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Community-Developed

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Exploring the Archives of the Heart

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Introduction

Our lives have been enriched with the gift of grandchildren and I want to begin by sharing the questions that two of our grandsons asked me some time ago. The older one is in his 30's already and the younger one is in his early teens. The older one came back to Winnipeg from Ottawa on a visit, and posed this question, "So, Opa what's going on?" and more recently the younger one asked, while we were driving, "What's it really like to be old?"

These are incredible questions, aren't they? They can be answered quickly and superficially or they can lead to longer and more complicated conversations between younger people and their opa who is into his 82nd year already. More than that, these two questions can provide an important framework for all of us who are seniors as we reflect on our own lives.

As I pondered these questions I realized something about my own growing up and my earlier adulthood. I regret never having asked my aging parents those kind of questions. (I never knew any of my grandparents). My mom died at age 72 and my dad at 88.

There would have been time and opportunity but for some reason I never took advantage of it; and I feel not only I but they as well may have missed out on a wonderful opportunity, an opportunity to go beneath the surface and probe the depth of their own particular human experience and dare to draw the curtain aside on their inner life. But they didn't. My parents' self-disclosing that I miss in retrospect simply didn't happen.

In the last 30 years or so I have discovered that others have pursued the questions my grandsons asked, "What's it really like to be old?" and, "So, what's going on?"

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In fact the description of the elderly has shifted significantly in recent decades. What I mean is that in 1970 TIME's cover story was, "The Old in the Country of the Young" and spoke of the gradual devaluation of older people, as weak, powerless, frail, dependent, largely unemployed, introspective and often depressed."

And a Harris poll in 1975 found that the attitude toward the elderly was "We do not consider the aged to be very active, alert or contented. The elderly are relatively sedentary, inactive, increasingly lonely, growing sick and less useful citizens. They are un-alert, narrow-minded, ineffective, in poor health and suffering the miseries of loneliness." What a depressing characterization!

That was the general attitude in our culture in the 1970's. Similar attitudes had been expressed already 50 years earlier. Sir William Osler (died in 1919) e.g. wrote about "the relative uselessness of persons over sixty."

How would the elderly of those years have responded to the questions my grandsons asked? — What's it really like to be old? So, what's going on?

But things changed. In 1992 FORTUNE magazine wrote about *The Tyranny of America's Old.* There was no talk about weakness and ineffectiveness; there was talk about "pensioners on the golf course, geriatric avarice, elderly dandies and golden oldies."

Both depictions, some 20 years apart offer distortions and generalizations as well as a shift. Many people over 65 today are very much alive and well. They do not see themselves as individuals who are rotting away…they want to live better and they want to be more active and want to contribute to society above everything else.

The elderly today are more vigorous, better educated, more mobile and more affluent than earlier generations. Getting old is not seen as a disease but as an opportunity to have a stimulating and rewarding life.

These seniors would respond quite differently to my grandsons' questions than my parents would have when they were over 70!

Many of us who are over 70 nowadays have a quite different approach/attitude. We are saying yes to the relentless march of the calendar of our lives, knowing full well that we have fewer tomorrows ahead of us, than yesterdays behind us. We are definitely not a homogeneous group and we have a range of answers to give those who ask, "What's it really like being old?" and "So, what's going on?"

There's something else going on in addition to research and surveys. It seems that whatever the cultural trends are, there are always some who provide a more humorous spin to what aging is all about.

"Laughter may not cure but at the very least it reduces pain, it diffuses trouble, has no bad side effects, and its free."

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Humour is hope. Humour brings strength where there is weakness.
Humour does not contradict the importance of faith,
it intertwines with faith,
and releases endorphins that reduce pain. It energizes!
That was the view of Norman Cousins in *The Laughter Connection.*

While receiving chemo at Concordia some years ago, a group of us watched a Victor Borge video. We literally laughed our way through two hours of dripping. Humour did take our minds off our problems for a while.

The Golden Years
Everything hurts and what doesn't hurt doesn't work.
You feel like the night before and you haven't been anywhere.
You get winded playing chess.
When you're tying your shoes you wonder what else you should do while you're down there.
You begin to outlive enthusiasm.
A dripping faucet causes an uncontrollable bladder urge.
You sit in a rocking chair and can't get it going.
Your back goes out more than you do.

Another Story
An older couple is lying in bed one morning, having just awakened from a good night's sleep. He takes her hand and she responds, "Don't touch me." "Why not?" he asks.
She answers back, "Because I'm dead." The husband says, "What are you talking about? We're both lying here in bed and talking to one another." She says, "No, I'm definitely dead." He insists, "You're not dead. What in the world makes you think you're dead?" "Because I woke up this morning and nothing hurts."

Many of us seniors have learned that aging is definitely not for sissies and it is so much more than simply getting older. Aging is not an illness that somehow needs to be cured; we will never escape getting older, but how we get older is partly up to us. How we grow old is more important than how old we grow. And as someone has said, aging doesn't just happen to us; aging is what we are doing. In fact, we have a role to play in how we age.

I hope that those who are seniors as well as their younger families and their caregivers will continue to explore the meaning of aging with a great deal of curiosity, particularly about the expanding inner world and what we are actively involved in when we are no longer busy with other things.

Not by bread, nor by breath alone

In the temptation narrative of the gospel Jesus quotes the ancient book of Deuteronomy "Mortals do not live by bread alone", and I would like to add, "neither do they live by breath

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alone." There is more to aging than having a beating heart, there's more to aging than having a balanced diet, there is more to aging than simply marking time, more than being in a comfortable place, with food and medical attention, as important as these things are.

There is more to aging than being alive physically, breathing, having a heart beat, being aware of what and who is in our space with us, as important as these are.

There is a deeper and more profound dimension to life, to aging, than having the basics of physical life — bread and breath — as we age our concerns deepen and broaden — go beyond what may have been most important earlier in life.

It is as if we had a graduation ceremony that went unnoticed and uncelebrated, it snuck up on us, some earlier, some later, and presents us with a new curriculum whose focus is that multi-layered and complicated dimension that is central to aging - the agenda of all elders, that has to do with the invisible rather than the visible, with the internal rather than the external, with the spiritual rather than the material. Not that these didn't show up earlier in life, but they may have been crowded out by busy-ness, by lack of interest, by priorities, or by a seeming shortage of time.

One of the things that happens as we age is that busy-ness decreases, priorities shift, and lots of energy to do many things transforms gradually into less energy and less ability to do what we did earlier; and time, so scarce a commodity earlier, becomes ours in abundance, time drops into our laps sometimes as a delight, but often as a burden, with a fresh challenge.

And all of us know with increasing clarity, whether we accept it or not, whether we like it or not, that this gift of time is temporal indeed. "This living, this life, this lifetime, it doesn't last forever. It has an end. It was never supposed to last forever." (From *In the Shadow Box*, Christofer, 1977) I will expand on this a little later.

Two things we can do with this abundant gift of time in our senior years are: one, nurture the relationships we have with loved ones, family and friends, and two, deal with the questions that probe the past, our particular past — the physically invisible, the part we may have tended to earlier in life as well — but have the opportunity to do so now with greater intensity and with focused intentionality.

In addition to the downsizing that most seniors experience, i.e. the physical downsizing of their living spaces, seniors also simultaneously experience an enlargement of their inner space.

Recently, Karen Toole (FP) wrote about "your real living room" — the inner space that we inhabit emotionally, mentally and spiritually. This important living room does not shrink as we age; it grows and expands and every time we visit with a senior we have the opportunity not only to be with them in their confined physical space, but also to join them in the all important inner living room.

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What goes on in “the real living room” is what I am referring to as “exploring the archives of the heart”. Before I share some details about that I want to say something to those who are the children and grandchildren of the elderly, and their caregivers.

We may need to broaden our range of interest and deepen our awareness as we try to understand what the seniors we love are actually going through at this stage of their lives.

Our level of interest must reach beyond the questions of necessary finances, of adequate long-term care, beyond the concern in the self-satisfied comment heard after having brought a loved one to a care home, “Well, at least she will be comfortable here and not alone.”

Comfort, care and company are important to be sure, but they are actually of secondary importance in the big scheme of things. Our concern must shift to the invisible dimensions of comfort and care and presence.

Our concern must reach beyond the quick call or short visit in which we may ask the question, “How are you?” followed by the quick answer, “I’m fine.” That answer was quick indeed, immediate, and if we assume that was the full answer then we may have failed to understand that it was only the beginning of an answer; an answer that may take much longer to hear than we had hoped it might.

What I am suggesting is that as our elders move into their final stage of life their children and grandchildren are also challenged to increase the breadth of their concern and interest, to embrace the invisible agenda that is front and centre for all seniors, sometimes on the surface, often beneath the surface.

What I am suggesting is that the children of the elderly and their official caregivers may need to learn both the vocabulary and the attitude suited to the new agenda.

Some elders have earlier acquired the vocabulary that belongs to reflection and self-disclosure that are key to the private soliloquies of this stage in life, while others haltingly grope for the new vocabulary, even as they begin to deal with the new agenda, the issues that may have been suppressed or avoided earlier in life; the issues that come to mind relentlessly, unbidden, unsolicited and uninvited.

Now they beg for attention and it is good when family and caregivers tune in, give up on their own agendas, shift gears, slow down and engage this particular person, man or woman in whose real living room they now sit as honoured guests.

Some elders while struggling with the issues, are also struggling on another level, learning how to name that which is now most important, to name all that is beyond the scope of bread and of breath. Some of us have not acquired this language earlier.

Some elders will struggle with this dual challenge, they may feel self-conscious about it, but the impulse to disclose that which is in the depth of their being at this stage of life, even if it is

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done haltingly, imperfectly and with emotion, that impulse will be there. The impulse to share that which is remembered and reflected upon has moved to centre stage for them.

The impulse to share may feel strange and new to them, for they are in this for the first time in their lives; they may feel defensive about it, anxious about it, and they may well have to work to become gardeners of their own soil of memory and reflection. They are now the gardeners of a steaming compost heap of potential that waits to be tilled with care and with patience, with hope, and of course with courage and curiosity.

The question that adult sons and daughters of these seniors must face as never before is the one that Eugene Peterson said was so critical for all involved in ministry — that question is whether we will be able to overcome the strong urge to be efficient, to try to be as persuasive as bulldozers, when the key is to become gardeners — gentle, patient, willing to wait in hope as your loved seniors learn what is now central for them on their side of things as they learn the art of soliloquy, at first in silence and then audibly.

This new time in their lives is pregnant with possibility and potential — the elderly need to be encouraged in the direction of self-disclosure and reflection rather than self-protection and aloofness. In other words, whether they have been gardeners in their lives earlier, now they are learning the art of gardening the soil of their past, recalling, sorting things out, tying loose ends together, leaving some ends hanging loose and unresolved, hoping to reap the fruit of integration and wisdom. Being able to say tentatively at least, this has been my life, the life I have lived with others and with God. I am very much aware that the time of my departure is near, and I offer it to the Lord trusting in His grace.

This is a steep, very steep learning curve for every senior, and for all in their circles of love and concern. This is part of what is going on with us as seniors and with those in the generations that follow — we are all in the process of learning to be gardeners, working patiently not in the soil but with all that is beyond the visible and beyond the tangible, beyond all bread and breath.

This is the demanding challenge that all of us seniors face; this is the agenda that some who are younger will have the patience to explore together with them.

What is it that lies beyond comfort and care and company? What is it that lies beyond bread and breath? What is it that is noticed when we explore the archives of the heart while sitting in “the real living rooms” with the elderly?

The American writer, Frederick Buechner, has coined a phrase for this archival quest and speaks about “intentionally entering the room called remember.”

When I came across Buechner’s phrase, a room called remember I realized I had been there already, before knowing what to call it. Many of us seniors stumble our way into this archival vault, this living room called remember without intending to. It just happened, seems to be part and parcel of what we do as seniors. As we rummage around this archival deposit we recall, we review and we begin to make sense of our lives. This is the major agenda of our

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later years, the major challenge not only for seniors themselves but also for their loved ones and their caregivers.

Beyond Bread and Breath

One of the clearest messages most writers about aging have to share is that in the end all seniors need to pay attention to the recurring impulse to dwell in the past wholeheartedly and "pay attention to our lives" — to the people with whom we were closest, to the things that happened long ago and continue to impact us in the present. According to Buechner, this is the best, and most authentic, way to experience oneself and God.

It's worth mentioning that going beyond bread and breath, beyond the visible to the invisible, means that we are promoting something we may have thought of as negative earlier — living in the past. We have been told, don't live in the past, but now we are encouraged to deliberately live in and with our past.

To explore the archives of the heart means that we will deliberately enter the "room called remember," we will live in our past on purpose. We hope that our loved ones and our caregivers and even our casual visitors will notice that we are indeed living in the past. This is one of the key things that is going on; this is what we ought to be busy with when we are no longer busy.

This is the point — not that we stray into this remembering room unawares but that we decide we will spend time there on purpose. Katie Funk Wiebe in *Border Crossing* agrees when she says, "the soil of memory needs to be tilled or it becomes hard-packed. Then it is no longer useful. And so I dig and dig." (155)

Some seniors may resist taking this step but it is a required course in the last semesters of life. It takes time and patience and each of us remembers at our own speed.

Once we get started we remember the places, the people, the hymns and the difficulties, the successes, all of the noteworthy times of our lives, the particular lives we have lived. This remembering comes at us helter-skelter, unorganized, but it comes.

As we remember the data of our lives, often with the help of a photo or a question we will find ourselves going a little deeper, exploring how we felt about things, what they meant to us then, and what they might mean to us today.

Notice that this kind of remembering cannot be hurried, and events and people and emotions will be interspersed with pauses, silence; waiting, not anxiously watching the clock (such activity may break the spell and the power of the moment). Remember we are gardeners, not bulldozers.

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Gardeners will notice sentences and phrases coming to the surface: “It was wonderful to… But I never learned to … I used to think, but now … I wished I would have kept my mouth shut … I wished I had spoken up, it was the right thing to do… .”

We will recall *kairos* moments, times packed with meaning or with dread and maybe regret. We may recall times where we were filled with fear and anxiety as well as moments of deepest contentment and *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness).

We may remember questions we struggled with long ago and realize that some questions still have no resolution. “Life often saves its most difficult questions for the end.” We may also remember that we hesitated to voice some of our questions, for we were not at all sure it was safe to do so.

“The unanswered questions are not nearly as dangerous as the unquestioned answers.” Mark Roncace

Many of our seniors will intertwine the remembering of their stories with the retelling of a biblical story or two. And they may name an experience with others, be it painful or pleasurable, as having been an encounter with God. The retelling of life’s narratives increases self-insight as well as awareness of God’s presence.

We may remember the ancient story of twin brothers, Jacob and Esau meeting after a long estrangement and Jacob saying, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God.” Or, Joseph telling his brothers who had betrayed him, saying, after he has identified himself to them, “God sent me ahead of you.”

Or, we might recall Paul and Silas in the stocks, in danger, but daring to sing hymns of praise at midnight. Or, we recall the words of a Psalm that now seems to fit perfectly with our experience.

Exploring the archives of the heart is tilling the memories that are ours, we may discover that though the past is over and done with, it’s not done with us at all. The past continues to shed light on our path today. Some remembering will be painful and some will be pleasurable. Some will still bring tears to our eyes, and some will bring praise to our lips.

“We are the bearers of secrets we have never told, and the guardians of memories more precious than gold and sadder than an empty house.” Buechner.

Eli Wiesel, who remembered the holocaust, spoke of memory as our “most intimate teacher” — about ourselves, our past, our upbringing, other people and God. Augustine said, “Lord all that I have discovered about you I have done so by remembering.”

So, Opa what’s going on? What are you busy with when you are no longer busy? This is part of my answer to my grandson’s query. We are enrolled in a course called remembering, living in the past and remembering. Focussed on that which is “beyond bread and breath”, beyond that which is commonly associated with comfort and care and company.

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I have another answer to the question. In addition to memories and the fears and questions intertwined with them there is another issue, one that we wrestle with from time to time — mortality. Mortality is what Jacob's word to his adult son is all about,"I am about to die."

I remember visiting a member in the hospital one morning. She was sort of sitting up in bed, we greeted each other and she said it directly, "This is the end of the line for me." "What do you mean?" "The doctor was in this morning and told me that I will soon die."

I was quiet for a bit and then I asked, "If that's the case, what would you like to do between now and then?" She had thought about it already. "I would like to have communion with my family and a few friends here in this room."

A day or two later we gathered around her bed and celebrated the Lord's Supper, remembering the original event, when the disciples took the cup and the bread with Jesus, knowing that he was to die shortly. We thanked God for that first Lord's Supper and prayed that she would have a peaceful, blessed dying experience, knowing that she would be supported and attended to.

This woman's funeral service was a sad, but faith-filled celebration. She was not yet 60 years of age, but she had discovered that she had a significant role to play in her own dying.

Leo Tolstoy has written an insightful book, *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch,* in which he writes of a different and much more difficult experience. He tells about "the terrible solitude of a death made lonely by withholding the truth."

"This solitude through which he was passing as he lay with his face turned to the back of the divan, a solitude amid a populous city, and amid his numerous circle of friends and family, a solitude deeper than which could not be found anywhere, either in the depths of the sea or in the earth." Ivan could share his terrible knowledge with no one and he had to live thus, alone without anyone to understand him or to pity him." (Sherwin Nuland, p. 245 *How we die*)

"The old scenario that so often casts a shadow over the last days of people who die of cancer — we knew — she knew — we knew she knew — she knew we knew — and none of us would talk about it when we were all together. We kept up the charade to the end." (Sherwin Nuland, p. 266 *How we die)*

While there are family circles within which talking about dying is happening, there are others who want to avoid this necessary conversation.

Dr. David Kuhl, "Talking about dying is very difficult. We are afraid that talking about death beckons it. We all know death is inevitable, it both fascinates us and it disturbs us, but we don't want it to happen."

A woman in her 80's talking with her adult daughter put it this way, "I think I'm going to die soon." Her daughter responded, "Mom, don't talk like that."

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Years ago our youth pastor spoke on a Sunday morning, using a Latin expression for his sermon title, *Memento Mori.* It was not until he was well into the sermon that he explained. The monks of the Cistercian Monastery in the 13 th C were committed to silence except that when they passed in the hall, they could say to each other, *Memento Mori,* Remember that you will die.

Studies show that all seniors think consciously of their own deaths, but that many have not learned to verbalize their thinking and allow it to be heard by another. How empowering would it be if seniors and those who visit and care for them could break the code of silence and utter words about dying.

I wonder whether we need coaching about this kind of thing. Is it imaginable/possible that friends or family could talk about it at the dinner table? Sharing our earliest recollections of death, our most recent experience of death, how our parents died, or our most painful memory of death?

An Arab proverb says, “Death is a black camel that lies down at every door. Sooner or later you must ride the camel.” Can we share with others what it is that we fear about dying? Can we share with others how death was dealt with in times past — with preparation of the body at home, digging the grave, having the viewing at home? Wearing the black armband for a year?

Can we acquaint ourselves with the topic of death and grieving by imagining what it took for Jacob to tell his adult son, “I am about to die?” and also imagining what it took for Joseph to be able to hear his father speak that way?

Can we learn from others? Mitch Albom’s, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Schmitt’s, *Dialogue with Death,* or Maggie Callanan’s, *Final Journeys?*

Can we accept help with grieving our own end by going through denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance as Kuebler-Ross outlined it?

Back once more to the questions my grandsons asked: “What’s it really like being old?” and “So, Opa, what’s going on?” What are you busy with when you’re no longer busy? The short answer goes like this — we are busy exploring the archives of the heart. For the longer answer, you’ll have to stay a good while.