

# Religious and Spiritual Supports for Late-Life Meaning

By Susan McFadden and Rabbi Cary Kozberg, guest editors

*... talk of God, talk of faith, makes people squirm. They'd rather gab about their new Hummer . . . or American Idol—anything but religion. If you're one of those who's started nibbling at eternity—like some lowly but holy mouse—there's no lack of "educated" folks who'll look at you as if you're crossed-eyed and dangerous. . . . But religions, if nothing else, are metaphors for how we choose to lead our lives, how we choose to defy the empty cultural whirlwind. Our lives begin in mystery . . . and end in mystery. In between we try to explain to ourselves, all 6.5 billion of us who are wedged onto this improbable planet—6.5 billion potential paths to the holy.*

—Jennings, 2008

These words were written within a week after the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008) reported that 60 percent of Americans say that religion is “very important” to them, and 84 percent of Americans affiliate with one of hundreds of religious denominations. At the same time, 44 percent of American adults are reported to have switched their religious affiliations at some point. However, this statistic does not necessarily confirm that people are becoming less religious or less “believing.”

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*For many, religion and spirituality are important resources for coping with the challenges of aging.*

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Rather it indicates that they are still convinced that there is such a thing as religious truth: Instead of passively accepting the faith of their birth, they prefer to make the journey to seek out a religious truth that fits (as Jennings suggests).

Indeed, our lives begin and end in mystery. That mystery has spawned questions that the myriad religions, philosophies, and literatures down through human history have addressed:

- What does it mean to live?
- What does it mean to die?
- What meaning or purpose does existence have?
- Why do we suffer?
- Is death a finality, or can humans overcome their mortality?

To these questions, add the all-encompassing question, put forth succinctly by Hebrew Scripture: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9).

For those of us raised in a predominantly Western cultural milieu, Genesis 3—explaining both human sentience and human mortality—is a formative narrative, telling how it is that human beings are both like and unlike God, and *why* it is that we are able (and feel the need)

to “nibble at eternity.” Each of us has a “potential path to the holy”; each of us (to paraphrase the ancient Talmudic sages) has a capacity to respond to “the Voice that beckons,” according to our own individual makeup.

And while our individual “potential paths” may vary depending on factors such as gender, cultural background, and individual life experiences, they also vary with age. Growing older may decrease *physical* capacities, but it also offers the opportunity to increase—and reenergize—our spiritual capacities. Indeed, those of us who have any sort of regular contact with older adults are regularly amazed and inspired by how they respond to the Voice: how their “nibblings at eternity”—their appetite to connect with that which is transcendent—keeps them connected to their loved ones and their surroundings, while animating their lives with continued purpose and thus reaffirming them as creatures of beauty and worth.

To be sure, it should be noted that while all of these potential paths may be spiritual paths, they may not be affirmed as *religious* paths. Though the two are often equated, religion and spirituality are not necessarily synonymous; spiritual needs are not always the same as religious needs. While many may choose to identify with a particular religious faith as a way to address internal spiritual concerns and needs, others may strongly feel called by “an internal spirit” that directs their values and helps them authentically respond to how they hear “the Voice.” Thus it is erroneous and unfair to assume that people automatically have no connection to, or interest in, spiritual matters, just because they do not assent to a set of religious beliefs or choose not to identify with a particular faith community. As is more and more the case, individuals may prefer not to identify with “organized religion” yet still be enriched and edified by other activities that resonate in the soul: listening to music, reading a book, discussing philosophy or politics, watching a sunset, spending an afternoon in the park, or spending time with loved ones.

For, unlike religion, which is usually identified with set beliefs and rituals, “spirituality” has come to be understood in broader terms, perhaps with as many definitions and descriptions

as there are people! Among the more common and useful descriptions are the following:

- That which brings meaning to life and that which forms values for an individual (Barton, Grudzen, and Zielske, 2003).
- How we live out the relationship we have with a higher being or what we claim to be meaningful in life (Fischer, cited in Barton, Grudzen, and Zielske, 2003, p. xi).
- “[T]he internal sense of wellness and the sense of commonality among all people. In religious terms, it is that aspect of a person that is created in God’s image . . . the process of connecting to our sense of meaning, value, and purpose to create a sense of identity” (Seicol, quoted in Barton, Grudzen, and Zielske, 2003, p. xi).
- “[T]he affirmation of life...a relationship to God, self, community and environment . . . that nurtures and celebrates wholeness” (National Interfaith Coalition on Aging, quoted in Barton, Grudzen, and Zielske, 2003, p. xi).

What all of these descriptions share is a focus on bringing meaning and values to life, affirming the person, while connecting with someone/something beyond the individual—themes which are beautifully illustrated by our contributors throughout this issue.

As the editors of this issue, we should note that although each of us is a person for whom religious and spiritual matters are central to how we live in the world and make sense of it, we are keenly aware that not all *Generations* readers share this outlook. We also realize that the topic of religion and spirituality may be challenging, disconcerting, even taboo. Those for whom such matters are not personally important may find it quite difficult to understand, much less appreciate, some or all of the ideas, concepts—even language—expressed in this issue. In addition, we know the polarizing rather than unifying effect the topic of religion and spirituality has had recently on politics and culture, and how the subject can often aggravate, rather than improve, relationships among individuals and among groups.

Nevertheless, for the last twenty years, conferences and publications of the American Society on Aging have offered forums for discussing how work with older people raises profound existential and religious questions. Those of us

who have been involved in this effort have held these discussions with a spirit of openness to listening and learning from one another regardless of our commitments to very different faith traditions, or to none at all. We have learned how to talk about spiritual strengths and spiritual challenges as we discuss our professional work, and we have learned how to have these conversations with elders. Despite the polarizing political atmosphere of recent years surrounding the topic of religion, gerontological practitioners have courageously acknowledged the significance of older people's faith and spirituality and, in many ways, have encouraged their "home" disciplines to be more mindful about the importance of taking religion and spirituality seriously.

Indeed, the subject of late-life meaning shaped by religiousness and spirituality is not a "luxury" for gerontological research, practice, and policy. Instead, as the articles in this issue clearly demonstrate, older adults' religious beliefs and practices, and their experiences of spiritual growth and community connections, represent core strengths and resources. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers have been telling us for over two decades that religion matters to older people. Many identify their faith as their most important support for coping with the trials and tribulations of aging. However, often people working with elders in a variety of settings do not know how to talk about religion and thus feel anxious or uncertain about what to say when a client mentions it. It is our hope that the articles in this issue will help to reduce some of that anxiety.

#### IN THIS ISSUE

In organizing the articles in this issue, we decided that we needed to begin by examining the questions of "what" and "why": What do we mean when we talk about religion and spirituality, and why do they matter both to older people and to us as professionals in gerontology?

Next, we wanted to address the many creative ways that faith communities are responding to the aging of our society. We are aware that we could not include articles about all faith traditions, but we believe that we have provided a good sample of perspectives on how gathered

communities of believers are meeting the needs of aging people. A strong theme in this section is collaboration—collaboration between judicial bodies and local congregations, between congregations and academic institutions, among congregations of varying faith traditions, between clergy and parishioners, and among generations as elders mentor the young.

The third section of this collection examines several specific aspects of spiritual life. We are aware that we could not cover everything in these articles, but we believe that we have highlighted important spiritual practices of doing the hard work of forgiveness, structuring prayer and ritual into everyday life, and working with other people similarly motivated by religious commitments to help to repair a broken world.

Finally, in the last section, we circle back to the original "why" question and present articles that inform gerontological practitioners about the process of integrating our understanding of the importance of religiousness and spirituality into our work with older people.

Researchers from a variety of backgrounds—including sociology, psychology, epidemiology, social work, and nursing—have also been actively seeking to understand the contributions of religious beliefs and spiritual practices to a sense of late-life meaning and purpose. A recent volume of the *Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Aging* (Ellor, 2008) provides an excellent overview of studies conducted in many of the disciplines that form gerontology. Neal Krause (2006) reviewed the latest research on religion and late-life health in the sixth edition of the *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging* and covered topics like religious attendance, prayer, religious coping, forgiveness, social support from congregations, and religious meaning. In addition, the sixth edition of the *Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences* also contained a chapter reviewing research on religion and aging from a sociological perspective (Idler, 2006). The chapter addressed views of aging in various faith traditions, cohort differences in religious involvement, the effects of societal aging on religious institutions, congregational programs that reach out to older people, and the ways that congregations become communities of memory for elders. These volumes have long been viewed

as reliable reference works on the most current and cutting-edge gerontological research, so it is significant that in their most recent iterations, each contained a chapter on religion.

In surveying the remarkable proliferation of research on religion, spirituality, and aging in the last two decades, we are both impressed by the scope of topics studied and humbled by the observation that there is so much left to learn.

To offer just one example, much more attention must be paid to the actual content of older people's beliefs and how it shapes their daily lives and decisions about personal and social issues like use of resources, both their own and those of the earth. We also need to learn more about how religious beliefs and spiritual practices shape older adults' behavior toward others, including their own circle of friends and acquaintances as well as those throughout the world whom they will never meet. Older people's commitment to "mission," whether defined in terms of meeting the basic needs of daily life or of promoting religious beliefs, has been documented anecdotally but has not been empirically studied.

For example, Rabbi Dayle Friedman (2001) offered a wonderful description of the performance of *mitzvot* by nursing home residents who "adopted" a young Ethiopian Jew who had fled to Israel. We know that among Protestants, those who are active in local churches are more likely to volunteer (Park and Smith, 2000). Considerable research has also shown that community service by older people, especially those involved in religious congregations, has a protective effect on their health and psychological well-being (Brown, Consedine, and Magai, 2005; Gruenewald et al., 2007; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003; Oman, Thoresen, and McMahon, 1999). However, in this research on voluntarism among older people, we find little to no effort made to discern the motivating force of specific religious beliefs and spiritual resources like the *Mitzvah* model described by Friedman.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

As we reviewed the final drafts of the articles for this issue of *Generations*, we noted a number of cross-cutting themes that have impli-

cations for various forms of research and practice with older people, as well as for our own lives since we are all aging. Many of these articles present compelling arguments about the gifts of the world's faith traditions for aging people and their societies. Religious faith tells a different story about aging, a story that can provide hope in societies dominated by ageist attitudes. For example, we know how greatly people fear any form of dependency, and yet as Sapp shows in this issue, the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam declare that all people are essentially dependent on one another and on the source of Being. Additionally, Sapp describes how these faith traditions counter the dread of mortality by offering a different story about the limits of life, as well as hope that transcends the limitation imposed by death. Nakasone also indicates how ancient beliefs and practices—in this case, from Asian traditions—can provide new models for aging. In addition, Nakasone points out how religious rituals, and the stories that infuse them, provide meaning both for aging people and for their societies, a point echoed in Address's article about Judaism.

A number of articles in this issue demonstrate that one of the most important ways religious faith affects aging people and their social worlds is through offering a new way of telling stories about our own aging and the aging of our loved ones. Achenbaum and Lentz provide a unique and personal view of their own friendship, and, by telling their story, they show how friendship can nurture spiritual development. Rost sets the personal story of his experience as an aging Catholic priest within a larger context of the way aging priests with compassion for elders can provide much needed pastoral care. Ramsey's stories arise from the intimacy of the pastoral counseling encounter, while Minnix grounds his story in the experience of his dying mother receiving meaningful pastoral care in long-term-care and medical facilities. Richards urges the telling of stories by people sharing care with others. Overall, one can read these and other articles in this issue as reflections of the healing power of narrative in human life, especially when personal narrative is connected to sacred narrative.

One of the strongest themes coursing through these articles is the way religious beliefs and traditions, along with a variety of spiritual practices, bring people together in communities and offer older adults important roles within those communities. Spirituality is nourished in community, even in communities of the frail and the ill, as noted by Minnix. In the first article of this collection, Atchley examines the role of elders within community and the much-needed spiritual guidance they can offer. Secular culture rarely speaks of the responsibilities of older people to their social worlds. Instead, we hear all too often a message of no responsibility communicated either through advertisements about leisure living or through fear-ridden tales of loss and dependency. Religious traditions, on the other hand, offer older people important roles as mentors to others, a point clearly made by Ajrouch in her description of Muslim communities, and in Patrick Cullinane's examples of older people's work for social justice through faith-based groups.

In thinking about the ways older people serve their communities, it is important to remember that individuals and communities interact within particular contexts affected by public policies and political decisions. This point is brought into focus by Ellor, whose article on faith-based initiatives provides details about the history of government support for congregations that provide social services.

Older adults want meaningful roles in their communities, including their faith communities. They do not want merely to be entertained by a "senior ministry" program. In fact, according to Address, they do not want congregations to create programs at all if they are a substitute for deep engagement with spiritual matters related to the lessons and challenges of a long life. The articles in this issue strongly suggest that older adults are open to expanding their spiritual horizons and being enriched by learning about forms of spirituality that may not be emphasized in their faith traditions. This desire will become more widely expressed as the current cohort of middle-aged people ages. They are, after all, the people who ignited the debate over the relationship between religion and spirituality. We find in several articles, in particular

those by Atchley and by Achenbaum and Lentz, indications of the potential for spiritual exploration and growth that can occur at the same time that people hold onto their commitments to particular faith communities.

Although the story of aging is often given a negative spin by popular media, the articles collected here reveal its vast potential for significant spiritual growth that offers to older people glimpses of ineffable mystery. Old age lived within faith traditions also affords opportunities for healing old wounds wrought in painful human relationships. Thus, it is instructive to note how many of the articles collected here address the theme of forgiveness. Ramsey deals with forgiveness directly, stating that it is often the need that brings people to pastoral counselors. Oberle identifies forgiveness as one of the central themes of prayer, and he argues that older people have the opportunity to sanctify time through developing their prayer lives. In her article about sharing care, Richards shows that people in relationships structured around care activities must address the issues that call for forgiveness. Often the spiritually aware social worker or nurse is the point person for guiding an elder in the difficult but necessary work of forgiveness.

In all of our interactions with older people, we must be sensitive to the power of language. Ramsey makes it clear that individuals of different faith traditions will vary in their understanding of the word "forgiveness." Barbara Cullinane sensitizes readers to the need to listen carefully for older adults' hints that they are open to discussing their life challenges in a spiritual context. Just one word might open the door to such a discussion. Richards is also aware of how language can structure relationships, which is why she suggests that we give up the language of "caregiving" and substitute the notion of "care sharing," since that implies reciprocity. In other words, Richards wants us to remember that even the frailest elders still have something to give us; sometimes that gift is their frailty itself, which shows us our capacity for compassion.

The last article in this issue offers the important reminder that integrating spirituality into late life can be a source of joy and zest for living.

We are often so somber when we speak of religious and spiritual matters, and indeed, they do engage us quite seriously with difficult and challenging concerns like the fact of our mortality. What gets lost, sometimes, is the lightness of being that can flow from being open to the spiritual realm, a lightness that Chenfeld captures beautifully in her personal account of growing old with spirit.

We have been honored to work with the remarkable group of authors who contributed to this issue of *Generations*. We are also grateful to the editorial board for giving us the opportunity to gather these authors together to reflect on a topic that provides meaning, comfort, hope, and joy to so many older people. ❧

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