



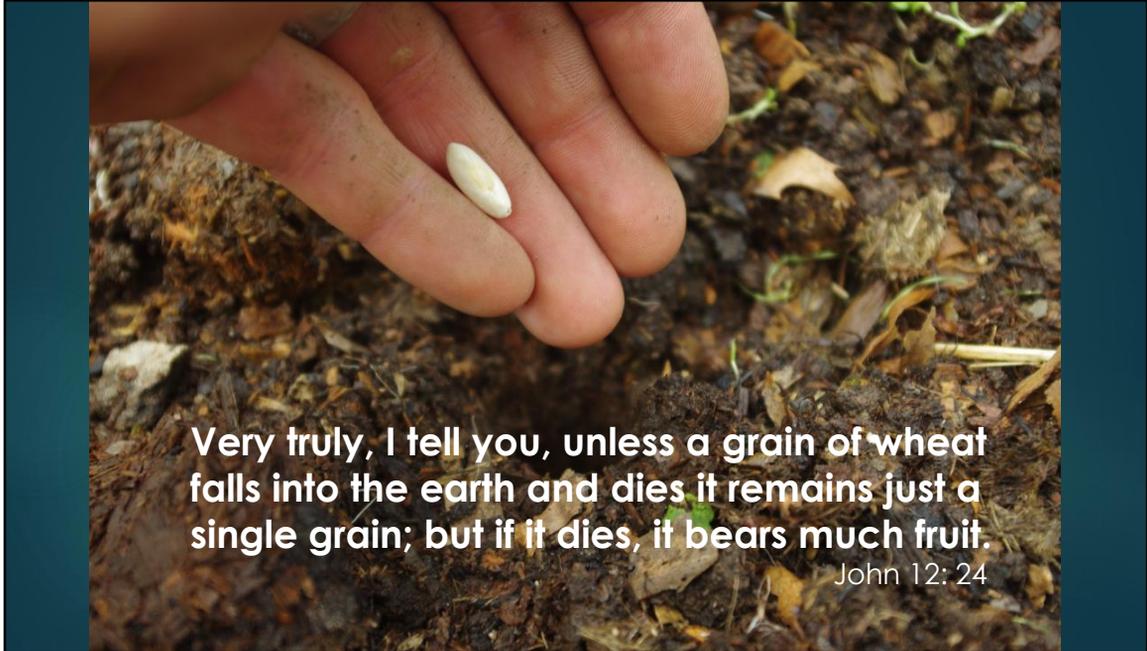
# Spirituality of Aging

APRIL 15, 2018



Each stage and phase of life is ordained by God and therefore has a purpose . . . We grow in never-ending spirals of change, as the progression of our lives ebbs and flows, with the Spirit nudging and guiding us always. There is no one phase of life that is more important than another: each has its place; each is equally essential...ongoing faith formation throughout life supports a spirituality that is constantly growing, ever changing.

Johnson, R. "Shaping a New Vision of Faith Formation for Maturing Adults: Sixteen Fundamental Tasks," in *Lifelong Faith*, Spring 2007.



**Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.**

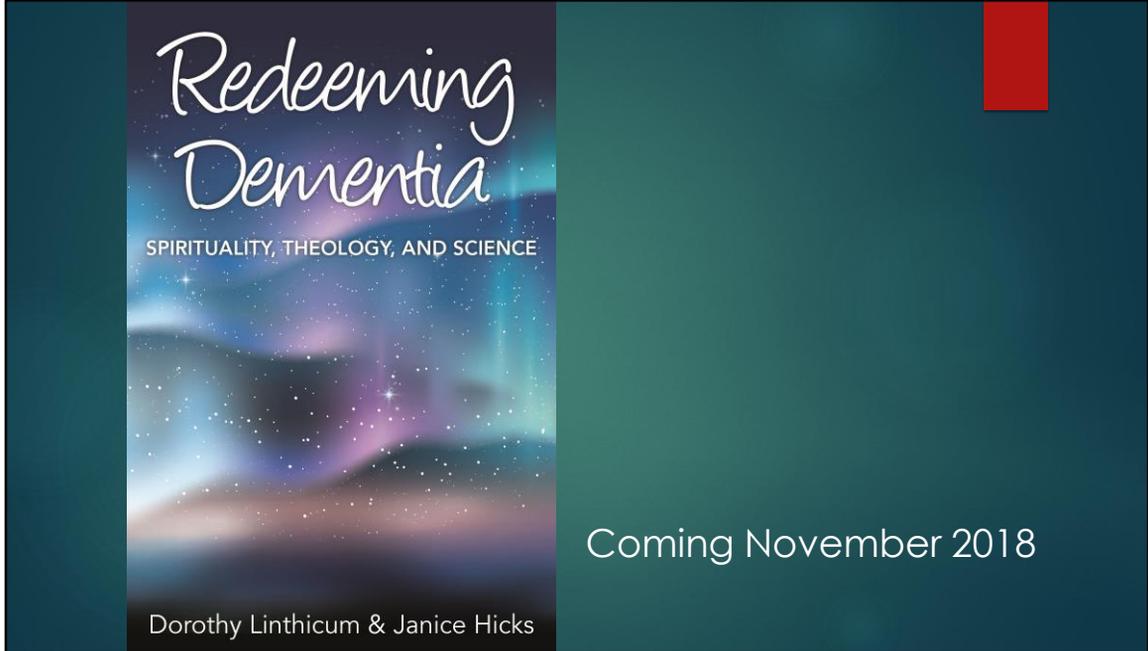
John 12: 24

What opinions, judgments, expectations, or goals do you need to put in the ground in order for God to live in your life in the place you find yourself now? We come here with life experiences and proficiencies that have defined and driven us our whole lives.”

But God wants something new for us. “God is asking us to bury ourselves so that new fruit can grow.”



. . . if no one phase of life is more important than another, if we are called to bury the seeds of our past and look for the resurrection of a new future, why does our culture resist so strongly the idea of growing old?



I have been exploring this topic for several years with a former student, Janice Hicks, who co-authored a book called *Redeeming Dementia* that is coming out in November. We looked at dementia through the lens of spirituality, science and theology. The more we looked at this topic and spent time with people who had dementia or were caregivers, the more hope we began to claim.

For I am convinced that  
neither death, nor life,  
nor angels, nor rulers,  
nor things present, nor  
things to come, nor  
powers, nor height, nor  
depth, nor anything else  
in all creation, will be  
able to separate us  
from the love of God in  
Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39



How do we begin to deepen our relationship to God and help others do the same through our ministries?



There are two major tasks to human life. The task of the first half of life is to create a proper container for one's life and answer some central questions...The task of the second half of life is...to find the actual contents that this container was meant to hold and deliver.

Richard Rohr in *Falling Upward*

How are we helping young people construct sturdy containers? How do we walk with those as they continue to work on the shape of those containers? And finally, how do we identify the content we need to fill them?

## Joan & Erik Erikson

- ▶ We reach a stage of transcendence that encompasses the losses of old age and the search for meaning.

Joan Erikson



Erik Erikson, the developmental theorist who spent a long time coming to terms with his identity, was surprised by life when he got older. The descriptions he had so carefully given to Stage 8, the elder years, didn't quite match his own experiences. There was a quality of life, or lack of quality, that he had not foreseen. Folding in Buddhist ideas with western psychology, Joan Erikson describes a stage of transcendence that encompasses the losses of old age and the search for meaning.

## Lars Tornstam



“We develop and change; we mature. It’s a process that goes on all our lives, and it doesn’t ever end...The mistake we make in middle age is thinking that good aging means continuing to be the way we were at 50. Maybe it’s not.”

Tornstam uses Erikson as a starting point, and considers gerotranscendence - if achieved - to be the final stage of developing towards wisdom. In his view, a frail 89-year-old who is withdrawing from activities and socialization isn't deteriorating - she is evolving. An increased need for solitude, and for the company of only a few intimates, is one of the traits Tornstam attributes to this continuing maturation.

# Gerotranscendence

- ▶ Increased feeling of affinity with past generations, & decreased interest in superfluous social interaction.
- ▶ Feeling of cosmic awareness, & redefinition of time, space, life and death.
- ▶ Individual becomes less self-occupied & more selective in choice of social and other activities.
- ▶ Individual might experience decrease in interest in material things. Solitude becomes more attractive.

Thomas, B., "Changing Aging Blogstream," Feb. 3, 2011.  
<http://changingaging.org/blog/2011/02/03/gerotranscendence/>

Gerotranscendence is a developmental stage that occurs when an individual who is living into very old age shifts their perspective "...from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction." Gerotranscendent individuals view death as a natural part of the life process; they appear to fear death less than those who are younger.

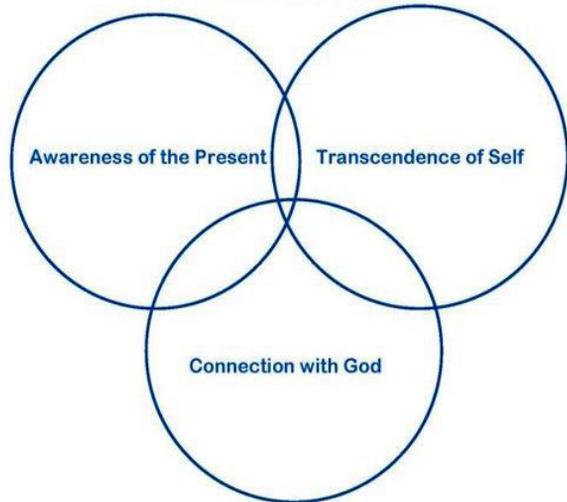
## Looking at Spirituality

1. What is spirituality?
2. What makes an experience spiritual?
3. What does it mean to grow spirituality?
4. What is the nature of a spiritual journey?
5. How does spirituality manifest itself in everyday life?
6. How are these questions shaped by and how do they influence the experience of aging?

Robert Atchley, *Spirituality and Aging*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Robert  
Atchley

## Forms of Spirituality



Those three aspects of spirituality, which are relevant to all ages, are guideposts for how to create programs, events, liturgies, prayers, here at St. Alban's.

## Elaine Brody

“My present perspective, then, is that of an 86-year-old woman who, I suppose, was prepared for old age intellectually but not emotionally. Even my children are growing into the stages of life I studied.

Common experiences of old age, such as illness and losses, were unexpected, even though expectable.”



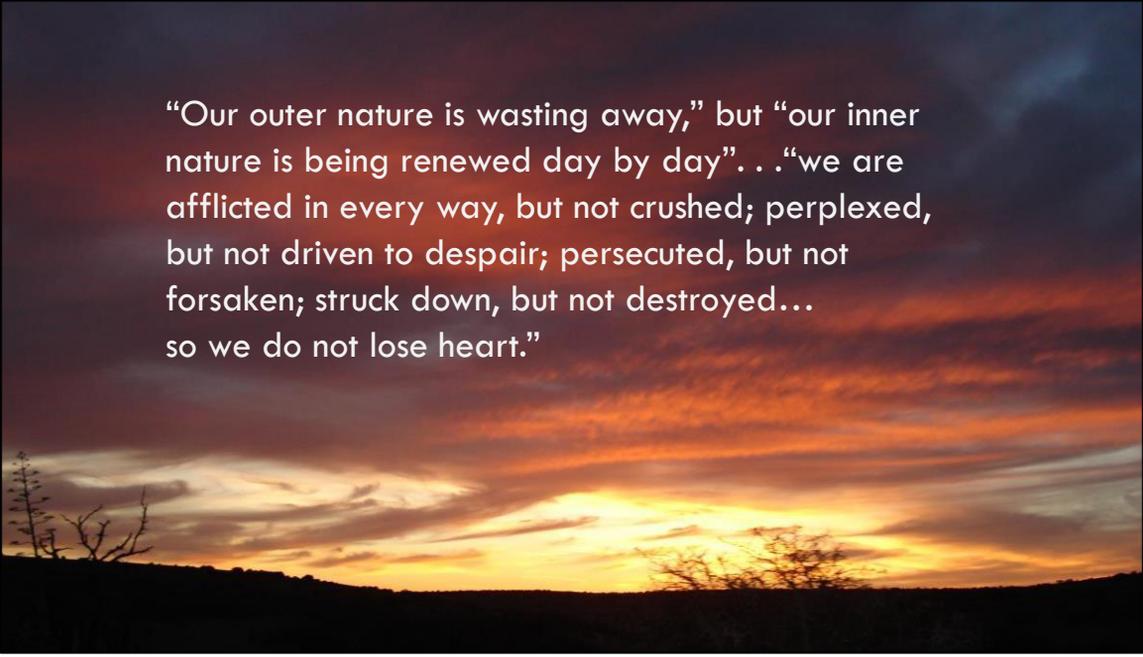
Brody, E. "On Being Very, Very Old: An Insider's Perspective," *The Gerontologist* (2010) 50 (1):1.

What I have learned – what I am learning – is that I can bone up intellectually about growing older, but that doesn't help me deal with the “unexpected, even though expectable.”



## Memory Boxes

What is comforting comes from deep memories that bring back satisfying feelings by transcending the present to enter a place of quiet joy. Entering a place of escape can bring respite and comfort, even when we are not able to live into the present because of grief, illness, dementia or other infirmity. Those working with people who have dementia have discovered the power of “memory boxes,” filled with memory cues that take the form of written stories, poetry, photos, music, scrapbooks, and other memorabilia. Older people tell us that when they tap into deep memories, they sometimes experience feelings of being a child, a young person, an adult and an older adult all in one moment. This view of time allows them to reevaluate old events to gain new perspectives, and provides opportunities to right old wrongs.



“Our outer nature is wasting away,” but “our inner nature is being renewed day by day”. . .“we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed... so we do not lose heart.”

“Growing Old” may sound like an oxymoron: two words that don’t belong together. As a culture we are far more likely to associate aging with decline rather than growth. Decline in our ability to do some of the things we used to do is clearly part of the aging process. Spiritual resiliency is nurtured in community. It is the experience of being knocked down and stunned by events and finding a hand of comfort, support, and encouragement that assists us in once again rising. It is the experience of faith, hope, and love shared through our various connections in life that nurtures our inner renewal.



As you or someone you love is confronted by the unexpectedness of the expected, tap into the power of deepest memories and the hope of the resurrection for comfort and sustenance. Sam concluded her sermon by saying, "So let the past go. Bury it in the dirt. Let it die. And watch God's glory and grace in your life grow." Do not lose heart!