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Faith Today

Life. Worth living at 45? OK, how about 60?

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

At 45 and again at 60, Jesuit Father Walter Burghardt asked himself, "Is my life worth living?"

Both times, and especially when he was 60, he answered "with a resounding and literal 'By God, yes!'"

I interviewed this well-known educator at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where he is theologian in residence. Having seen his book "Seasons That Laugh or Weep" (Paulist, 1983), where the comment above appeared, I wanted to ask him some questions about how Christians fine-tune their outlook on a life in which expectations of the future, memories of the past and a complicated life in the present moment sometimes seem to compete for attention.

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The history of the Christian community reveals "we are a pilgrim people, moving like lightning it fits and starts, advances and regressions," Father Burghardt said in our conversation.

He added: "Faith gives a vision, a way of looking at reality, how I get there, where I am going."

For this theologian, a knowledge of history — our personal history as individuals and our history as a Christian community — is crucial in developing a perspective on life.

"If we are to find our way through our future, we must find our way through our past," he writes in his book.

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For the Christian "the most demanding type of memory is memory of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ," the Jesuit says. It is in connecting the human story with the story of the suffering Jesus that Christians learn how to transform the events of their lives into an opportunity to explore God's works among them.

This suggests that growth can be hard.

Essential to growth as Christians is learning how to let go, Father Burghardt observes: "Time and again, from womb to tomb, you have to let go. And to let go is to die a little; it's painful."

But, he continues, for the journey to go forward, you have to "let go of the level of life where you are now, so as to live more fully."

Fine-tuning one's outlook as a Christian almost inevitably involves adapting to change — in oneself, in others, in the circumstances of one's life. Flannery O'Connor, the Catholic novelist and short-story writer, represents for Father Burghardt what this can involve.

At age 25 Ms. O'Connor discovered she had incurable lupus erythematosus; she died at 39 in 1964. In his book, he tells how much he admires her realism and her ability to adjust to her drastically altered situation.

He writes: "She described her human and Christian struggle as 'not struggle to submit but a struggle to accept and with passion. I mean, possibly, with joy.'"

Despite the long nights of suffering she experienced — suffering that meant she seldom was able to write more than three hours a day — her concern was for others, not for herself.

Father Burghardt points out that Ms. O'Connor was able to write to a "specially dear, troubled, questioning friend: 'You will have found Christ when you are concerned with other people's sufferings and not your own.'"

Father Burghardt adds: "I wish I had known her. There was so much Christ-life in that frail frame — grace on crutches. The end of her life simply capped all that had gone before."

The Jesuit indicated that in the course of his long life he's had to adjust to many changes. "To the challenge of change I could hardly respond 'no, thank you,'" he says.

At one point, the challenge for him was how "to react to a changing world, a changing



church, a changing priesthood...My problem was how to harmonize past and present, tradition and reform."

He comments that for him the answer was to adapt creatively to new challenges, to find ways to "continue to discover God, sense his presence" in the people and circumstances of his life.

And a sense of humor helped:

Gradually "you come to see yourself in perspective as you really are," Father Burghardt says, "a creature wonderfully yet fearfully made, a bundle of paradoxes and contradictions. In brief, you can laugh at yourself and you put your trust in Another."

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

LENT

With the passage of time comes the inevitable challenge of change, says Jesuit Father Walter Burghardt. In an interview with Katharine Bird, the theologian suggests that adapting to change means growth. And it means letting go.