NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Turning old age's prison into a time of forgiveness and gratitude

Ed Hays | Mar. 2, 2013
Essay

One day you awake to find yourself behind barbed wire fences as a prisoner of an escape-proof concentration camp -- old age. You have been seeing all the warning signs of your dreaded deportation in the mirror and knew soon you would be next.

We postpone acceptance of our old age as long as possible because being old is so unattractive in a culture that worships athletic and beautiful young bodies. True, our society loves its senior members -- as long as they don't look or act old. We begin aging at birth, so aren't there some preventive measures we can take to have a pleasurable old age?

Any preparation is difficult because our capitalistic culture values productivity, and old people, instead of being seen as contributing, are considered a drain on resources. Gone are the times when villagers and family bestowed respectful dignity on the oldest among them as their walking encyclopedias of history and knowledge. Today, who needs old folks when we have Google? Yet their numbers are rapidly increasing, and they are living longer and have more needs.

While each elderly person is a living snapshot of everyone's tomorrow, society's denial of old age makes these people nearly invisible.

If you wish to prepare wisely for your elderhood, upon seeing a hobbling old person, take a reverent moment to frame her or him as a prophetic holy icon of yourself someday. And do not treat aged strangers as if they were invisible. Stop to speak to them with a smile, and treat them with the esteem you would wish to be given when your years advance and your body becomes stooped and disabled.

I expect that as you reflect on old age as an internment in prison you think this is a darkly misfortunate metaphor. I'm not surprised. Our American society, when speaking of the disadvantaged, tries to be "politically correct" and so for old age employs euphemisms like *senior* or *golden* years. The early years of growing older are for some indeed golden times for travel and hobbies. But the sand in the hourglass speedily drains out, and the golden years too often become the dark years of depression, pain, suffering and loss.

If you desire all your advanced years to be truly golden, develop the King Midas touch. Today, whatever your current age, begin touching everything in your life, including your health, with golden awareness and diamond gratitude. Use your mystical King Midas touch on those persons you love. If each day you turn the drab and dull tin of common things into gleaming treasure, you grow a habit that will make your ending years rich with contentment.

The essence of entering prison is loss. The possessions of those entering are confiscated. As they are stripped of clothing, lost too is their dignity. Elders experience this confiscation of dignity as well by examinations in doctors' offices and in various medical procedures. These losses increase as they age, as slowly hair color goes,

and for some, hair itself. Bodily strength and agility are taken away, then teeth, eyesight and hearing. Painful losses of later years can include the fabulous freedom achieved at 16 of having a driver's license. At any time in aging comes a profoundly dreadful confiscation -- loss of memory. When memories of loved ones, dear friends, adventures in life, one's work or profession are taken, the elderly are stripped naked to the bone.

While you are in the youth of old age, acknowledge that some of these losses are waiting for you just beyond the horizon. Anticipating them as a natural part of life can help you gracefully embrace them. Wisely do not take for granted those physical gifts you now enjoy, and daily get drunk on intoxicating gratitude. Inebriated on the Spirit, you will better see another vision, one wherein the mystic Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin says the loss of bodily and mental abilities in old age is but the creator carving out large cavities in us so to fill them up with God. Instead of begrudgingly enduring your aging physical or mental decline, see it with the eyes of God as an act of divine love. Your Beloved's all-encompassing love for you from the beginning has nothing to do with your possessing a youthfully appealing body or the intellect of a scholar. You have been and are now unconditionally loved, even with a wrinkled, perhaps even incontinent body and a sometimes forgetful mind.

This beautiful insight of Teilhard is also a frightening challenge. The bottom line of this mystic wisdom of Teilhard is that each tribulation of aging becomes a divine homework assignment.

One such assignment could be the daily routine of taking medications. Daily pill-taking can be compared to priests' obligation to pray the Divine Office at set times of the day. The elderly as well are obligated to take prescribed medications at specific times: sunrise, mid-morning or noon, evening and before going to bed. This daily taking of pills easily becomes disagreeable, so consider engaging in the spirituality of the Hopi Indians of the Southwest, who believe that all medicines should be taken with a prayer. It's wonderful how saying a mini-prayer can transform the bothersome obligation of taking pills.

Early, middle and senior-middle age are the times to prevent ancient diseases such as prickly impatience, touchy irritability, moody grumpiness, pessimistic cynicism, criticism of youth, and sickly nostalgia for the good old days. In your early aging years, swear a vow never to indulge in any one of them. Strictly scrutinize your speech to guard against a sneak infection of even one debilitating virus. If you are already advanced in age and infected by one or more, then perform repeated, radical self-surgeries. As soon as you catch yourself complaining about anything, instantly yank out your griping like it was a painful rotten tooth. The best cure for old age's common bellyaching is taking the hard-to-swallow bitter pill of being your own critic. Honest self-examination is best prophylactic for the old age pestilence of complaining about others.

Unfortunately, in advanced old age more dignity must be surrendered. Performing once-simple actions like bathing and other private bodily functions often requires the help of others. When these compromises or other undesirable needs like canes and walkers arise, a helpful medicine is prescribed by the Islamic Sufi saint Rumi: "Welcome difficulty into your life. Learn the alchemy that the moment you accept whatever troubles you've been given, the door opens." Alchemy, the secret chemistry of changing anything worthless into gold, opens the door for you to see that your embarrassing needs provide occasions for others to acquire the grace-filled gifts of being a caregiver. That opened door also allows an opportunity to look back at baptism in the early Christian church, when adults of all ages were baptized naked in front of the community. The naturally apprehensive candidates for baptism were instructed, "Be not ashamed. Remember you have been created in God's image." So practice that admonition and never prudishly be ashamed of your body, naked or otherwise.

The bathroom mirror sadly reflects back to older persons a seemingly unlovable body that threatens their love unions and friendships. Teilhard proposes hanging in place of the bathroom mirror a mystical mirror to encourage falling in love even in your old age. He says, "Learn to love interior fragility and old age with its long shadows and ever-shrinking days ahead, and love diminishments and decline." A great and noble challenge it is

to fall in love with your withered body and fading mind, and to love the dwindling days left in your life.

A long life can be viewed as having more time to pray. It can be and it can't; regardless, make the distinction between saying prayers and praying. After a lifetime of praying you may find recited prayers become stepping stones to silence. When in the midst of saying prayers you sense you are falling into stillness, let go and allow yourself to sink deeply into the silent Divine Presence.

When the time comes, however, that your constant companions are pain and suffering, even familiar prayers become impossible. Forget reciting prayers and become a living prayer by unconditionally embracing your sufferings, and by so doing consecrate them into the communion of divine suffering. God took on the flesh of the infant Jesus and that of all humanity, including the frail flesh of the elderly. This consecration creates the glorious transfiguration of an aged body into the mystical body.

In the last stage of aging the old must confront death's striptease. To provide hope, clergy and pastoral care workers lift up the paschal mystery, the dying and rising of Jesus. In offering the dying oneness with Christ in the Easter victory, these workers are sadly restricted to only one example -- Christ. In the real world the church seems to struggle with faith in the paschal mystery as it resists closing old institutions that are dead or dying. As the ancient creator of rituals, the church has one for a bishop digging the first shovel of dirt at the groundbreaking of a new parish, yet none for a closing upon the death of a parish.

As the dying find few living examples of sharing in the Easter victory of Christ, they are challenged to become true followers of Jesus, who died lacking a single shred of evidence that anything existed after death. When it becomes time for that ultimate courageous trust in the abiding love of God, I suggest following the words of Napoleon: "You must speak to your soul to electrify the soul." Death requires a sacred and daring trust possible of only the highest-voltage electrified soul. Of this courageous stance in the face of dying, Teilhard said in his Hymn of the Universe: "Blessed, above all, be death and the horror of falling back through death into the cosmic forces."

In this reflection I have tried to present a realistic image of old age, even if that meant some of its darker and depressive aspects. I close with 12 brief lines from Shakespeare's play "King Lear." At 80 years old, King Lear speaks to his daughter Cordelia, whom some think symbolizes his sprite spirit. Read slowly these beautiful lines:

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
We too alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by the moon.

Old age is prison time. It's a time for asking forgiveness, for gratitude and prayer, for singing and the telling of old tales. In the last years of our lives we become like God's spies as we enter into the mystery of things and laugh at the gossip of poor rogues who are still obsessed with who's in and who's out, who wins or loses at court, in the endless ebb and changes of the fickle old moon.

No, no, no, no to self-pity and yearning to be young! Come, let's away to prison!

[Fr. Edward M. Hays is the author of more than 30 books on contemporary spirituality. He has served as a chaplain of the state penitentiary in Lansing, Kan., parish priest, and spiritual director. This article first appeared in the November 2012 issue of *Celebration*, *NCR*'s worship resource. Visit its website at celebrationpublications.org.]

Source URL (retrieved on *07/30/2014 - 00:02*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/turning-old-ages-prison-time-forgiveness-and-gratitude