Introductory Essay Module 3

Surrender: from Useful to Beloved

The central challenge of aging is surrender. After a youth spent growing in skill and an adulthood of mastery, the accomplishment that looms in our later years is that of letting go in many ways. We learn to accept the diminishment of bodily strength, of civic influence, of mental acuity, and eventually of life itself.

While the journey involves many forms of diminishment, it is not strictly a negative path. There are hidden joys and freedom to be found in release. Jesus said more than once that only those who become like children will enter the kingdom of God and those who lose their lives for his sake will find them. Aging is an invitation to embrace childlikeness as seen in dependence, simplicity, confident trust in God instead of self, and in surrender to God’s care. It is like the chute a kayaker must navigate as water enters a tight spot in a canyon. But after the tightness the kayaker enters the beauty and freedom of a broad place where the water is calm. The strictures of age are real, but so is the joy and freedom that await the one who navigates them well.

Loss of Meaning

Vincent Miller writes in *Consuming Religion* about the loss of meaning in symbols. Our culture is so consumed with image and performance, that we have lost the cultural wisdom that traditional cultures and religions carried. We do not know how to connect with any meaning beyond commodification. As he says, “Everyday life in the modern world lacks …an overarching symbolic realm. It is burdened by a series of estrangements: from labor, from community, and from nature.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We live increasingly detached from our material nature as well as from any community that might ground us in awareness of our mortality and help us discover its meaning. We need a symbolic realm to help us make sense of our life journey from birth to death. Our Christian faith is rich in symbolic and spiritual resources, but we have chosen instead a Christianity that is transactional and one dimensional, not robust enough to serve us on the perilous journey toward eternal life with God.

As a result, we are shipwrecked. We have only practical, economic and biological approaches to a challenge that requires us to have vision and sacred purpose. It is as if the shipwrecked sailor found materials for building a raft, but no means to give it direction or shape. A raft’s flat shape will not cut through the ocean’s swells; without a sail or rudder it is at the mercy of the current. If a soul is to be well equipped for its journey to God, that soul will need a sea chart and tools for navigation, sails to catch the wind, and a sturdy hull made to manage ocean swells. She or he will need to know where the shoals are and what sea monsters lie in the way. How can they steer toward the bright shore where they will find rest with God and avoid despair and bitterness?

Protestant Ethic

The diminishment of age forces us to depend on others and let go of our self-sufficiency. In our individualistic culture needing help feels shameful. As American Protestants, we have imbibed the protestant work ethic first described by Max Weber. Weber’s, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* argues that Calvinism isolated people spiritually, making it difficult for them to share their spiritual journeys. In fact, they lost any confidence that they could evaluate their spiritual journeys reliably. Emotions were suspect and so discounted as an aid to connecting with God. If one could not know the state of their own soul, neither could they rely on the encouragement of a friend. The Calvinist ethic then was opposed to the emotional insights of the Jesuits, the spiritual companionship of Celtic Christianity, and the humble reliance on God seen in Lutheranism, as well as the comforting rituals of Catholicism.

The genuine Puritan even rejected all signs of religious ceremony at the grave and buried his nearest and dearest without song or ritual in order that no superstition, no trust in the effects of magical and sacramental forces on salvation, should creep in. There was not only no magical means of attaining the grace of God for those to whom God had decided to deny it, but no means whatever.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Calvinism’s claim that salvation was solely in the hands of God and could not be reliably known in this world left no consolation except in pious work. Weber writes: “since Calvin viewed all pure feelings and emotions, no matter how exalted they might seem to be, with suspicion, faith had to be proved by its objective results in order to provide a firm foundation for the *certitudo salutis*.”[[3]](#footnote-3) If the only clue for believers to the state of their soul was their involvement in godly works, is it any wonder that present day Presbyterians struggle to know God’s love when they are unable to serve God actively?

Useful or Beloved?

This emphasis on active service is heard in the common refrain, “I just want to be useful!” and its counterpart, “I don’t want to be a burden.” Our Protestant American culture has so emphasized independence that we struggle to receive help even when we need it. Further, we struggle to see ourselves as loveable when we are needy or vulnerable. Sadly, many elders seem to fear helplessness more than anything. They experience great shame in their neediness.

Our theology tells us each person is made in the image of God and is “of more value than many sparrows.” (Matt. 10:31) But our culture permeates our psyches and shouts that we are not loveable when we are not useful. But is being useless the same as being worthless?

Many traditional societies honor their elders, valuing them for their presence, their embodiment of history, and their wisdom. Randy Woodley writes about the high value Native Americans have for elders:

Indians are taught to give seats to elders first, to assist by carrying things for them or by opening doors, to never send an elder away from a meal without a “to go” plate, and to always bring a gift when visiting an elder. Elders are considered to be the most important members of the Indian community. They are valued and respected a priori and for the vital role they play in the community.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Does the cultural value placed on elders ease their passage through surrender? Does it help them to age more peacefully? How could our communities better value our elders?

Constant Invitations

Perhaps surrender would not be so hard if it were once and for all. Most of us will be asked to surrender to age over and over. We will surrender our work and all the significance that it gives us when we retire, our prestige as a leader as we let go of even our volunteer work. We lose independence as we let go of driving, we may find using a walker to be both necessary and a blow to our dignity. We find our computers and phones increasingly difficult to manage. When our bladders become unmanageable, we surrender our pride and wear Depends. Eventually, our children may raise the question of whether we are safe living on our own. If we move to be nearer children or into a senior community, we surrender social and geographical familiarity for a new place and new routines over which we do not have control.

Moving often means letting go of a lifetime of possessions. Even if we are able to “age in place” without moving, we eventually surrender to being cared for.

Aging seems to present constant invitations to surrender and we have a choice about how to respond to them. Father Rolhieser shares the wisdom of Richard Rohr about this choice in his lectures on “Spirituality and the Two Halves of Life.”Rohr says we have three choices as we grow old. We can become the pathetic old fool who is busy pretending they are not old. This person is pursuing every possible means of holding onto at least the appearance of youth. Secondly, we can become an embittered old fool. This fool is consumed with anger. Life has not been fair, and they are holding onto their grudges. The third option is to become the holy old fool. This person is neither pretending to be young nor consumed with anger but receives the invitation to take the spiritual journey of later life.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Unafraid to be useless or helpless, this person embraces simplicity and childlikeness in the confidence that it is the key to the kingdom of God.

The surrender asked of us in aging is really a specific variation of the surrender asked of all Christians. It comes to us as a new aspect of Jesus’ teaching that to keep our life we must lose it. It gives a new shade of meaning to the parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price. We must be willing to trade everything for the kingdom. For the elderly, this means to let go of independence, choosing childlike trust, in order to find the joy of being beloved for ourselves instead of our accomplishments.

It is useful to recognize the central challenge of surrender because it is tempting to minimize it when it occurs. We are apt to encourage our loved ones that they can take Uber when driving has become a problem. When that encouragement comes to us, we may find ourselves struggling to articulate why it seems so inadequate. We are blind to the true size of the challenge. The presenting problem is like the tip of an iceberg. We do not see the bulk of it lurking below the surface. Those of us who care for the elders in our community should recognize the magnitude of this issue. As we honor their struggles, we may develop the awareness of our own need to surrender at the appropriate time.

A Symbolic Approach

Weber’s comment on the Puritan lack of ceremony connected to death was grounded in the practices and teaching of several centuries ago. But its legacy is an enduring suspicion of ritual and symbol that survives in evangelical circles. Even as we are finding our souls yearning for meaning, we do not know where to find it or how to integrate it with our Christian faith. Helen Luke’s book *Old Age* helps us by unearthing a universal pattern of the meaning of age in the stories of Odysseus, King Lear, and Prospero as well as the speaker of T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

She presents the challenge of surrender as the momentous trial that it is and describes the hardships these souls encounter in choosing to let go as well as the blessings that come to them as a result. Her approach dignifies the diminishment of age and honors the magnitude of the choices elders face. There is much we can learn from her perspective on the soul’s journey.

1. Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 20005), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Weber, 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*, Prophetic Christianity Series (PC) (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2012), 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Spirituality and the Two Halves of Life,* 3 vols. (Franciscan Media, 2021), https://vimeo.com/showcase/8489527, part 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Helen Luke, *Old Age: Journey into Simplicity* (San Mateo: SteinerBooks, Incorporated, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)