote it in April of this year on her 69th birthday.

It's my birthday today. I'm the oldest I've ever been—fifty-nineteen. I woke up to a beautiful card from my husband and an invitation from my son to go for a walk in the redwoods where the streams are rushing with the recent torrential rains.

.... (These days) I limp. I have planters' fasciitis that is much better but never completely gone, and bursitis in one hip. My doctor sent me to a physical therapy class last month called "Hip Care," with four other much young limpy people. I was having an unusually sore day, and hobbled into the class like Walter Brennan. She began by explaining all the reasons hips might hurt—ie sports injuries, arthritis, repetitive stress—and then added thoughtfully, "old age." But during the series of exercises she had us do on the padded tables, I injured my knee. I suppose I have to go to Knee Care class next, if I can risk it.

So a bum hip, sore knee and bad feet, but I go for a walk in Nature every day. Otherwise I become Mad Bummer Lady—

...Now, at 50-19, My senior moments can be scary. My main exercise is trying to find things—the phone, the keys, the car in big parking lots. A friend finally scared himself to death with the increased space out-ed-ness, and got the complete two-day neurological work up. At the end, the neurologist "assured" (hah!) him he simply had age appropriate cognitive decline, and added something that has saved me—it's not a problem if you can never find your keys or glasses, but it becomes one if, when you find them, you can't remember what they are for. So far so good every time: no flies on the princess!

But still, I am as happy and grateful as I have ever been, because I practice gratitude, and because of the incredible people who love me. I even love and respect me, mostly, old mad bummer lady me, one of the great gifts of getting older. I still have tiny control issues, and offer too much advice and "help" to my poor family members, even though I've learned that help is the sunny side of control. But I'm way more gentle with me and amused by myself now, or perhaps I'm just foggy enough not to notice all the annoying things I do or say: it's the grace of myopia.

My Texan friend ...told me nearly 37 years go when I got sober that God loved me exactly the way I was, and loved me way too much to let me stay like that. (2)

May we be open to the ways God is inviting us to love ourselves at any age, following the ways of Jesus and exploring the contents of our containers to discover a deeper and fuller life, now and always. Amen.

1) Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. (Jossey Bass 2011) pp. Intro, chapter 1, Amazon interview on author page

2) Anne LaMott, "Reflections on my Birthday," April 10, 2023, Anne Lamott Facebook Page.

Another good resource for this topic is *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity and Getting Old* by Parker Palmer. (2018 Berret-Koehler Publishers)