
On Christian Maturity

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I understand the term "Christian maturity" here to mean "the particular expressions/experiences of Christian faith in a person of advanced age." Although I have not yet reached the advanced age that would qualify me as an authority on the subject, I am, perhaps, near enough to it to offer my reflections.

One might assume that advanced age brings with it both greater spiritual and psychological maturity. From my observations, however, growing older does not guarantee either of those desirable ends. No doubt years of experience carry with them some acquisition of wisdom not available to the young. Mistakes (and successes) made in life should produce their own wake of wisdom. But even that is not certain; I know some people of advanced age who seem never to have learned from their experience. To map the faith-terrain of the older Christian person is thus a difficult task.

Perhaps it will help to begin with one of my poems. In it an elderly man on a park bench speaks to us about his life:

I am no longer lithe or fast
Can't swim or cycle like I dast—
Sometimes, hardly even wobble.
Nevertheless, I still can hobble
To places left for me to see.
So don't feel sorry, now, for me.

There was a time I looked at those
Who could not do the things I chose
As old decrepits, trashbin things.
They were earthbound; I had wings.
Now, when I see the young afly,
I see how time has passed me by,

And I regret my early pride.
Thinking my glory would abide,
I did not think what was to come;
Proud of my strength, my mind was numb.
Now that I'm older, I can see
How foolish that way came to be.

No use to look for remedy,
But face whatever is to come,
And savor life as it remains

With remnant joy amid the pains
That come with age's hazardry.
It's cause for rejoicing just to be.

The poem describes some of the effects of aging. We see first of all the erosive effects of time on the body: with age comes limited energy, strength, mobility, and flexibility. One can no longer do with ease the physical feats of youth. Any physical activity an elderly person undertakes must be approached with caution and a sense of limitation. Second, we note that a reversal has taken place: whereas in youth the speaker tended to scoff and laugh at the limitations of older people, he now finds himself identified with them and sees the folly of his scorn. There is an implication that other areas in life may thus suffer a reversal of attitude and ideology as well. Third, as a consequence of that reversal, he has acquired some wisdom about earlier behavior, rendering him perhaps a bit more compassionate and understanding than he used to be. Fourth, a part of that wisdom is his willingness to accept and resign himself to limitations, while still rejoicing in the life that remains. Finally, we note throughout his speech a vigor and liveliness of inner spirit despite the limitations within which he now lives.

The poem has thus given us a glimpse of the problems and attitudes which aging brings. It gives no hint, except in the Pauline note of joy in the last stanza, of how those problems and attitudes relate to Christian faith. How do the problems and attitudes of aging impinge upon or affect one's faith? How does faith respond to them?

The recognition that with age one grows physically more vulnerable underscores one's awareness of the fragility and brevity of life. At my father's death many years ago, I remember assenting to the words I read in Psalm 103. Now they seem even more accurate:

As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.

Whereas the young normally may look forward to extended years, the elderly see future years diminishing and sense mortality in a fresh and more urgent way. Every day is a gift for which to be thankful. With the diminishment of days and possibilities comes a greater sense of dependence upon God's love and grace and a pervasive gratitude that invigorates faith. The "closer walk with God" of the old hymn now seems even more relevant and more necessary than it did earlier. The thankfulness for continued being and the gratitude for extended time motivate one to a more intensive devotion. Prayer, worship, Communion, and Scripture become more vivid and meaningful.

One hopes that the reversal of attitude the speaker described in the poem may also happen to us. Recognizing the limitations of one's earlier outlook leads to a humility in the confrontations of life, and to a compassion towards others who may be ideologically, socially, or culturally different. Attractive as it is to

accept the poem's implication that such change is always positive, most of us have probably observed the reverse of that in our aging comrades. Too often, as we grow older, we become more rigid, more prejudiced, more conservative theologically, politically, and economically. Robert Frost has nicely captured this fact in his little poem, "The Span of Life":

The old dog barks backward without getting up.
I can remember when he was a pup.

In other words, in the process of aging, there is the possibility of negative as well as positive change. Neither, of course, is an inevitable consequence of the process, but in order to forestall the negative, one must be consciously vigilant and encourage positive, active open-mindedness. In this task of "renewing the mind," one looks with hope to the promise in the words of John Bell's liturgical song:

Behold, Behold, I make all things new,
Beginning with you and starting from today.
Behold, Behold, I make all things new,
My promise is true, for I am Christ the Way.

The new being promised forestalls the ossification of mind and spirit that may come with age. Receptively alert, we look to that hope as never before.

The resignation expressed by the speaker at the end of the poem tells us something else, perhaps about the spiritual life of the elderly. When nothing can be done about the circumstances of diminishing physical strength and time, there appears a choice: what attitude to adopt toward these emergencies? Shall anxiety or peace rule the mind?

Anxiety may result from looking both backward and forward. Looking backward, we ask: has life been worthwhile? Has work been meaningful and useful to others? Have one's relationships been merciful and just? Could it all have been done better than it was? Has one left a legacy worthy of our calling in Christ? Looking forward, do we see darkness and annihilation, or resurrection and light? Is there life after this life? What will it be like? Are there consequences there for how we have lived here?

These questions give rise to careful self-examination: looking backward and forward, we turn to the promises of the faith. Those parts of Scripture and doctrine to which we paid little attention in our youth now become vital and comforting. In assessing the past, peace is ours when we see that our ultimate standing with God comes not from the durability or magnificence of our achievements but from God's unconditional love and grace. We see that forgiveness is available for our haunting follies and mistakes, if they are admitted in repentance. The trust we place in God's promises eases the burden of the mystery of not knowing how our questions may ultimately be answered.

The questions we raise can thus be a source of renewal as we accept and implement the promises of the faith. Moreover, they reveal the mind as alive and growing. As long as we continue to ask questions and seek for answers, we

are not intellectually or spiritually dead. Curiosity and the willingness to be open to new ideas and fresh solutions to life's emergencies are desirable marks of the "mature" mind in both senses of the word. Thus we may, with God's help, fulfill the summons of Ephesians 4:23, "to be renewed in the spirit of your minds," and step into the assurance Paul gives us when he says, "Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16b).

It is the inner nature of the speaker in the poem that finally claims our attention. Throughout his speech, he reveals a liveliness of inner spirit despite the growing limitations of his outer nature. That may provide us with a valuable insight, reminding us that in dealing with our older comrades we need to look past that "wasting away" in the outer person, and honor the experience, wisdom, ability, and dignity of the inner person. The vigor expressed by the speaker is reminiscent of another elderly speaker in "I Look Into My Glass," a poem by Thomas Hardy:

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, "Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!"

.....

But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.

We have God's promise, as voiced by Paul, that our hearts need not shrink with age, that through God's grace we may, as we grow older, nourish and enlarge them. Then, to hear Psalm 103 again, as we "bless the Lord," and "do not forget all his benefits," we may know that the Lord

... forgives all your iniquity,
... heals all your diseases,
... redeems your life from the Pit,
... crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
... satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Then we may be assured that, although our outer frame is fragile, there are within the throbbings of a youthful spirit.