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The age of wisdom

Diane Scharper | Aug. 31, 2011

Author explores spirituality of ?Adulthood II?

COMPOSING A FURTHER LIFE:
THE AGE OF ACTIVE WISDOM
By Mary Catherine Bateson
Published by Knopf, $25.95

They?re in their 60s, retired or ready to retire, and wondering what to do with the rest of their lives. That challenge faces the first wave of 76 million Baby Boomers. With recent medical advances, most can count on another 15 or even 20 years of good health. But how can they find fulfillment?

Mary Catherine Bateson answers that question in her absorbing but discursive book, *Composing a Further Life: The Age of Active Wisdom*. Focusing on older adults, Bateson offers a unique perspective on self-help. Her book is not about getting help -- as one might expect. It?s about giving it. And it?s about leaving a legacy by following the creative spirit within.

Bateson converses with six older adults from various professions. As her subjects discuss their lives, one overriding theme emerges: the importance of spirituality in later life. As actress Jane Fonda puts it, ?I felt myself ... moving back into myself. ... I heard myself saying this is God. This is what we are meant to be, and it?s what Jesus preached, it?s what he taught. Wholeness. Not perfection. Wholeness.?

The daughter of anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, and a retired professor of anthropology herself, Bateson is author or coauthor of 12 other books. One of them, *Composing a Life* (1990), focusing on women?s lives, is the forerunner for her latest.

Bateson calls for a new stage known as Adulthood II, an age of active wisdom. These are the years between Adulthood I and Old Age, Bateson says, when the gait may be slower, but the brain -- enriched by years of learning -- is wiser. These older adults can and want to contribute to society and to connect with family, friends and God. Here?s how some of them do that:

- Fr. Cornelius Goggin, 78, lives in a retirement home for priests but drives a few hours each way on weekends to say Mass at several parishes. Not as spry as he used to be, he sits when he says Mass. But he feels himself to be more of a priest than ever. Now that he doesn?t have to worry about ?the parking lot on a snowy night,? he says, he?s able to study scripture and to devote more time to preparing for his homilies. Goggin offers the inspiration of wisdom, age and grace -- to say nothing of study and life experience.
- Glady Thacher, an artist and activist from California in her 80s, gave up art to raise her family and later started a counseling service to help underprivileged high-school students realize their creative potential. More recently, Thacher has established a Life Plan Center for people 50 and older./li>

Not everyone that Bateson talks to has positive feelings. Some, like a woman she calls Helen, are depressed. Living into late old age and in failing health, Helen, Bateson says, must realize that God loves her not for her busyness but for who she is -- beyond time -- with all stages of her life visible to God in an eternal now.

Bateson's mother was an Episcopalian and her father was an atheist; she joined the Roman Catholic church. She insists that divisions between branches of Christianity are wrong. Moreover, Bateson believes that there?s more to unite world religions than to divide them.

Jews, Christians and Muslims, she says, start from a belief in the ?Creator?s entry into human affairs.? God?s concern for justice and peace evoke ?worship and wonder through a process of self-revelation.? Bateson wants her clarion call of a book to encourage older adults to deepen that process, emulate that Creator, and be a conduit of the divine life within.

[Diane Scharper teaches English at Towson University in Maryland.]

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story identified Bateson as "a high-church Episcopalian," but Bateson is Roman Catholic. *NCR* regrets the error. She told *NCR*, "My journey to Catholicism has been a bumpy one -- but my own story of lapsing and returning in my 60s -- is in the book as an example of late life spiritual search." See her comment below.

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