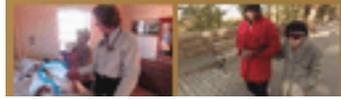


LIVING OLD



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Faith, Spirituality & Aging”

AN INTERVIEW WITH REV. JENNIFER L. BROWER

Jennifer L. Brower is a Unitarian Universalist minister. Since 2002 she has served the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock in Manhasset, N.Y., a congregation that has a remarkable number of very active and involved members who are in their 80s and 90s. The Rev. Brower received her master’s of divinity at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. A native of Manhattan, she and her family now live on the north shore of Long Island.

- » With advancing age, what happens that may lead to a re-evaluation of one’s life and what has guided a person religiously or spiritually?
- » How does faith and having a creed that one believes in provide—usually—some degree of comfort for people at the end of their life?
- » Are there other ways one can come to terms with the end of one’s life without having a religious belief?
- » Can you talk about your personal story about how a healing, a peace, can come near the end of life?
- » What guidance do you have for the elderly and their family members in terms of psychospiritual needs and issues?

With advancing age, what happens that may lead to a rethinking, a re-evaluation of one’s life and what has guided a person religiously or spiritually?

Very simply, the aging process—the experience of moving into and through different developmental phases—affects the spirit and therefore one’s spiritual life.

When we understand the “spirit” to mean the animating or vital force within each person—“spirit” derived from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning “soul, courage, vigor, breath”—then the spirit is our vital center or our core. And the “spiritual” are those things which support that center; those things which enliven us and give us a sense of courage, or heart, for our living. Spiritual

tune us to that vital or animating force within and which give greater meaning and depth to our day-to-day living.

Naturally, that which moves the spirit, that which brings us deep meaning and satisfaction and enlivens us at 45 years of age may not be what nurtures our sense of wholeness and spiritual wellness at 93. So, in my view, the process of aging at every life stage brings about changes in one's spiritual life.

Some of the events within the latter stages of life which may prompt spiritual growth or an overhaul of the religious life are well documented and commonly experienced.

BEREAVEMENT

Among the tasks set before the aging and the well elderly is the task of bereavement, the loss of our closest relationships.

If we live long enough, we may very well outlive our life companion. Not only must we cope with the emotional tumult of deep grief and adjust to navigating the world alone, without someone who may have been by our side for most of our adult life, but the loss of our partner may send ripples out in all directions. For instance, without the support of our spouse, we may no longer be able to live independently. We may need help with activities of daily living. We may need assistance with transportation. Or we may even be forced into a new and unfamiliar living arrangement.

In addition to the sorrow and stress of mourning the death of a spouse, there is also the good possibility that as we age, we will experience a protracted period of grief as our circle of friends and family members die. Our social and familial support system may shrink to such an extent that we no longer feel "known." And one of our deepest human needs is the need for intimacy—to be known and understood.

With the death of an older generation, and then our own age cohorts, we are left without people who knew us in all phases of our life and who experienced the same critical, life-shaping world events that shaped our life. As we find ourselves in the company of significantly younger people who do not share our frame of reference, we may feel increasingly alone and lonely.

REDEFINING OUR SENSE OF PURPOSE

Another task confronting seniors is the challenge of locating new sources of fulfillment and joy when jobs, careers and family no longer dictate how our time is spent and give shape to our identity. What gives us meaning and satisfaction? From whence do we derive our purpose for living? What are we if we are not industrious? If we are no longer “producers” of income or healthy children and families, what is our role?

Our early and middle adult years do not adequately prepare us for the new role of being an older adult. Shifting out of the role we are groomed for and to the unfamiliar role of retiree and then well elderly person may produce feelings of despair and depression.

RECONCILING ONE’S SENSE OF SELF WITH PHYSICAL, (MAYBE MENTAL) DECLINE

From earliest life, we struggle to assert our independence—to “do it ourselves”—and that desire and drive for self-sufficiency never ends. Having faith, and cultivating faith (trust in life and in other people) doesn’t eradicate fear, but it serves to minimize the effect that fear may have and makes it possible to live “in the tension.”

As we age and experience changing physical and mental abilities—changes that require our adaptation and adjustment and possibly the assistance of others—our innate desire is still for autonomy. And our loss of autonomy may produce feelings of frustration, anger and bitterness.

To add insult to injury, the effects of aging may produce conditions that are not only inconvenient, but uncomfortable or embarrassing and which may require the personal assistance of another, younger person.

Dependency is difficult no matter what our age. But loss of independence isn’t the only form of loss that we may experience. As our abilities change, there may also be a growing feeling of estrangement from oneself—a disconnect, if you will, between our self-perception and our physical reality.

Most of us are not reared with the understanding that we are each temporarily able; that life’s accidents and injuries and the process of aging will alter our physical and cognitive functioning. And so, as our abilities are

impaired, our body ceases to be a place of familiarity, comfort and ease. If our physical and cognitive functioning is no longer predictable and reliable, we no longer know our body. And who are we then?

TIME OF “LIFE REVIEW”

Along with all of this, whether we are engaged in a relatively comfortable aging process or a difficult one, it is likely that we will be engaged in the important process known as “life review,” a time of reflection upon the successes and failures of our life.

What we discern during this life review may produce an overhaul of every aspect of our living. For some, the experience produces a desire to tie up any remaining “loose ends.” But in all cases, it is a time of questioning: Are there things left undone or unsaid that I need to tend to now? What do I regret? What did I fail to do? Have I done [life] the way I ought to have done it? What can be done now, given the constraints of age and health? What do I hope will live on through my children, grandchildren or students and others whose lives I have encountered?

In brief, the more advanced one’s age, generally, the more steeped in loss—of loved ones, of self and abilities. Add to this the encouragement by others that we plan for end-of-life care and make funeral or memorial arrangements, acts which are unfathomable to most of us. Although we each know that inevitably we will die, we cannot begin to imagine the experience of dying or the world without our presence. And here some doctor or adult child or social worker—some younger person—is constantly reminding us that before too long, we’ll find out about these mysterious events.

QUESTIONS ON THE NATURE OF GOD, HUMAN EXISTENCE, DEATH

Along with each age-related physical and emotional challenge, a multitude of questions may be raised within us as to the nature of God, called by so many different names, and the nature of human existence.

We may have deeply held concerns about the worth and value of our life and whether we did all that we might have with the life now slipping away. We may have questions about the experience of death—whether there will be

ly conscious experience at the moment of dying or after death. And we may be afraid of what may occur in the dying process and about what may or may not come next. And, we may be afraid for our loved ones.

I knew a woman who somehow refused to die. Though her doctors thought she should have been long dead from liver cancer, she lived 18 months in hospice care. In the afternoons we spent together, I learned a great deal about her and her family. Eventually, she told me how her husband of more than 50 years had terrorized her, abusing her physically and verbally all the years of their married life. Being a firm believer in an eternal afterlife, she fully expected that she would have to see him again when she died. She simply didn't want to see him again. In order for her to die with some peace of mind and heart, she needed some reassurance that the hell she'd experienced on earth wouldn't continue for all eternity. Fear kept her alive despite the pain and discomfort of living with end-stage cancer.

Fear and anxiety are powerful forces in both our living and our dying. Even for those experiencing great pain or who are suffering as a result of advanced age or illness and who have expressed a readiness to die, there may still be some anxiety. For many, there is concern for the family members or partner who will be left behind to mourn. None of us wishes to inflict suffering on the people we love. And we are never ready to leave them.

OUR RELATIONSHIP TO RELIGION, A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

Hopefully, as we cultivate our inner spiritual resources, we have the support of a religious community. But just as our spirit may undergo great change throughout the aging process, our relationship to the religious community may also be subject to profound change.

The word "religion" is derived from the Latin *religare*, meaning "to tie or bind." In our religious communities, we are tied or bound together by shared beliefs. Along with advancing age may come a shift in perspective—a "wisdom of the ages," some might call it—and with that "wisdom" or perspective change may come a shift in one's interpretation of religious doctrine. Some folks of advanced age will have grown in their affirmation of

religious teachings, while others may feel an increasing dissonance and discomfort with the teaching of their religious community. Accumulated life experiences may alter how one interprets the teachings of their religious community and whether those teachings retain a degree of veracity or relevance for their living.

Just as there are many age-related psychospiritual challenges that affect our spiritual life and sense of connection to our religious tradition, there are also practical concerns and physical obstacles which may interfere with our participation in a worshipping community.

For instance, if I can no longer drive, is there easy and comfortable transportation to the worshipping community for worship and fellowship? Can I manage the physical demands of such a trip? Is the space accessible? Can I hear the service and/or other people well enough? What visual requirements exist? Will I be able to read the Order of Worship? Are there adaptations available to assist me, such as amplified hearing devices, a large-print Order of Worship? Is it OK if I do not stand during hymns or other elements during which it is common to stand? Where are the restrooms? Are they close enough, and are they accessible? How long is the service, and will I need to leave before it is over? Am I comfortable doing that, if need be? Is it an intergenerational environment, and will there be any children running around? Do I feel safe?

How does faith and having a creed that one believes in provide—usually—some degree of comfort for people at the end of their life? Does faith have a special role in countering fear?

As a minister who serves a noncreedal religious tradition, a tradition in which each member must craft their own statement of belief, I can only speculate how a shared statement of faith held by one's entire religious community might provide comfort.

I imagine that if we feel truly in harmony with the creedal statement of our religious tradition, then that creed serves as something of an anchor, giving us added stability in the ebb and flow of life's waves. By the same token, I suspect that if our faith in the creed is thin, then that lack of congruence between our belief and the creed of the faith community may create a feeling of alienation and religious anxiety. I imagine that for those folks, there is no meaningful support found in one's religious life.

ough noncreedal, in my tradition the same possibilities exist. If one has carefully crafted their personal belief statement as to what one believes about the nature of the holy and the universe, to whom and to what one feels accountable, and what one is called to do to live in alignment with these beliefs, then hopefully that statement of personal belief, that credo statement, will help one stay centered as everything changes through advancing age and the likelihood of deteriorating health.

With, tricky though it can be to get your hands around, and the relationship between faith and the challenges of later life is a little easier for me to address. As said by the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin, “Faith is not belief without proof; it is trust without reservation.”

Having faith of this sort—trust without reservation—in the unfolding process of living and dying makes it possible to live with the unknown and face the vicissitudes of life with grace and humor, despite the indignities that advancing age may bring. Having faith and cultivating faith—trust in life and in other people—doesn’t eradicate fear, but it serves to minimize the effect that fear may have and makes it possible to live “in the tension.”

Are there other ways one can come to terms with the end of one’s life without having a religious belief?

Imagine so, but I believe that no matter what we call it, we are having a religious or spiritual experience all of the time. So what one person may call strictly secular experience I may see as the day-to-day presence of the holy—the mystery of life. No matter what we call it, if an event or experience moves us to a feeling of awe or opens us to seeing a glimmer of goodness that encourages our faith, as described previously, we are attuned to a quality of being and living that will help us cope with whatever may come.

You have your own personal story concerning how a healing, a peace, can come near the end of life.

Yes, through my mother’s living with debilitating illness and her process of dying I learned that, generally speaking, people die the way they live, with the same attitudes and biases and defenses in place, but that the possibility of personal growth, revelation, healing and transformation exists right up until the very last breath is drawn.

My mother had ALS—Lou Gehrig’s disease. She slowly lost control over every muscular movement except the ability to blink. And as this frightening

paralysis overtook her body, she moved through expressions of anger, denial, bargaining and depression. Eventually, she arrived at a place of greater peace.

Putting aside the realities of ALS—the paralysis, the inability to speak, etc., which create an appearance of peace and calm—in the final days of life, my mother was not the same person I’d experienced as my mother over three decades. She had changed. Through this awful experience she had grown inwardly, in a way that defies easy description. Her whole demeanor was different. Though dying, she was, in some ineffable way, fuller, brighter, more vibrant. The light of life that burned within her, and which was reflected within her fully functioning eyes, seemed to burn especially brightly toward the very end. Witnessing that change has given me an abiding faith in the power of healing even in the process of suffering and dying.

One of the essential elements that allowed my mother to find that inner healing and peace and to have a “good” death was the quality of care she received at the very end of her life. The physician who cared for her in the last month of her life did so with unparalleled compassion. Though he had no relationship with my mother prior to the end stage of her life, he was able to acknowledge and honor her unique personhood and inherent dignity. He affirmed my mother’s rightful authority to determine the course of her care, no matter that she couldn’t talk. And by his presence, he restored my mother’s faith in those who care for the sick. By teaching us—my father and siblings and spouses—how to care for my mother as she died, her physician gave her the assurance that she would not be alone or suffer at the very end. When the time came, my mother died at home, comfortably and peacefully. She died with many of the people who loved her sitting beside her. It was as good and gentle as anyone could have hoped.

What guidance do you have for the elderly and their family members in terms of psychospiritual needs and issues?

Some theological thinkers believe that God, called by so many different names, is found or created in the connection formed between two people who are engaged in the mutual enterprise of sharing from their deepest self and being open to the other person’s deepest self—what Martin Buber called an “I-Thou” relationship, or what is referred to in the term *namaste*, meaning “I bow to the divine within you.” There, in that space, the holy is

ought to life, and through that experience both people will be transformed.

In Unitarian Universalism, we believe that the holy is continually being revealed; that “revelation is not sealed.” So until our very end, and maybe after, there is always the possibility of discerning something new about the transcendent and our connection to the Most High.

No matter how old we get to be, no matter what the circumstances of our aging and dying, I believe that within our relationships with other people and through our unique experience of being alive, flashes of insight, moments of healing and transformation are always possible.

We encourage people to stay open to the fullness of experience, whether sorrowful or joyful, and the wisdom that will yet come to them, for through these deeply felt experiences, their life will be changed and made richer—if they allow it to be.

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