

"SPIRITUALITY AND AGING"

Notes from the March Vital Aging Network (VAN) Meeting

10 to noon, Tuesday, March 11, 2003

PRESENT

Dale Anderson, Shelby Address, Shirely Benitez, Karen Bowen, Julie Bursik, Bob Callahan, Eileen Collard, William Cox (presenter), Cathy Coult, Meridel Dabel, Maureen Dalnes, Carolyn Finegan, Wayne Funk, Sharon Hagenson, Jan Hively (facilitator/recorder), Louise Huebner, Janet Jacobson, Pamela Jensen, Yleen Joselyn, Nan Just, Rich Kessler (presenter), Barbara Laporte, Jim Lenarz, Lindsey McDivitt, Barbara Muesing, Arnie Olson, Elma Olson, Robert Pope, Bob Preston, Janet Ramsey (presenter), Grace Ramseyer (hostess), Kathryn Ringham, Barbara Satin, Ray Seth, Stephanie Stabell, Gloria Swanson (presenter), Connie Thompson, Janet Triplett, Belle Undis, Lecia Van Amerongen, Lydia Volz, Mary Claire Wahlburg, Ronn Williamson

"SPIRITUAL RESILIENCY AND OLDER WOMEN", JANET RAMSEY

Janet Ramsey came from Virginia to join the Luther Seminary faculty as an associate professor last September. She is also associated with the Center for Aging, Religion and Spirituality (CARS). She recently published a book titled, "Spiritual Resiliency and Older Women" (Corwin Press, 1999), which is the topic for this VAN presentation.

Janet has always focused on resiliency and strength in her work with older adults, rather than taking a more traditional problem-solving approach. While a gerontology counselor working on her Ph.D. at Virginia Tech, Janet noticed that studies listing factors for successful aging did not include religion as a factor. She decided to focus her dissertation on spiritual resiliency and older women, working with Rosemary Blieszner, who had previously written about the role of friendship in successful aging. Now that her book about older women is published (and available in local bookstores), Janet has been pursuing similar research in the Twin Cities and Germany, but this time about older men.

It's important to define the terms:

SPIRITUALITY is defined as the lived experience of faith

RESILIENCY describes the power to bounce back

Janet has gained direction for her work from Paul Baltes, who had written about resiliency and aging in his studies of life span development. He talks about the wisdom acquired throughout life and the spiritual resiliency that is tempered by life's crises. Janet decided to study women because prior work on spiritual resiliency had focused on men. It's important to recognize the role of women as spiritual guides. For example, 8 out of 10 in her research said that a grandmother was the most important person in her faith journey. She heard a number of stories of wise old women. The stories she heard changed her own view of aging and diminished her dread of the physical, economic and social challenges likely to show up in the future. Janet was awestruck by the tremendous resiliency of her interviewees.

Janet began by talking with focus groups of Lutheran women over 65 who had been affiliated with church throughout life. She asked them, their pastors, and researchers to

nominate women who were particularly wise and strong in their faith, by asking, "To whom would you go if you had a spiritual crisis in your life?" She taped the life stories of women, both in a town in northern Germany and in rural Virginia. They had demonstrated resiliency through tragedy and loss, supported by their faith and congregation.

THEMES:

1) The importance of community. Usually we think about spirituality as an individual matter. These women were spiritually anchored in their geographic community, and thought about others who had helped them with their faith -- poets, authors, those in other countries, etc. -- as part of their community. They saw the intersection between their life stories and their community as a reflection of God's love. They are able to give and to receive help and assistance from others. They are peacemakers and are concerned about the future generations.

2) Personal relationship with God. Their faith in God was personal. "Jesus was by my side during that crisis." Their faith stories are interwoven with stories of their relationships with both God and others. They are not afraid of death.

3) Affect/emotion was a strong part of their lives. Their experiences created emotions that became part of their faith. For them, spirituality was an emotional experience. They have gone through hard times and grown.

There is an overlap among these three themes. For example: Lovie in Virginia, whose life had been spent doing hard work -- housework, farm work, craft work -- said, "God made a beautiful earth for us. It's our job to keep it beautiful for him." She talked about her faith as she experienced it, and trusted God to take of the next generation.

Anna in Germany provided a role model for Janet. Anna had been the first woman mayor and was the church council president. She had raised an Islamic student in her home. And she had also been a Nazi (Hitler Youth). She was horrified after the war, when she had married and had children, as she found out about the Nazis' atrocities. Now, she has a Greenpeace bumper sticker, reads newspapers from around the world, and stimulates conversation about the Holocaust wherever she can. This is in a city where the personal bios and the town history usually skip over the Hitler years.

Anna talked about the importance of community: "You need a handrail as you grow older -- a community to keep you steady. We are part of an enormous web of community that connects all human beings."

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"FROM AGE-ING TO SAGE-ING", WILLIAM COX AND RICH KESSLER

William Cox and Rich Kessler -- and their partner, Marion Eisner -- represent the Spiritual Eldering Institute in Minnesota. All three have had substantial life experience as counselors.

William and Rich asked the meeting participants to introduce themselves by telling their names, years of life experience, and one thing that they are looking forward to as they grow older. At the end of the go-round, Rich commented that there were 3000 years of life experience in the room. William suggested that people should always ask "How many years of life experience do you have?" rather than "How old are you?" He asked how people had felt when they announced their years of life experience:

... "I felt proud"

... "I felt more valuable. Experience connotes wisdom."

... "There is an inference of value connected with experience."

In 1995, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, then a professor at Temple University, wanted to change the view of what it means to grow old and wrote the first edition of "From Age-ing to Sage-ing." The Rabbi, who is still alive and being heard, has recognized and cultivated the role of elders sharing their wisdom with others, and acting as a witness to the spiritual growth of others. As Janet said, spirituality is an element in the fulfillment of a human being, added to what is physical and emotional and intellectual in the harvest of life. Eldering is a process through which an older adult develops into an elder. In some children, who appear to have "old souls", the elder begins to shine through early.

DEFINITION. The Rabbi took his definition of an elder from the work of Barry Barkan, a gerontologist who founded the Live Oak Living Center, a humanistically run nursing home, in El Sobrante, California. "An elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner, still with potential and whose life continues to have within it promise for, and connection to, the future. An elder is still in pursuit of happiness, joy and pleasure, and her or his birthright to these remains intact. Moreover, an elder is a person who deserves respect and honor and whose work it is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience and formulate this into a legacy for future generations." The residents of Live Oak Center say this definition every day at morning meetings and talk about how the definition relates to their experience. They are focusing on being vibrant rather than tired or drained -- living rather than dying. Everyone needs a safe space to explore and process experience.

ESSENCE. "Age-ing to Sage-ing" is redefining the role of aging in our culture. Element of the program focus on:

... Dealing with life completion

... Nourishing ourselves mentally, physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually

... Engaging in Life Review and Live Repair (forgiving oneself and others)

... Synthesizing wisdom from long life experience (harvesting wisdom, values, ideals)

... Transmitting a legacy to future generations (passing on wisdom)

SPIRITUAL INTIMACY. We need to work on the outside -- helping the shift in attitudes about aging to focus on strengths rather than needs. We must not accept putdowns about people who are growing older. We need to work on the inside. Too often, we look with fear at the angel of death in the future. Fear sucks our energy. Or we look at the past with shame and resentment, dealing with unresolved issues and unmet

hopes. Some get stuck in a box, created by thoughts of the past and/or future. We need to get out of the box by working through our fears. Ram Dass says that preparing for death is the single most spiritual practice available to us throughout our lives. We should practice dying. Similarly, we need to forgive ourselves and others for the past. William and Rich encourage journaling as a process to help do this work. The journaling process helps us explore the furthest reaches of the human spirit.

COMPASSIONATE LISTENING. The only way to get it together is together. It's important to share with others, developing spiritual intimacy, listening to feelings as well as to words. The open ear of the receiver opens the mouth of the speaker. Rich led the group through an exercise in which the participants paired up, asked deep questions from a list provided by the Spiritual Eldering Institute, and listened from the heart. When asked about their reactions to the exercise, participants responded:

... "I was surprised by my response."

... "I felt something growing."

... "I felt humbled by the experience of having someone share their deep thoughts."

... "It's nice to be asked a question that is not superficial but requires deep thought."

... "It will take practice. It's not something that we men often do."

... "I was tempted to respond and try to fix things rather than to simply listen well."

Rich also guides compassionate listening in his professional role as a mediator and teacher of conflict resolution. William does the same as a personal coach. Copies of "From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A profound new vision of growing older" by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller was available for sale (\$14). The Spiritual Eldering Institute also publishes other books and a newsletter. William closed the presentation with a poem ending, "Most beautiful of all is gracious old age."

Visit William and Rich online at <www.allaboutaging.com>

"THE CENTER FOR VITAL AGING MINISTRIES," Gloria Swanson

Gloria Swanson is a gerontologist and chaplain at Prince of Peace Church in Burnsville, where there are 10,000 parishioners including 1,500 seniors and 3,000 baby boomers about to become seniors. Most churches will be looking at one-third of their membership being 65+ in a few years. Even now, ministers say that they are spending one-half of their time on senior adult issues.

Six years ago, the Senior Ministries Center at Prince of Peace saw its role as taking seniors on a monthly field trip. With help from a Vision Team and volunteers, Gloria has shifted the direction of the center, based on research including the work mentioned by Janet, William and Rich. The vision is to bring better understanding and awareness of vital aging and to develop a wholistic ministry that will nurture both active and frail seniors, assist seniors in the search for meaning in their lives, facilitate the discovery of their giftedness, encourage their service to others, and provide opportunity for seniors to share their life stories and spiritual journeys with others. Gloria encourages every senior to use the Life Gifts Assessment and Spiritual Gifts Assessment tools on the Prince of Peace Web site.

Gloria reviewed the range of activities sponsored through the Center for Vital Aging Ministries:

- ...Information and Referral, often responding to questions from adult children, which includes a "Getting Ready for Retirement" series
- ...Lifecare, which includes support groups, health education, and house blessings when leaving a home and/or entering a new one
- ...Spiritual Care Ministry, which prepares 100 volunteers to be lay ministers, finds prayer buddies for children and teens, and provides prayer shawls for those 80+
- ...Discipleship Opportunities, which includes on-line Bible studies, reading Scripture, and LifeKeys for Sages and Sophias
- ...Service Opportunities, including an Evergreen Reading Program for the homebound, mission trips, and tutoring for children and teens
- ...Lifelong Learning Opportunities, including SALT (Senior Adults Learning Together)
- ...Transportation for church services, medical appointments, and hospital/nursing home visits
- ...Intergenerational Opportunities, including an after-school program for children with residents of a care facility
- ...End-of-Life Care and Bereavement Care

Gloria read a letter from an 80 year old parishioner, saying "I am what I am, but how much more I would like to be! I want to remain sensitive, to do the things I am to lighten the load of others, and be a role model for healthy aging." As stated in one Psalm, "...In old age, they still produce fruit. They are always green and full of sap, proving that the Lord is upright."

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NEXT VAN MEETING ON "CREATIVE AGING THROUGH THE ARTS," ON TUESDAY, APRIL 8, 10 AM TO NOON, AT THE EARLE BROWN CENTER ON THE U OF M ST. PAUL CAMPUS