

THE BEST IS YET TO BE

A time of reflection for older adults

by Janet Schaeffler, OP

Overview

This time of reflection will help people in their maturing years to gather and reflect on some realities about getting older. It is designed to be a flexible process that you can adapt to different situations.

This guide includes six sessions, which can be used in one of the following ways:

- A full- or half-day group retreat. Depending on your available time, you can extend with additional reflection and social time or shorten by removing sessions.
- A series of shorter, retreat-like events. For example, you could offer one core session per week over the course of six weeks, or on consecutive mornings or evenings. In this case you can re-use elements of the opening and closing prayers in each session.
- A self-guided personal retreat.
- An online retreat, gathering participants together in a closed group.

Consider hosting one or more events in homes, senior citizen residences, or assisted living facilities.

This kit has been designed as a guide for parish leaders – with all the components prepared for you (talking points, prayers, handouts, etc.). You will not necessarily need all of the included options, so feel free to exclude whatever does not fit in the time you have available.

Thank you for your ministry and your role in ministering to this vibrant and ever-growing generation of adults in our midst.

Staff

One or more leaders (possibly from pastoral staff) are needed to provide the reflections and lead the sharing. A hospitality team of three or four people can help provide a welcoming atmosphere, refreshments, and general set-up and clean-up.

Room set up

- A hospitable room with round tables (if possible) with seating for six participants per table
- Podium and microphone
- Small table for a prayer setting (candle, Scripture, etc.)
- Table for refreshments

Materials needed

- A prayer center with Scripture, candle, etc.
- Copies of the handouts provided within this packet
- Baskets of quotes (directions within the outline)
- Name tags
- Music and music player (if needed for music during prayer and/or quiet times)
- Paper and pens (for taking notes)

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1. Introduction



Welcome

Welcome everyone and explain any organizational details, such as location of restrooms, schedule for the gathering, etc.

Explain that your time together will contain these components:

- Prayer
- Reflective talks
- Time for personal reflection or journaling (optional handouts will guide participants)
- Group conversations

If you wish to invite people to go to different locations for their quiet times, point out these spaces (outside, church, chapel, adjoining rooms, etc.)



Opening Song

Choose a hymn with which your participants are familiar. Some suggestions:

- Be Not Afraid
- Blest Be the Lord
- How Can I Keep from Singing?
- On Eagle's Wings
- You Are Mine
- We Walk by Faith



Opening Prayer

Leader: God of all ages, you have known us for every second of our lives.

Side 1: You created us in love; your love has surrounded us each day.

Side 2: Scripture reminds us that we are precious in your sight.

Side 1: You have told us that through your Spirit older people will dream dreams, giving witness to the vision of God.

Side 2: You see older women and men as you have called them to be: wisdom-sages, hope-filled dreamers, and faithful doers of your word.

All: Thank you for your presence, your strength, your unconditional love. Encourage us, empower us, nudge us toward continuing growth; to be the best we can be; to experience that the best is yet to be.



Scripture reading

Isaiah 46:4

Even to your old age I am God,
even when you turn gray I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save.

A few moments of quiet reflection.



Concluding Prayer

Leader: God, ever ancient, ever new,
your own son was greeted and blessed by the aged prophets Anna and Simeon.

Side 1: Help us to recognize again and again
the gifts of wisdom, peace, joy, and commitment that you have nurtured in us.

Side 2: Strengthen us to continually grow—in love of you, in deepening all you have placed
within us, and in caring for all those you have given us.

All: Fill each of us with your Holy Spirit, so that we may together
reflect the fullness of your image from generation to generation;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2. What is “Old”?



Discussion

Invite the participants to quietly reflect for a moment:

- How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?

Then share with the group:

- Here's one definition of becoming old:
Age is only the number of times you've been around the sun.

Now invite participants to share with two other people:

- How do you know when you are old?

After some discussion time, invite some participants to share their answers with the full group.

Conclude with:

- One possible (and perhaps the most important) answer to when we become old is:
when we choose to stop loving.



Talking Points

Share these insights with the group in your own words:

- Robert Browning said to Elizabeth: “Come grow old with me. The best is yet to be; the last of life for which the first was made: Our times are in His hand who saith, “A whole I planned. Youth shows but half; Trust God; see all, nor be afraid.”
- This part of life—our older years—is extremely important.
- Before we look at some ideas and some practical things to do, let's pause and reflect upon some of our ideas about growing older.



Discussion

Make a copy of the next page for each group. Cut out each quotation so it is on a separate piece of paper, and place them in a basket for each group. Invite each person to draw a quotation from the basket, read it aloud, and share their feelings/thoughts about it.

Quotations on Aging

They say that the older we get the more cautious we get. I don't think so. I think the older we get the smarter we get. We know now what isn't worth the price of a life well-lived.
(Joan Chittister)

There is a fountain of youth: it's your mind – your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you'll truly have defeated age. (Sophia Loren)

The great thing about getting older is that you don't lose all the other ages you've been.
(Madeleine L'Engle)

You don't get older, you get better. (Shirley Bassey)

Spiritual experiences are those events in life and moments in relationships which attune 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. (Jennifer Brower)

"My first interview was with eighty-eight-year-old folk artist Marcia Muth... 'Your life does change as you get older,' she told me. 'You get into what's important and what's not.'"
(Ashton Applewhite)

"Well, you do have all those gray hairs." I point to the few silver strands coming through. "They're not gray," Mom barks at me as she opens her door. "They're strands of glittery goodness." (Margaret McHeyzer)

You don't stop laughing when you grow old, you grow old when you stop laughing.
(George Bernard Shaw)

The spiritual eyesight improves as the physical eyesight declines. (Plato)

It is lovely to meet an old person whose face is deeply lined, a face that has been deeply inhabited, to look in the eyes and find light there. (John O'Donohue)

Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old. (Franz Kafka)

3. Eldering and Being Grateful



Talking Points

Share the following points with the group:

This part of life – our older years - is extremely important; and we do have some control over it.

- One of the secrets of eldery—and doing it gracefully—is to approach it differently than our culture does.
- Society often views aging as a disease, a period of inevitable decline. Instead, we can see it as a stage of transition which holds the possibility of being a rich, and possibly most fruitful time of life, in spite of physical weakness.

Perhaps, then, there are some specific things we can do:

① Watch our language.

- There is a difference between “getting older” and “getting old.”
- What’s the difference? Society usually centers on disabilities and losses. It stresses ageism and illness. At no other time in life are disabilities equated with personhood except when one is labeled “elderly.”
- In his book, *The Virtues of Aging*, former President Jimmy Carter says that he discovered the truth that there is a big difference between getting older and growing old as he observed his mother, “Miss Lillian.” When her husband died in 1953, Miss Lillian was fifty-five. “For a few weeks she played the expected role of a grieving widow, but then decided that there was more to life than staying at home and enjoying a passive existence. She continued to age for thirty more years but never grew old.”

② Refrain from using “elderly” or “old.”

- In our society these terms connote diminishment and finality. Instead, say “getting older.” This pertains to everyone!
- Our biological cellular aging begins between ages 11-12, speed of reaction time begins to slow around age 20, and muscular strength declines shortly after age 30.
- But who recognizes these facts? Our culture doesn’t; it glorifies youth.
- The words “elderly” and “senior citizen” each have connotations of diminishment.
- That’s why many people have begun to use the word “eldery.” The “ing” makes it a very active concept rather than diminishment. “Eldery” brings together the wisdom that is within maturing adults and all the action/life that we are still giving.

3 Don't accept what society says.

- A 65-year old woman went to the doctor because of a pain in her arm. The doctor quickly said, "Well, after all, what do you expect? As you get older..." She immediately responded, "Funny thing. My other arm feels just fine and it's the same age."
- Don't see yourselves as "over the hill," nor under it, but on top of it. That means you can see farther than you ever could. Continually remind yourself that it's better to be 75 years young rather than 40 years old.



Discussion

Invite the participants—either as a large group or in groups of three or four—to share about the above three points. Ask what their experience has been around following (or not following) these suggestions.



Talking Points

Share the following points with the group:

One of the steps/moments in the maturing/eldering years, is retirement.

- Two of the many definitions of retirement are:
 1. going to sleep
 2. re-tired: getting a new set of tires for our next phase, our next step of the journey/trip
- In retirement, there are losses but also rebirths.
- We might let go of some things, but there are new things in their place: fresh life and love, new visions and dreams.
- We need to be realistic about the many changes, while always asking ourselves: what is the foundation of how we think about ourselves: a new time for growth and deepening or a time of diminishment and deteriorating limitations?
- James Hillman, in his book on aging, *The Force of Character and Lasting Life*, answers the question of what God and nature had in mind when designing the aging process with a metaphor: the best wines have to be aged in cracked old barrels.
- The last years of our lives are meant to mellow the soul; almost everything inside our biology conspires together to ensure that this happens. He believes that there's intelligence inside of life that intends aging—just as it intends growth in youth. It's a huge mistake to read the signs of aging as indications of dying rather than as initiations into another way of life.

Let's explore together the gift of this time of our lives:

- These years are a time for gratitude and appreciation for the first half.
- These years are a time when we can discover even more of the wondrous gifts that we have received, still have, and continue to develop.
- A maturing person's greatest tragedy is not making mistakes, but in settling for the status quo and opting for stagnation.
- In our growth as elders, we need to develop a new inwardness, a new contemplative and creative way of being in the world. This is a time when our growth, who we really are, deepens.



Personal Reflection

Let's look at this first distinctive gift of these years: time for reflection on our lives up until the present. As we reflect on our already-lived years, do we have an attitude of gratitude and appreciation for all we've been given?

- For his book, *Elder Wisdom*, Eugene C. Bianchi interviewed more than 100 older people over a two-year period. One of the common factors with those who were thriving in their older years was the ability to live with gratitude.
- Gratitude is so crucial to life, but in the busyness of life we sometimes don't take time for it.

Perhaps, then, this is a gift of the eldering years - or we can make it a gift to ourselves in our eldering years:

- Taking the time for gratitude
- Becoming more aware of all we now have and have had, throughout our lives
- Who are the people in your life (living/deceased) for whom you are grateful? Why? This and three other questions are on your handout: "Time to Be Grateful."

Provide quiet time for people to reflect and enjoy these feelings of gratitude.



Discussion

Invite the participants—in groups of three or four—to share some of their thoughts.

After the small group discussions, invite some reflection with the whole group, e.g. did you discover something new about yourself that you haven't been aware of previously?

Time to Be Grateful

Who are the people in my life (living or deceased) for whom I am grateful? Why?

What are (have been) the biggest things/events in my life for which I am grateful? the simplest?

Is there something that happened which at the time I wished hadn't happened, but now, upon reflection I see as a blessing?

Are there things that didn't happen (aren't happening) for which I'm grateful?

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE