

## THE BOOK OF LIFE The Final Chapter

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### INTRODUCTION:

The aging process is an interesting chapter in the Book of Life, filled with unlimited possibilities and many untold challenges. For some it is a chapter like a long winter's journey; for others it is a chapter filled with joy, like the season of harvest.

Learning to live out one's time well, and with quality, is one of the tasks of this process called 'aging'. For those who are living through the aging process, you already know the struggles and surprises, the vast potential and joys, the sense of loss, the feeling of isolation, issues of health and well-being, and on and on . . .

For this article, I would like to view this process of aging through a much broader lens — a view that includes a series of new beginnings both for me, and for others. Aging can be a process of coming alive in ways not yet experienced. In taking this broader approach, I am, of course, in no way minimizing the tremendous challenges of growing older . . . and old.

Whatever attitudes have conditioned our being throughout our lives helps or hinders our living out the final years well. Helping others embrace what we often refer to as *the Focusing Attitude* is central to my work and my life, and whether we are consciously Focusing or intuitively sensing the attitude of respect, concern, caring, gentleness, and profound regard for the *life* in others, the Focusing Attitude trumps all 'techniques' (at least for me).

Old age is a treasure-house of history. In each person there is a story, and it is a story that needs to be told. Very often listening to life-stories helps people move past places of stuckness and places long neglected, into a new sense of fresh life within; therefore each unique story needs to be received, valued, and cherished. It is such a gift to witness the flowering of a spirit and the growing of a soul. In my life experience I have had this privilege. All I can say is that I stand before this mystery with a sense of AWE.

In reflecting upon this article about aging, I initially had a sense of feeling overwhelmed. There are so many approaches that can be taken in viewing the process of life and death.

As I started to write, the first thing that happened was my inner critic informed me that I really had nothing new to say. After having recovered from that attack, I let it know firmly that, "Yes, I do have something to share and I *will* share my experience." Why? Because I have had the very special privilege of journeying with some very ordinary people, yet they are extraordinary in their quality of life right to the end. Having helped them to experience a nurturing, gentle way of being with pain, grief, letting go, moving into hope

and trust, and finally finding the path that opened them to the Source of all Life, I discovered profound and grace-filled moments for me — and I hope for them, too.

Later in this article I will share one woman's journey during a particularly profound and life-changing experience for her. As you read my account of her story — and my story — I hope you will be able to get a sense of the change process, and the transformation that happened in both of us.

I also felt compelled to write this article, in order to connect again with so many of you who have been such a vital part of the fabric of my being. My heart is filled with love and gratitude as I age. I am now 72 years young, and I cherish all the memories of our celebrations and sharings over many years.

### **WHERE DOES FOCUSING 'FIT' WITH THE APPROACH I TAKE TO AGING?**

For me, Focusing is a *way of being present* to oneself, to others, to God, and to all of creation. Focusing is a way of being that embodies an awareness of my own experiencing and includes every one of my relationships. For me, honesty is the hallmark of whatever situation or relationship I encounter. For example, when I am listening and sensing inside myself and discover that I may need more time and space to process what I've heard, I simply say, "This is not a good time for me. Can we talk later?" I don't pretend to be all okay to listen to another if I am not all OK in myself. This is not only about me. Making room *for me* gives the Focuser (or other person, whether they are consciously Focusing or not) permission to say 'no' when that feels like the correct response *for them*. Being authentic also encourages others to experience my humanness and vulnerabilities. In my position as Congregational Leader, it is common for some people to put me on a pedestal, especially those who grew up in a different culture where authority was so central to their lives.

Touching into my own felt senses is so much more than a 'personal process'. My ongoing felt senses and listening carefully to them are a profound guide in my work, helping me to make the right decisions in most of the situations that I encounter on a daily basis, and (maybe?) how I came to be the Congregational Leader for my Community. The following story will better illustrate what I mean.

Every four years our Congregation assembles a 'Chapter' to elect its Congregational Leader. Any Sister can be a Chapter delegate with voting privileges. In order to be eligible as Congregational Leader, there is a process of 'discernment' to reflect upon whether this is where God is calling you. If so, the Sister puts her name forward. I have never had any desire, nor interest in this election process.

A few months prior to the elections, my sister and soul-mate died suddenly of cancer. I felt devastated, grief-stricken, depressed and angry. I didn't care about anything. I told my friends that I was withdrawing my name as a delegate for the Chapter, and that I would not even be present at the Chapter meeting. It felt inside as if part of me had died, too. I would go to the graveyard daily and cry out to God in anger and emptiness. I was also angry with my sister, Marge, for leaving me. *How could she leave like that?*

After a couple of weeks of this ongoing angst and pain, I was standing by her grave one morning and unexpectedly experienced a powerful shift in my chest and abdomen. I didn't know why it happened, or why it happened at that moment. All I knew was that it was like warm flowing water moving freely in my body, and the feeling was almost indescribable, and so very deeply soothing. A profound peace permeated every fiber of my being. I stood there sensing time and eternity, as one. I was no longer separate, but connected to all that *IS*. I had no concept of time, as hours passed. Then suddenly, a voice from within me said, "*You will be the Congregational Leader.*" For just a moment, time stopped, my breath stopped, my thoughts stopped, and without thinking I simply answered, "*Of course.*" This was a moment of what I call *grace* in its fullest manifestation. The message about my future felt unquestionably *right*. It was just so — and so be it. I have carried the intensity and joy of that experience for the past five years as Congregational Leader, and the profound impact it had on my consciousness has made my journey feel like a pure gift. I have never wavered in that *knowing* the *rightness* of accepting the position in my Congregation, or what I am doing/feeling on a daily basis, as I experience the ongoing evolving of God's creative plan for my life.

Further, the experience at the gravesite helped me to know, unequivocally, that no matter how impossible something may seem, given the right climate in which to move forward, change can and does (miraculously) happen. In my work with others, I am ever aware of trying to help people make a shift in their *attitude*, with a vision toward inwardly-felt-meaning, and trusting the message.

I am also always curious and amazed at the number of people that I encounter who have an astoundingly harsh inner voice, also known in Focusing as a *Critic*. I witness these harsh critic attacks in so many different circumstances, and in particular during a process that I have with the Sisters (at a certain stage) called, 'A Life Review'.

This exercise, of carefully reviewing one's life, is often part of the process in preparing for the last phase of the life journey. Many of the women in our Congregation have spent their entire lives providing service to others, especially with the poor, the weak, and taking a stand, or standing up for the voiceless. How often I have noticed during the review that the place where the person I am talking to gets stuck, over and over again, agonizing about what she 'didn't do' or what she 'should have done'. Guilt gets a free reign and overtakes the process. Helping these wonderful, giving women to be aware of this harsh critic and teaching them strategies for dealing with their internalized negative voices is no easy task. Often they and their critics are one-stuck-together. Of the many and varied approaches and skills that I use in working with people (including *experiential listening*, of course!) I have found that perhaps one of the most powerful tools for assisting the change process is *imagery*.

I hope that the following story of one person's journey in the last stages of her life will illustrate the use of gentle Focusing, listening, imagery, and working with the Critic . . . and the '*more*' that came, for both her and me.

This story is about an 86-year-old Sister who spent most of her life as a teacher and principal of a high school. She was very successful and enjoyed the reputation she acquired as a leader in the field of education. On the positive side, she was very self-contained, extremely

independent, and proud of it. On the ‘other’ side, fostering close and connected relationships was not one of her strengths. It seemed that in her treasured self-sufficiency, there was very little need to rely on others. At the age of 85, she was forced to experience a most unwelcome transition. She had to be moved from the small convent that she loved, and where she was independent and felt free, into our health care unit known as our ‘Motherhouse’. This 12-bed unit is staffed with nurses around the clock. As you might know, many nurses love to ‘nurse’, that is, take constant good care of their patients — even sometimes when the patients don’t need them! In the case of this very independent Sister, you might here start to imagine the innumerable conflicts that arose between her and the very ‘caring’ nurses!

Unfortunately, this elderly and quite feisty teacher had few options regarding being in nursing care. She was no longer able walk on her own. Saying that she was not happy about her new living quarters is an understatement. She fought every attempt on the part of the nurses to help her with the simplest of care. She would yell, *“I can do that for myself, just get out and leave me alone.”*

In frustration by the staff, and during one of these episodes, I was finally called in to mediate. The nurses were fed up and felt that she needed medication to calm her down. Being totally opposed to such an approach, I informed the nurses that I would like to talk with her. As I entered the room, she shouted, *“I don’t want to see you.”* I responded, *“I know, but I want to see you,”* and pulled up a chair by her bed.

As I sat down and collected myself (for I didn’t know what!) I had a very strong feeling/felt sense in that initial moment, and an even stronger sense to share it with her. I said, *“Wow, you are one strong lady, and I like that! You are feisty and you are not going to let anyone tell you what you need. Do you realize that this is one of your greatest strengths. . . ? Can you feel that strength?”*

There was a very long silence then, with some amazement she finally said, *“You are the first person to ever tell me that!”*

And I said, *“Well, I’m glad.”* We sat in silence as I sensed that she was touching something deeply held inside.

Then she said, *“I feel like I’m in prison with no means of escape.”* (Long silence.) Then, inside of me a voice whispered, *“Don’t say a word, you are treading on sacred ground, so just wait.”* She continued, *“I’m like a bird that once could fly freely, but now my wings are clipped. I’m so frustrated and angry.”*

And I said simply, *“You feel like you have lost your freedom.”*

My response was not a complete listening one as I felt that we needed to create a *climate* inside of her and deepen the connection between us before moving to the place of anger — or whatever else might emerge. I said, *“Can you sense how that was for you . . . feeling like a bird flying?”*

There was a long silence, and then she said, *“It is like feeling alive, the wind, the sunrise, it is just gentle and free.”* There was another long silence, in which we both experi-

enced a deep connection, and then she said, “*When I stay with that alive feeling, it changes everything. I don’t feel angry anymore. I can breathe.*”

Before I could respond, she said thoughtfully, “*I know that I shouldn’t be angry. I should be grateful for what I have. . .*” Then, without warning, her critic jumped in, taking her from the deep place she had reached into more anger and criticism of her self, what she’d done, what she hadn’t done (. . . and on and on in typical critic-fashion). I explained to her some of the dynamics of the critic: what it is and how it works, then helped her to return to the place of calm. She was able to recover and with insight said, “*That ‘thing’ makes me feel bad, I don’t like it.*”

“*Yes*”, I nodded. And the expression on her face indicated that she knew she was ‘heard’ and ‘understood’. I left her then, in a peaceful and quiet place. I promised her that I would visit her again the next day to see how she was doing. I also worked gently but firmly with the nurses to help them be more compassionate and gentle with her, and further told them they were not to give her any medication — if there was a problem they were welcome to call me.

As the days passed there were far less outbursts with the nursing staff. I continued to visit with her. I often asked her to go *inside* and find her *bird place*. She loved going *there*, and the pleasure she received from *being in* that place was palpable. From a Focusing perspective, allowing for some positive time created an important balance regarding when to be with what’s *right* and when to be with what’s *wrong*. I feel strongly that it is essential to allow/take the time for a person to experience their *life-energy* first, before going to wounded or angry places — and this she happily did.

Over the weeks our relationship grew exponentially, both deep and strong. She trusted me, and I knew inside myself that I would never betray that trust. Our relationship expanded into one of teasing, laughing, and just enjoying being together. As she revealed more of her life story, I came to appreciate more and more her beautiful zest to live life to the fullest until she drew her last breath.

One morning I came to see her and she said, “*I am going to die soon. I’m looking forward to going Home. I know that God loves me and I’m ready to embrace my new life.*”

I felt shocked! For a long time I just looked at her. I had a sense of awe and also a sense of wonderment: How did this woman get from where she was to where she had now come? I said, “*It is so wonderful to have such deep faith. You know for sure where you are going.*” (*Silence*). Then I added, “*I don’t have that.*”

She responded, “*It is more than faith. I know it in here (pointing to her stomach).*”

I said, “*Have you always known?*”

She responded, “*On some level deep down I did, but I didn’t think about it much.*”

I said, “*Okay, when you get there could you give me a sign so that I know you are okay?*”

She said, laughing, “*Do you want me to come back and pull your ear?*”

I said, “*No, that is too harsh, I’d like something a bit more gentle.*” Six days later she died very peacefully, surrounded by me, the Community, and some assorted family members.

A few weeks later my sister Marge and I (this story precedes my sister’s death) rented a cottage in the woods near a lake. I would go out early in the morning for a walk with my little dog, Molly. I was feeling the beauty of nature and watching the sunrise. It felt like a thrilling experience, and I was joyfully letting my body and spirit take it all in. Then suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, a little white dove flew onto my right shoulder and quickly disappeared. I *knew* it was the sign that I had asked for. I am unable to find words to express the fullness of the experience, but I could feel my spirit soaring. Suffice to say, I knew in that moment what my friend carried with her as the inspiration for everything she did during her life-time was right there, right now. For her, the central issues that emerged as she aged brought her to the fullness of life to make her new and renewed, again. She was a woman with soul, and I loved her.

#### **CONCLUSION: WHAT I FEEL PASSIONATE ABOUT?**

- \* I feel that there is no greater gift than to be allowed to journey with someone longing for the experience of living this process of aging well.
- \* There is a quote by an unknown author that says:  
*It is a long way home, when someone has to walk alone, so let me take you by the hand and let me walk with you.*
- \* I believe that no one should die alone.
- \* I believe in respecting the dignity and choices that the dying person makes, even if we don’t agree with her or him.
- \* I feel that the greatest asset in the aging process, and all of life for that matter, is a *sense of humor*.
- \* In my experience, growth and change come in an atmosphere of gentleness and compassion.
- \* I feel that death is not the end but only the beginning. This thought helps me to trust the process and embrace the mystery that will at last be revealed.
- \* I consider that the most important part of my work as Congregational Leader is to instill hope and foster gentleness and compassion in all relationships.

All the rest is out of my control.