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Faith Today

Lessons of the Sea

By Dolores Leckey
NC News Service

My father-in-law is 81. When his wife of 51 years died, I didn't expect that he would be able to chart a course for this new period in his life with the calm grace now so evident.

When he decided that his life as a widower could best be spent in a residence for the elderly, I was taken aback. Why would he give up his own home, his independence, when he was still healthy and functioning well?

While he was still exploring the idea, my husband and I and his other children visited the residence with him. It was an overcast, wintry day. The world seemed on hold.

Inside the residence many elderly people were gathered, waiting for the dining room to open; it was time for the noon meal.

Our visit convinced me that this was not the right place for my father-in-law to go — someone I've always viewed as intellectually and morally vigorous, in charge of his life.

Of course, he sensed my lack of enthusiasm. He wanted me and the others to speak frankly. He was, after all, gathering input for his decision.

Last spring my father-in-law called all of us and announced that he had made his decision. He would move to the residence.

He had considered all sides of the question, and he felt that what he needed at this juncture in his life was found there, including companionship and community.

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The next time I saw my father-in-law, he had moved into the Sts. Cosmas and Damian residence. And he seemed content.

How did he arrive at what seems a wise decision for him?

I think the course of his whole life prepared him for this important decision. A former British seaman, he was trained to master all pertinent information, approach situations in a disciplined manner and at the same time take the appropriate risks. He tells stories of steering the ship and holding a steady course in the most treacherous weather.

It is a memory that calls forth his pride, and that of his children and grandchildren. It is also a



The old seaman, trained for years to analyze, listen and then have the courage to act, made his decision. And though it at first startled writer Dolores Leckey, it soon became clear that the man's inner wisdom was on course.

training that he has transferred to other areas of his life.

Faced with a significant choice, my father-in-law typically studies all the available information, listens to advice from others and listens to his own wisdom. So armed, he is able to make decisions and is willing to live with their consequences. Furthermore, if he sees he is going nowhere or in the wrong direction, he's willing to change course.

He has learned the lessons of the sea.

My father-in-law was able to see in his residence for the elderly a lifestyle compatible with the structure of his inner self. For example, he values order and dependable routine. And while he enjoys companionship, he is naturally attuned to the pleasures of solitude. He walks, he reads, he observes nature's subtle changes.

At his new residence, he has a small apartment which allows for privacy. His meals are taken in common with men and women in similar circumstances. He can come and go as he chooses.

Frequently I come away from a telephone chat with my father-in-law aware that he is living each day in peace and gratitude for the good life that has been and is his. He is living in a state of what Gerald May, the psychiatrist who wrote "Spirit and Will," calls "willingness" — "saying yes to the mystery of being alive in each moment."

I would describe my father-in-law as a person moving thoughtfully and responsibly with the currents of his life as it is now. He is a man who knows himself well. Most important, he respects the person he is.

What brought him to Sts. Cosmas and Damian's?

Certainly he put the power of his mind to work as he made his decision, analyzing the values in a lifestyle that held special appeal for him. But his decision was not based on analysis alone.

My father-in-law's intuitive knowledge of himself helped to energize his will to act. Inner courage was another factor.

He is teaching me a great deal about making decisions with integrity.

(Mrs. Leckey is director of the U.S. bishops' Laity Secretariat.)