

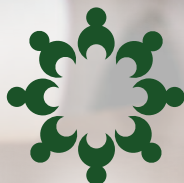
*The Community Voice for Seniors*

September 2011

# BULLETIN

Spirituality  
& Aging

**The Council  
on Aging  
of Ottawa**



**Le Conseil sur  
le vieillissement  
d'Ottawa**

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## Spirituality, aging and health

**S**pirituality, aging and health are related to one another and yet each one in itself is vast and complex. Despite the popularity of the word “spirituality” there is no unanimity in the literature about what it means. It is a very individual experience and very influenced by culture.

### **Spirituality:**

Spirituality differs from religion. Religion is an observable, sociological phenomenon by which people with common beliefs form a community, which expresses those beliefs through common language, music, symbols, rites and rituals and which adheres to common ethical principles.

Spirituality is an individual, anthropological phenomenon through which a person grows in understanding of his or her connection to or place in the universe and thereby finds meaning and purpose to his or her life.

A common denominator found in the literature seems to speak of a “search for meaning”. While this is certainly part of any spiritual journey, by itself it lacks the transcendent element that for me renders an experience spiritual.

The word for spirit in the Hebrew Scriptures is “Ruach” the same word as that used for breath and wind. Wind which we cannot see but the results of which we know: energy gentle as the invisible breeze that caresses our cheek on a hot day and refreshes us; our own breath, the source of life but visible only if it mixes with the air on a cold winter day; this same idea of mystery, energy and power is used to describe spirit.

### **Aging:**

Aging is indeed a process. For the first half of life we call it growing up or maturing; it is as though we are climbing a mountain towards the achievement of the goals we have set for ourselves. In many societies, particularly in Africa, Asia, and First Nations people, the climb continues in the second half of life towards a wisdom and fulfillment that is respected and honoured by those younger.

In North America however the prevailing image for the second part of life seems to be one of gradually descending the mountain with steps of loss: loss of health, loss of autonomy, and the reaction of society is one of pity, condescension or abandonment.

The increased life-span is already resulting in what some are referring to as a “tsunami of aging”—but for that to be a positive reality will necessitate changing attitudes on the

part both of the aging generation and of their care-givers. A positive attitude will be the crucial element determining how people understand the spiritual challenges of aging.

### **Health:**

To a large degree, physical health and illness is pre-determined by genetics. The environment also affects our bodies, the polluted air we breathe and the chemicals in the food we eat. There is no guarantee that if we follow all the food and exercise plans prescribed, we will not become ill.

Similarly, there is no guarantee that the person who has a deep spiritual life will escape illness. What I am prepared to argue, is that spirituality is one of the resources that can help us live through illness and aging with healthy attitudes, which may lessen anxiety, fear and even pain.

### **Spiritual Challenges of Aging:**

There are three realities that jolt most healthy people into an undeniable awareness that they are aging. The first is the significant birthday where we are confronted by our own mortality. The second is when damage to our bodies cannot be fixed and we have to learn to live with it. The third inescapable reality is when we are going to more funerals than we did a few years ago.

One of the first spiritual challenges of aging is to find a sense of identity in being rather than doing. Generally people at this stage of life find themselves thinking back over the past, reviewing their life; the risk is that one can simply become nostalgic and filled with regrets but the gift is that one can discover what wisdom has been gained and what one wants to pass on as a heritage to the next generation. Such action nurtures the self-esteem of the older person.

The process of aging involves increasing limitations: things we can no longer do, places we can no longer go, parts of our bodies that no longer work. And the natural reaction is to complain and to feel sorry for ourselves. The spiritual challenge is to develop an attitude of gratitude—gratitude for all the things we can still do, the places we can still go to, the parts of our bodies that still work.

Another challenge for all aging people is to move beyond ego-centrism and to remain interested in others and in the world around them. The pains and fears and losses of age make it easy for a person's field of interest to grow smaller and smaller until all he or she can talk about is those pains and fears and losses.



To find hope every day and in every situation is a further challenge. We do not know for sure what God will do, in this life or in the next; what people of faith know is that God's presence will always be with them, so they should be able to live, and die, with hope and with a certain sense of internal freedom.

In conclusion, there is one more spiritual challenge. I call it rediscovering the capacity for awe and wonder. Children before they go to school and are taught to think rationally, scientifically and technologically, are fascinated by nature; they at once feel part of it and are aware of its otherness.

I would like to suggest that the capacity for awe, the openness to mystery may reassert itself towards the end

of life. It never completely disappears, it only gets lost in our adult struggle to learn enough, to understand enough, to work hard enough to create our place in the world. But as we move into old age, we are no longer obsessed with creating our place in the world and I suggest that for all of us the opportunity is there to rediscover the capacity for awe and mystery.

**Source: Reverend Phyllis Smyth, former Director of Spiritual Care at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Montreal.**

**Complete address : "The Wind that calls out my name"**

<http://www.coaottawa.ca/news-events/events/documents/DrPhyllisSmythpresentation.pdf>

## Aging and gratitude

As I have just recently started receiving old-age pension cheques, I share these thoughts with you as a fellow member of this great club of old-timers.

I say "great club," because the fact that one has made it into this fraternity is reason enough to be grateful. Any check of the obituary column will reveal that too many people leave this world who are much younger than I am. The fact that we have not read our own obituaries justifies some measure of rejoicing.

Yes, we old-timers have reason to be grateful. The question we need to ask is, grateful for what, and to whom? For what—for having lived this long, if for nothing else. To whom—that is more complicated. For religious people, it all starts with gratitude to God. But that is not where it ends.

We know that there are so many factors which contribute to longevity. These include, as we have recently discovered, having good "longevity genes." For that we are grateful also to those who transmitted those genes, our parents.

Happiness contributes to longevity. And a happy marriage is most critical in this regard. So, there is a mandate for appropriate gratitude to one's spouse.

Being in a happy and fulfilling workplace works wonders for longevity. The workplace is where we spend so much of our adult life; those who gave our workplace a welcoming atmosphere deserve our gratitude.

Then there are the children, of whom it has been said that they are a comfort in our old-age, and help us get there more quickly! Having good children - which most often is the result of the children having good parents, makes every day a pleasure, a day one welcomes with eager

anticipation rather than dread. Children, good children, are worthy of our gratitude.

If any or all these gratitude sources apply to you, then there is one thing I would do without delay, assuming (probably erroneously) that you have not done so until now. The thing to do is to go to these various people, spouse, co-workers, boss, and perhaps most importantly children and siblings, and whoever else has contributed to your happy and extended state of being, and tell them, in your own unique words, how grateful you are to them.

This will make them feel good, and it will make you feel even better. Furthermore, it will generate even more goodness on their part, as they realize how much their own behaviour is appreciated.

The older we get, the more we realize what an immense blessing is our being in good health. Admittedly, a significant factor in good health is the genes. But how we look after ourselves is also a major factor.

No matter how much we may have neglected ourselves in the early years, it is never too late to embrace healthy habits, including a well-balanced and moderate diet and an appropriate exercise regimen. This will help us live longer and better.

Added to that is the less advertised yet all important ingredient called "attitude." A positive attitude is a huge part of aging gracefully. It starts with expressed gratitude for the life we have lived till now, and then moves into appreciating the bonus of life from here on in.

Admittedly, there are some whose aches and pains, whose serious health challenges, whose problems at home,

**Gratitude** Continued on next page

# The Spirituality of Ageing: Dance your final years!

## “What’s happening?”

For each of us, there is probably a defining moment when we sense we are crossing the threshold from feeling that we’re in “the prime of life” to the awareness that we’re “not as young as we used to be”. For me the year 2007 was such. I had retired from full-time work in administration. I had time of my own; I could do what I wanted with my days. It was a great feeling, but also disorienting: “Who am I now?” I asked myself, “and what will I be doing for the rest of my days?”

Then, on Good Friday that year a fire burnt down my Jesuit home. Much of the life I’d known went up in smoke, and a bleak and uncharted future loomed ahead. What was familiar had disappeared—books, writings, notes, bric-a-brac, clothes, photos—and part of me was gone with them. In this time of shock, I knew that I had been rocketed into a new phase of life, with new challenges and surprises. I was being introduced—against my will—to my senior years, the “Third Age” as it is kindly called. So I am writing from that perspective, and I’m addressing primarily those of you who know ageing from the inside. If you haven’t yet entered this strange world, knowledge of its landscape may help you relate more richly to those who have.

## Spirituality

The process of ageing occurs to everything: to cats and stars and TVs and saucepans, to the universe itself, and to all of us whether we like it or not. We see ageing all around us; we know what it is. But what about the “spirituality” of ageing?

A recent book listed forty-eight definitions of the term “spirituality”, but let’s be simple and agree that the

spirituality of ageing situates the ageing process in the context of our relationship with God. A spirituality is an assertion that there is Another involved in our life. Next, Christian spirituality means that Jesus interprets our life to us: Buddhists, Jews and Humanists would interpret ageing differently.

Practically it makes an enormous difference to you if you accept the Christian spirituality of ageing: there’s all the difference in the world between dancing alone and dancing with a partner, so we will be exploring how you can dance your final years with God, until you enter into the Dance that goes on forever.

## “Can I Trust You?”

Can we trust God to stay with us as we age? Does God grow tired of us, or will he truly lead us in the dance of our declining years? Trust is all-important in life, whether you are dancing with a partner, looking for a good friendship or living out a marriage. The deeper the trust, the more alive our relationship with the other will be, because we can then risk sharing more and more of ourselves. Ideally, when you trust someone enough, you can let yourself go completely into their arms.

So, if your relationship with God is already a trusting and happy one, you are ready to move along into this new chapter of your life, and even to enjoy it. If you are aware that God loves you through and through, thank God endlessly for this transforming realisation: it is not to be taken for granted.

As we age we become more dependent, less able to manage for ourselves: we can entrust our neediness to God only if we are at ease with him. But if you feel you can’t

**Gratitude** from page 3, concluded.

make such appreciation of the blessing of life difficult, to say the least.

This is not intended to trivialize these potentially overwhelming challenges. Even in the face of these challenges, I have seen so often how those who have a positive, appreciative approach to life, handle every challenge so much more effectively.

Where do you get this positive attitude? Do you buy it at a store? Is there an attitude pill? I wish it were so. But it is more easily accessible than you think. It is within us. We all have reasons to be grateful, and therefore the obligation

to share that gratitude. Once we do that, and spread such good feelings, we create the atmosphere of appreciation that feeds on itself and makes everyone around us more cheerful, more wanting to be with us.

Sharing gratitude helps assure we will not be alone as we get older. Being totally alone is potentially such a dreadful part of aging. There are many components to not being alone, but much of it is in our hands.

This is what I think of as true gray power. We have that power- let’s use it well.

**Source: Rabbi Reuven P. Bulka, Congregation Machzikei Hadas, Ottawa.**

be sure of God, then you will be afraid to risk this deeper dependency on him. And so I start this series by addressing those of you whose relationship with God has not been so good. My hope is that you can then make a leap of trust in God or at least pray: “I trust you, God, but help my lack of trust.”

I also invite you not just to read but to pray the content of this article. Ask God what he wants to show you. God and yourself are in this together!

### Loved Conditionally?

When I was writing the book, *Our Graced Life-Stories*, someone said to me:

“I’d love to be in that group.”

“Which group?” I asked.

“I’d love to be one of the people who have a graced life-story!”

This was a shock to me: I had taken it for granted that everyone had a graced life story, and only needed to be made more aware of it. In chatting, I found that the person meant that she had little sense of being loved by God.

“And,” she said, “there are so many like me. We try to be good, to live out our faith. We attend Mass and so on. We read the Messenger ‘Letters of Thanksgiving’ and often shed a tear, because we don’t really believe that God loves us. After all, why should he?”

She continued: “I feel that God just about tolerates me: he has to because he made me. I go to God to ask for what I need, but I’m afraid. Why? Well, I think that God loves me only IF I measure up to his standards, which of course I rarely do. I’m afraid he might get at me through my children—I can stand being hurt myself, but I couldn’t stand them being hurt. When I hear someone blithely say to me “God loves you!” it hurts. I’m sure God pities me, as you’d pity a family outsider, but I doubt he has compassion on me such as I have for my own children. I feel I don’t belong. I don’t think of God as “kind”—that for me is love in its truest form. I’m not at home with God—home is a kind word which for me means acceptance, welcome, belonging. Jesus says: “Make your home in me” but I can’t do it. It’s a lonely place, to feel left out—the unwanted child.

“I know I bought into what my parents taught me about God, and it wasn’t nice. Their acceptance of me was conditional, it was “iffy”. But if I wasn’t good enough for my parents just as I was, how can I be good enough for God? But still, that’s not the whole story! Over the past while all sorts of good things have happened to make me doubt my childhood voices. Now I want to let the real God speak for himself. I’ve always wanted someone who’d know me—my likes and loves, my fears, my secrets, the deepest parts

of me—and I’m trying to risk trusting that God is that Someone who knows me and yet loves me and that I matter to him. I’m taking baby steps in trust. I pray a lot for that grace. I can’t be really alive unless I take that risk.

“So I’m in a better place than I was ten years ago. I’m beginning to believe that I’m caught up in a love story with God. In a way I look forward to whatever years I have left, because they’ll be happier than the ones gone by. I can see that God’s looking out for me in the good things that happen to me. Isn’t that great? And the flaws of the saints—Augustine and Ignatius and Matt Talbot for example—show me that having flaws isn’t a barrier to being close to God. I can be flawed and loved, like an imperfect diamond!”

So speaks an honest woman, and since none of us trusts God enough, her story can help us to ask for what we may need, as St Ignatius says. Here we will ask to trust more and more the God who leads us through this mysterious world of ageing.

### Conversation with the Lord

Find a comfortable place and a quiet time. Imagine the Lord coming to you: his heart is full: he wants to get across to you just how deeply he and his Father love you. He knocks and comes in: he embraces you. You see in his eyes the message he has for you. You relax, and he says:

“I want to tell you the most important secret you need to know for your later years. It’s this: my Father and I will always think of you as our beloved! Our love for you has no conditions. So can you trust us as we guide you on to eternal joy?”

How do you respond?

**Source: Brian Grogan, S.J. 01 August 2010, The Sacred Heart Messenger, Ireland**





## Traditional grandmother— Roseann Martin-Ampoh

**H**er dark hair, shot with grey that barely touched her shoulders was pulled to the back of her head with an elastic band. “My hair used to be long but I cut it recently to mark my grief over the death of my mother. The oldest daughter does that in my nation.”

That stands out from my first meeting with Grandmother Rose. Later we met and she told me about herself and her life as a traditional grandmother.

She is a member of the Mi’gmaq First Nation whose home territory is located in Listuguj, Quebec. As a traditional grandmother, she follows the culture and performs the ceremonies of her nation. She carries on and passes on the cultural traditions of her Mi’gmaq people.

She is a residential school survivor, having been sent to school in Nova Scotia at age 5 ½. At 9 she was sent to school in Gaspé where she lived in a foster home. When she finally went back to Listuguj at age 20, she no longer spoke her own language but spoke English and French.

Since then she has relearned her language and her culture and has worked hard to discover who she is as an aboriginal person and to make peace with her past. *“There has been a lot of healing in my journey.”*

Having freed her spirit, she went to work traveling through Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, meeting and working with residential school survivors on 31 different reserves. She helped them with the paperwork connected with legal claims over the abuses and injustices of the residential schools.

She also tried to get these survivors to go back to their own culture, to explore native spirituality and ceremonies. Later she worked for Corrections Canada and Corrections Quebec, going into correctional institutions to teach natives about their culture and performing ceremonies.

Two years ago on a visit to her son, she learned that the Wabano Centre needed a Traditional Grandmother. As a Wabano staff person, she meets with seniors twice a week, does cultural teaching and performs ceremonies with all age groups and with different groups throughout the Ottawa area.

She dances, sings, chants, and drums in many places. Another part of her work is outreach as the Wabano grandmother to the homeless. Many months she meets with up to 1000 people, some at the Centre and many others during outreach.

She works hard to gain the trust of her clients and counsels many who have deep scars from their life journeys. While working as part of a team with other staff members



in the Wabano Seniors Program, she seeks to meet the needs of the seniors she serves. She has helped many to reclaim their cultural heritage.

She teaches Mi’gmaq culture to those whose background is Mi’gmaq and establishes appropriate connections for those of other nations, for example, Algonquin, Ojibway, and Mohawk. Many have no aboriginal identities, but she helps them to “fill the void” in their lives by “opening the door of their own spirits.”

The seniors here, she says, are more accepting of traditional culture than those she met on the reserves. The group of seniors she meets twice weekly has grown from 5 to about 15 regulars. They go on trips, practise crafts and explore their traditions in many ways. She teaches her clients to perform ceremonies such as the Water Ceremony by guiding them through the process. She teaches others as she herself was taught through participation.

*I am giving back what was given to me. The Elders gave to me when I thought I was unteachable. My work consists of caring and sharing with the seniors and with the tweens (13 year olds) and the teenagers. I do ceremonies for many groups and on many occasions. I have had opportunities to work with many different peoples, including drumming for the former Governor General Andrienne Clarkson.*

She is proud that her grandchildren are walking in her footsteps. One granddaughter is especially interested in the contents of her traditional bundle and how she obtained all the items.

She cares for her spirit beginning each day burning sweet grass and thanking the Creator for her blessings. Three times a year she fasts in her own community to maintain her connection with the Creator.

*“I am where I am supposed to be. I love what I do.”*

**Source: Helen Smith, Chair of Interfaith Network Reaching Out to Isolated Seniors.**

## Harvesting elders' wisdom

Like many other churches in Canada, First-Metropolitan United in Victoria, BC has a growing proportion of members, more than 60%, who are over the age of 60.

Terry Dance-Bennink, a recent retiree from Peterborough, saw this as an opportunity to help older adults and seniors continue their life-long learning and growing.

In 2007, with a modest grant from the national office of the United Church, Terry began the Spiritual Companions Program at First-Met. Its purpose is to:

- ◆ build a sense of community among elderly members who may feel disconnected from the church and;
- ◆ create a bridge between long-standing and newer members to ensure the wisdom of the elders is passed on to others.

The elders of the church loved the idea of sharing their life stories with a companion, so story-telling became the focus of the program. Twelve companions were recruited and given a 7-week training program, after which they began visiting elders, recording their life stories and transcribing them.

### Stories United

Out of this Spiritual Companions program, the idea for the book entitled *Stories United: Harvesting Elders' Wisdom* was born. After six months of visiting, more than 700 typed pages of stories were culled to 200 pages and edited.

The stories, grouped under 8 themes, became the chapters. Besides these chapters containing the elders' stories, *Stories United* contains an introduction, reflective questions to ponder at the end of each chapter, each elder's photo and biography, the wisdom learned from the elder by the companion, and a chapter that details the process of the program itself.

### Writing and Sharing Your Life Story

The publication of *Stories United* did not end the Spiritual Companions program. The companions have continued to visit their elders and meet with each other to share their experiences. Terry Dance-Bennink began another program to encourage people, not only in the church but also in the wider community, to write and share their own stories.

In the community program, *Stories United* was used as a kind of textbook. Group members were asked to read a chapter for homework and then answer the questions at the end of the chapter in order to write their own story.

At each meeting, they shared what they had written with others in the group. Because of this encouragement, many of the "graduates" of this program have gone on to publish their own stories.

I was a newcomer to First-Met when this Spiritual Companions program began. I was paired with Mrs. Ruth Howell, a native of Victoria who passed away February 20, 2010 at the age of 102. She taught me much about the history of the congregation and the city where she lived all her life.

In return, I visited her and provided some connection to the church that she could no longer attend. More than that, she felt a renewed sense of purpose in

her life, and, along the way, we became friends. If that were the only benefit of the program, then it was well worth it, but I know from the discussions I have had with others that each of us (elders and companions alike) has had our life enriched by the experience.

So often we wait till a life is over to celebrate it. Through the Spiritual Companions program and the book *Stories United: Harvesting Elders' Wisdom* which resulted from it, the elders were able to feast on the harvest of their lives while they were still around to enjoy them.

**Source: Edeana Malcolm, writer, Victoria, B.C.**





## The developmental task of late life

I would hazard a guess that most seniors reading this item expect that the end of life is, or more likely, should be, an experience of wholeness and completeness. Some who have had medical operations with an uncertain outcome might have some sense of this expectation.

The question for us is, can we really expect a sense of completeness and wholeness without working on it? This achievement is the task of spiritual integrity and spiritual maturity to be achieved in our late careers.

A gifted Australian nurse, honorary Anglican priest, and academic, Elizabeth MacKinlay, has worked with and researched the spiritual development of seniors at various stages of early and late aging.

She sees nothing automatic about this coming together of life without some preparatory work throughout the senior years. Aging, she says, is just another developmental chapter in human maturity and with it go tasks to be accomplished before moving on to the next level.

The tasks of aging are perhaps the most difficult stage of human development because these are the years of losses, the years of accepting or fighting what are inevitable changes and losses. We lose our youthful good looks, our once taken for granted physical strength and health start to deteriorate.

Friends and colleagues sicken and die so we go to more funerals than weddings, our social status begins to crumble and disappear as our network slides away from the centre of action, spouses and partners sicken and die and so we are left on our own to do everything for ourselves, and so time seems to march dismally onwards to what?

Where is the good in all of this? Ultimately we want to find peace in acceptance of our life, to enjoy a lively real expectation of solid, long term relationships, to arrive at a deep hope that these terrible ongoing losses will lead us to something good.

Elizabeth MacKinlay found in working with healthy and frail seniors over the years that this challenging developmental task and goal of the senior years begins early with a maturing awareness of what she names as six closely connected, and at times simultaneous, tasks. This process she says begins with awareness and acceptance of

the challenge to name the ultimate meaning and purpose of our lives.

To achieve such a goal we must ask ourselves why and how we have applied the spirit of our life in the many decisions we have been free to make. It seems logical for theists that whatever is ultimate in one's individual and deeply personal sense of life is another name for God.

For humanists this reflection on the ultimate concern of life can be said to be a reflection on what is valued as intrinsic in one's own experience of that which is most noble in the human species. Disciplining ourselves to move our spirits above a fixation on the troubles and trials of our

past and current lives challenges us to accept our past and rejoice in naming the good, however limited, of each day.

This exercise is what Elizabeth MacKinlay refers to as the long difficult step necessary to achieve the adult maturity and spiritual development which enables us to give and receive love from those with whom we share our daily lives.

A sure sign of getting there is the ability to find and share humour in the trials and tribulations of daily life. It seems that the famous psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud, recognized that finding and sharing humour is a self-

liberating victory over the losses of life. We laugh when we can stand back and see the absurdity of a situation in which we are immersed—we see the self-evident telling detail of a situation which signals to others the absurdity in an event, process, or human gesture. In humour we demonstrate our ability to rise above our irritation and to bring others along with us in a shared moment of liberation.

Elizabeth MacKinlay refers to the authentic humour of the spiritually mature person as self-transcendent, trusting and hope filled. She sees from her own experience interviewing seniors that those who care for frail seniors must be able to recognize and share these precious moments of authentic humour.

Such shared humour she says is the gateway to intimacy because a shared hearty spontaneous laugh establishes a bond of trust and mutual recognition.

**Source: Patricia Marsden-Dole, PhD student, St. Paul University.**

In humour we demonstrate our ability to rise above our irritation and to bring others along with us in a shared moment of liberation.



## The music of your life

It can be quite surprising where inspiration comes from. The inspiration for this theme came one day, when I sat down to take a coffee break, turned the television on, and to my surprise was in the midst of a program featuring Sue Johanson, the well-known professional counsellor, whose field is in the areas of education and human relations, or sexuality. This day, she never said a word about sex, but did speak about music, and I stayed tuned.

The bottom line of her message was that everyone should make a CD of the 'Music of Their Life'. She connected the music of our lives to the stages of our life, in terms of our life experience. While this was certainly a new thought for me, I embraced the idea and began to make my list of songs, connecting them to the stages and experiences of my life. I cannot imagine a world without music, but I do recognize that there are many people who never get to hear sounds and music. Our world is full of music: birds sing and chirp, wolves howl, cats meow, frogs croak, whales sing and all manner of life make their presence known to us in a world of a variety of sounds. Some are very pleasant and others rather strange, but in a world of many variations, we certainly can call some of these sounds, music. The music we listen to and experience, often pushes our emotions and moods. It triggers various feelings, stirs needs, and stimulates dreams. Music feeds our life energy and soul, slowing us down, and bringing us to a place of calm. In a moment, all that can change and a march, polka, or waltz calls us to our feet and invites us to physically move around the room, sometimes with a tea towel still in our hand. Music can be as primitive as a distant drum beat a continent away, an Alpine rancher blowing a large Alp horn, or the neighbour whistling in the yard next door.

The other end of this spectrum takes us to the great symphonies of the world, with their Concert Masters, Operas, Soloists and Accompanists, carrying us to heights of euphoria. The range of possibilities seems endless. From this place, we may find ourselves traveling to a nursing home or hospital to visit a loved one, or friend, and find a

group of seniors/patients exercising, singing or even dancing. Many modern therapies work with music. It is also used with people who have mental restrictions, and is very helpful in bereavement therapy.

The power of music is endless. It can turn our tears into laughter and our laughter into mush. It can sober us quickly and then put a smile on our face. It can make us smile on the inside and cry on the outside at the same time. It has the strength to pull us from chairs to crank up the radio, in order to hear a favourite song. All music has great power over us and within us.

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Music is an international language: it crosses racial boundaries, social boundaries, linguistic boundaries, educational boundaries and visual boundaries. It can be masterfully complicated and very simple. It can stir us, move us, and unsettle us. It takes us where we cannot imagine, sometimes leaving us dangling in the clouds or dropping us into a pit. It plays with us, teases us, yet, we always come back for more.

At Saint Vincent Hospital, a couple of years ago, we had a group called "The Music of Your Life." Six patients signed up, for one hour, over a period of six weeks. The process was that we chose a piece of music for our first session, moving from our earliest memories, to the second week, linking us to early childhood. Since everyone participating was 'in house' we were able to have a week to choose something.

A participating patient made a disk of all the choices for that week, and each week. The earliest memories were difficult for some folk, but all found music for each life stage. Since a few of the patients were still young, around 40, they were allowed to pick an extra song or two in order to have the same number as the others. There were only two of us who were actually seniors; some of the others were likely to have a shorter life span.

We faithfully gathered each week to listen to and talk about the music. It could be anything, it was their choice. We heard, Bach, The Beatles, Pop Songs, a range of era's,

**Music** Continued on next page

Music from page 9, concluded.

and singers. We heard marches, love songs, and children's songs. We learned about each other through the choices of music made, loved and enjoyed. Both leadership people participated as well. We felt for each other in our stories, and we celebrated a very good experience.

At one point, we heard from a woman before she had her choice played, and she told us about a song which was important to her through many years. It was a piece of music that she had skated to years ago. She skated no more. Her stroke limited greatly her physical ability, but the joy on her face and in her voice as she recalled those wonderful memories touched us deeply.

In the Saint Vincent Hospital situation, the invitation for the last session included an option for participants to choose a piece of music they would like to have played at their funeral. All but one person did, which surprised me. Their choices were amazing. Three of these were: *Free as a Bird* by John Lennon, *Go Rest High on the Mountain* - Vince Gill, and *Who Wants to Live Forever* - Queen. Music can trip us up. Some years ago, I was watching a live figure skating event. The occasion, I do not recall except that it was probably a final tour for Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean, former British ice dancers and Olympic champions. As they started their program, I found myself with tears rolling

down my face. I was shocked, surprised and confused. What just happened? I did not know the music, and I know nothing about the art of skating and choreography.

When the program finished, I called a friend, and asked

if she knew the music used? Her reply was, yes. She thought it was Holst, and that it was the music from *The Planets*, and specifically, *Jupiter*. She was right! The CD was quickly purchased and played. Strangely, it did not trigger the same reaction. Why? I cannot say for sure, but I think that the combination of Holst's wonderful music and the beautiful artistic presentation of the dancers was simply overwhelming.

Whatever your music skills, interests or talents are or are not, it is hoped that you will consider the idea of making a list of the music that has deeply, simply touched, or influenced your life. Consider the context of the songs, the music and words that have come to life

through them. Consider making a CD or series of CDs for your own pleasure, memories, and perhaps a gift for your family, some of whom may have no idea what has been so deeply felt within your being. Such treasures are also a real source for families in times of celebration.

**Source: The Reverend E. Lois Wilson, Queens University, Retired Minister, The United Church of Canada.**



The success of The Council on Aging is founded on your continued support, participation and involvement. Become involved through active participation and sharing your voice to help support all seniors and their families in the Ottawa area. Together, we can make a difference. Please visit our website for further information about The Council on Aging.

**[www.coaottawa.ca](http://www.coaottawa.ca)**

## Working with the brain: Neuroarchitecture and healing places

**T**he human brain may be particularly well suited to processing natural forms, textures, and colours. When individuals are ill, weak, young/old, or compromised in some way, natural features in the environment may be especially important.

Meditation gardens adjacent to buildings or places of indoor worship create an outdoor space where worship can extend beyond the built environment. Gardens adjacent to workplaces enhance worker satisfaction. Plants enhance air quality and reduce perceptual stress in the built environment.

Humans find sanctuary (feel safe) sitting near the periphery of a room, focusing on areas of changing social interaction (e.g. where people may enter/leave, interact, or perform). If a periphery does not exist, consider creating a “half wall” or partial divider to create distinct spaces. Consider constructing entrances/exits within the “sight line” of a person seated.

Flexibility and the ability to control the environment (e.g. temperature, sound, lighting, furniture configuration) typically enhance the individual’s satisfaction with the space. Worship spaces that allow for alternating sitting/standing/ kneeling make the environment more accessible to individuals of varying capabilities. Sound enhancement/ sound control for those with auditory impairments keeps individuals involved in the dialogue or meaning of the event.

Crowding, sudden noises, bright lights, multiple choice-points, and lack of landmarks typically trigger stress responses in humans. Consider eliminating these automatic “triggers” for a fight/flight response.

The “built environment” contains features that typically do not exist in nature; right angles (90 degrees) draw the attentional system and may create perceptual stress. Placing a plant or some natural feature in a corner (a 90-degree angle) may add interest and reduce stress. Curved lines may add interest and draw attention away from angular lines.

Humans create “mental maps” by navigating the space; therefore, allowing for movement around complex environments will generally enhance wayfinding, reduce requests for directions, and create an environment that’s more manageable for diverse populations.

Landmarks within environments enhance wayfinding. “The advantage of visual landmarks is that they can serve to keep people ‘oriented’ as they move within and between different environments, such as rooms or hallways.”

Windows to outside landmarks are particularly effective in helping individuals remember their location vis-à-vis other prominent places in a city. A view to nature reduces cortisol levels, enhances cooperative

interaction, and enhances immune functioning.

Environments that incorporate both “sanctuary” and “opportunity” are typically the most satisfying for humans, incorporating “evidence-based design” and sound neuroarchitectural principles.

**Source: Margaret DeCorte, President, Association for Spirituality and Mental Health, Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre.**

A view to nature  
reduces cortisol levels,  
enhances cooperative  
interaction, and  
enhances immune  
functioning.





## Grief

I recently dropped by the grave of the mother of a friend of mine. I recalled performing the funeral service for her a few years ago. After spending a few moments and saying a few prayers I returned home and e-mailed my friend and told him what I had done. He thanked me and said that he thought of his mother every day.

Simply thinking of someone who has passed away can be a form of grief. Just this morning after I woke up and I was wandering around my house with my morning cup of coffee, I noticed a few of my deceased mother's things which I have kept. There was a twinge of sadness and loss, mixed with the pleasantness of merely thinking of my dear old lady.

If we have loved someone, we will grieve with their passing, whether we know it or not. People grieve in different ways, known or unknown to them, and in different degrees. Grief is a part of a healing process and as the years go by, I think the more painful aspects of grief will also begin to go away. However, I don't think that our hearts are meant to be completely healed in this life.

With my love for my mother as strong as it was, I often wondered how I could emotionally survive the very experience of losing her and then having to live without her. Presiding over many funeral services, I felt relatively secure with my distance from the bereaved, but I often was amazed at people's ability to emotionally recover from the death of a parent or loved one. Seeing this made me think that when my time came to say good-bye to my mother, I might be able to do it.

Again, grieving is not something to feel guilty about. Don't be concerned if you don't cry or don't cry enough or if you cry too much. I have talked with people who say that they have seen the spirit of their loved one, or seen signs of their presence, or signs that their loved one is watching over them. When my mother passed away, my sister went to a grief group and she seemed to take things harder than I did. Grief will cause some to struggle with depression. Some people have to deal with anger or confusion or only God knows what.

On the topic of healing during the grieving process, I think it is important to have some of the deceased person's possessions around. Sometimes this can add to the feeling that the deceased person is really not too far away. I have some of my mother's clothes in my closet, a dress she wore, a blouse of sorts. This might look a little strange, but my housekeeper understands.

Soon after my mother's death I would occasionally do a bit of crying while driving my car. This hardly occurs now. I would also say that it's OK to talk to the deceased when you are alone. But don't forget to talk to God and thank

Him for providing such a great place for our loved ones. There is no doubt that the painfulness and damage of grief is alleviated by faith. Faith gives us some important answers about life and about life after death, but not all the answers. That is why it's called faith.

Family life affects the degree and type of grief. Before the passing of my mother, I think our family was greatly lacking in some important areas of mutual trust, understanding and cohesiveness. There was missing also some basic love, and acceptance of the other. Consequently, it was very difficult for us to be united and get along together during my mother's dying process. These family difficulties become actually more painful than the gradual passing of my mother. After my mom died,

some of us went our own separate ways.

I grieve this loss also. Generally we always had enjoyable times under my mother's roof. We met frequently on Sundays for supper. Those days are gone and I am sorry to see them go. As her "three grown up children", we will never be one again. Or will we? After all, I am a person of faith. With some confidence, prayer and hope, who knows what is in the future? Our God is a God who always has good things in store for us.

**Source: Father Daryl Kennedy, Associate Director of St. Patrick's Basilica, Ottawa.**

If we have loved someone, we will grieve with their passing, whether we know it or not. People grieve in different ways, known or unknown to them, and in different degrees.

## Search for Meaning

Recently retiring from full-time employment, but not full-time living has allowed me time to reflect on my life, faith and future. My eclectic life has ranged from manual labourer, to an aero-engine technician, to a geriatric and palliative counsellor, to a Canadian Forces Officer and to my final vocation, a Roman Catholic deacon in Ottawa. It was the latter that provided me the greatest support of my search for the meaning of my life.

If the phrase “search for meaning” sounds familiar you may have read the book “Man’s Search For Meaning” by psychiatrist and Jewish holocaust survivor, Viktor E. Frankl. A quotation from his book resonates with me:

*For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself.*

However, in my case, my surrender is to God rather than another person, and as a result what I have gained has been peace, happiness and an appreciation of life.

The meaning of one’s own life is a continuous journey that requires time to reflect and put into perspective all the elements and events that have transpired to date. For the greater portion of my life I have been pursuing a career, numerous possessions, and raising a family. As a deacon I am called upon to serve and to preach. In order provide something meaningful I reflect on my human experience to illustrate God’s message. As a former officer I was intrigued by the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola who like me was a soldier that went to war and reflected on life. As a gift to my parish community I published a small book entitled “God is Outside the Wire” to share some of my experiences and reflections.

The Gospel reading from Luke (12:13–21) about the parable relating to materialism has a sentence that inspired me to again focus on my war experiences.

*“This very night your life is being demanded of you”.*

Like St. Ignatius I have intensely encountered the possibility of that moment, the possibility of death, but I also experienced an awareness and a great appreciation of life, including a recognition of what is really of value, people. In addition, I experienced a unique feeling of liberation; because I was able let my ego die which allowed me to

focus on the importance of relationships. Again, during my war experiences I encountered people who were either building higher and stronger socio-psychological walls or others who were tearing their walls down.

The materialism parable is about much more than the accumulation of things, or being possessed by things. It is the possessive relationship we have with things or other qualities of life that affects our relationships with both God and people. We can be possessed by such desirable qualities as wealth, power, popularity or intellect, but we can also be possessed by negative qualities as poverty or pain. For example, I know an individual who was very proud of

his intellectual capabilities until the day he met someone with greater abilities and when his intellectual capabilities could not solve his problem. Poverty can also be a comfortable constant state of being. The newspapers have been full of stories of people who have won the lottery but squandered their winnings returning to a life of struggle.

As I explore the meaning of my life I have come accept that life is more about relationships than things. Although, things are good, being possessed by things or other qualities of life can destroy what is really of value, our relationships with God and people. When I was in Afghanistan I reflected

on all the relationships that I could no longer enjoy. In a message back to my parish community I concluded that:

*These sacrifices of relationship have made me focus on the one true relationship I have left, my relationship with God. All the other important relationships have been stripped away from me and I feel very vulnerable, totally naked, no support or protection. That is not to say they are not important to me, on the contrary I am selfish and I want all these relationships back. It is just that God is the only one left for me right now. I have become focussed on Him and Him alone. He is my constant companion opening my eyes to what I need to see and understand now. I have endured a lot but I have also been blessed a lot with great personal insights.*

As we get older the meaning of our lives are reflected in the quality of our relationships. Make some good ones.

**Source: Deacon Bob Van de Larr, St. Mary’s and St. Edith Stein parishes.**





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## Age Friendly Ottawa

Ottawa is increasing at a fast pace as a large and growing senior demographic of 101,000 or 12.4% in 2006, is projected to reach 231,000 and to make up 20.3% of the population by 2031. This increasingly diverse population will have an impact on the quality of aging in Ottawa.

In collaboration with the city of Ottawa and other community partners,

*Age Friendly Ottawa* is working towards a vision of Ottawa as a city where the physical, social and service environments are responsive to the needs of older adults thereby maximizing healthy and active aging.

The project is based on the World Health Organization Age Friendly Cities Project and Public Health Agency of Canada Age-Friendly Communities Initiative.

There are eight focus areas: (1) Outdoor spaces and buildings, (2) Transportation, (3) Housing, (4) Social Participation, (5) Respect and social inclusion, (6) Civic participation and employment, (7) Communication and information, (8) Community support and health services.

An environmental scan will be completed in 2011. A number of focus groups will be conducted with a broad cross-section of older adults in order to establish a baseline assessment of Ottawa's age-friendliness. This process will help identify areas of strength and areas that need improvement. A community report-card on Ottawa's age-friendliness will be developed and clear priorities identified. The goal is to involve the full diversity of Ottawa's community of seniors in developing action plans and implementing the age-friendly initiatives.

**The Council on Aging of Ottawa** is the leadership organization for *Age Friendly Ottawa*. The COA is a bilingual, nonprofit, charitable voluntary organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of life of all Ottawa seniors.

## What is an age-friendly city?

*"An Age-friendly City is an inclusive and accessible urban environment that promotes active ageing."*

(World Health Organization)

In an age-friendly city, **policies, services, settings** and **structures** support and enable people to age actively by:

- ◆ recognizing the wide range of capacities and resources among older people;
- ◆ anticipating and responding flexibly to ageing-related needs and preferences;
- ◆ respecting their decisions and lifestyle choices;
- ◆ protecting those who are most vulnerable;
- ◆ promoting the inclusion of older adults in, and valuing their contribution to all areas of community life.

For more information on the Age Friendly Communities project, please visit:

The Council on Aging of Ottawa Web site at: [www.coaottawa.ca](http://www.coaottawa.ca).

Or PHAC Website at: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/sh-sa/ifa-fiv/2008/initiative-eng.php](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/sh-sa/ifa-fiv/2008/initiative-eng.php)

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# Become a member of The Council on Aging of Ottawa — Support the community voice for all seniors

The Council on Aging is a bilingual, non-profit, voluntary organization  
dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for all seniors in Ottawa.

☐ YES, I would like to join and make a difference to Ottawa Seniors in 2011!

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