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THE AGING SPIRIT

A WOMAN-TO-WOMAN JOURNEY TOWARD AGING AND SPIRITUALITY

By **PHOEBE GIRARD**

When I became the administrator of a new, large retirement community, I had the opportunity to interview more than 500 potential residents and their family members.

As many of them became residents, I was often struck by the dilemmas that they confronted. Frequently they were dealing with increased frailty and dependence. Some were living with family ruptures and estrangements. Others were lonely. One widow, when I asked why she wanted to move, said she was lonely and could no longer tolerate standing over the kitchen sink eating a sandwich by herself.

These residents were particularly afraid that they were no longer worthwhile or had any value. Many questioned what their purposes might be at this late stage of life and wondered about the meaning of their longevity. A significant number were eager to tell their stories and speak of their triumphs. Among them were numerous firsts: the first woman chief financial officer of a large healthcare network, the first woman professor in an all-male department, and so on.

HEARING THEIR VOICES

Because the face of aging is primarily female, the residents were mainly women. As an administrator, I felt compelled to stay focused on administrative concerns, but overhearing these voices in the lobby, in committee meetings, in the dining room and when the residents confronted having to move to a higher level of care, I wondered what would happen if I gathered the women sitting in the lobby and invited them to the coffee shop in order to listen to what was in their hearts. I wanted to hear about their joys and burdens and encourage them to affirm each other. With this decision, I felt a shift in myself: I sensed more openness and a curiosity about my own aging, and I experienced the insights of other women who were further down life's path than I was.

A few years later, when I turned 50, I decided to respond to this shift with a change in my professional work. I completed training in older adult ministry with a project interviewing midlife and older women, comparing how they perceived their physical, spiritual, psychological and financial well-being, as well as their overall life satisfaction. This research laid the groundwork for what would become the Women to Women Project. (Although both men and women see the joys and burdens of growing older, they often take different paths.)

In the field of aging, interest in spirituality has grown in recent years as the discussions about it have branched out from theology to healthcare and mental health care settings. The ideas of holistic health have begun to take hold. Now spirituality in midlife or later is becoming a specialized interest. Professionals in aging are fortunate that new paradigms have emerged to help facilitate late-life spiritual

growth. In addition to such contemporary spiritual masters as Ram Dass, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Father Henri Nouwen, women theologians are offering their views on how women can best negotiate their later years. Among them are Kathleen Fischer, Carroll Saussy and Maria Harris. A group of women clergy and teachers of liturgy have recently published *Wising Up: Ritual Resources for Women of Faith in Their Journey of Aging*, edited by Kathy Black and Heather Murray Elkins (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2005).

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

As I completed the research and training, I began to gather women together. The elements of a women's project had taken shape. I offered a welcoming space, and women began to talk about their inner lives, as well as concepts like freedom. They discussed treating their older bodies with respect and love, confronting diminishment, dealing with loss and grief, and learning to both give and receive care.

In these circles, women of different generations join together to search out models of aging for elderhood and to strengthen connections to each other. Over the years, I've found that each of their stories has moved me deeply. One woman confessed, "No one has ever heard my story from my birth to these current years." I cannot forget the 60-year-old twins, who compared the similarities and differences of their aging bodies, and the choices they have made. And I was especially touched by a clergywoman who was struggling with her own aging and anxieties.

REACHING OUT

This small-group modality reflects one gender difference between the male and female approach to spiritual growth. Although the male journey may be solitary, many women have a tendency to join with others for mutual reflection and support. Women seem to find it natural and even comforting to be in the company of other women. Commonly, women in their earlier lives discussed child rearing, marriage and relationships, health and career concerns with one another. In late life, women are more apt to be interested in discussing themselves growing older with others like them.

I began to reach out and take risks in providing a welcoming space to facilitate women's spiritual growth. The Women to Women Project, which I launched in 2000, hosts sessions in coffee shops ("Mid-Life Café After Hours,"), in senior centers ("Finding a Path to a Good Old Age"), in bed and breakfasts and retreat centers ("Autumn Wisdom"), and at the local Yoga Centers ("Love, Beauty and Aging"). More than 500 women have participated in these circles, mostly in New Mexico, but also in Arizona, Colorado and Michigan. Recently, colleagues from the Conscious Aging Network of New Mexico have cofacilitated some of the daylong and weekend retreats. In addition to these community offerings, churches and church-affiliated groups have responded to this area of spiritual growth and sponsored events.

Exploring women, aging and spirituality offers a rich and rewarding adventure. Unlimited opportunities are available to engage women in this quest, as well as abundant resources to help guide such conversations. (See "For Discussion," on page 13.) Current books provide questions for spiritual seekers in midlife and later years; online reviews of provocative films on aging—most obtainable through commercial and popular sources—can help older women and men find titles that interest them. Although there is no set curriculum, I feel certain that by listening to the spiritual hungers and responding in a heartfelt way, many inspired—and inspiring—programs will be created. ❖

Phoebe Girard directs the Women to Women Project and is a founding member of the Conscious Aging Network of New Mexico, based in Santa Fe.

FOR DISCUSSION

Following are selected books and films to stimulate discussions:

BOOKS

The Art of Growing Old: A Guide to Faithful Aging, by Carroll Saussy; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998.

Wise Women: A Celebration of Their Insights, Courage and Beauty, by Joyce Tenneson; Boston: A Bulfinch Press Book/Little Brown and Company, 2002.

Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Stages of Women's Spirituality, by Maria Harris; New York City: Bantam Trade Paper Edition, 1991.

Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging, by Kathleen Fischer; Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998.

FILMS ON DVD

Strangers in Good Company, directed by Cynthia Scott; with Alice Diabo, Mary Meigs, others; 1990 (Canada).

Marvin's Room, directed by Jerry Zaks; starring Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton; 1996.

Sunset Story, directed by Laura Gabbert; documentary, 2003.

The Straight Story, directed by David Lynch; with Richard Farnsworth; 1998.

Assisted Living, by Elliot Greenebaum; with Michael Bonsignore and Maggie Riley; 2004.