

Some reflections on growing older

A15

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The following are excerpts from *Where Do We Go From Here? A Catholic Perspective on Death and What Follows*, a book written by Msgr. William H. Shannon. It will be published in the spring of 2005 by St. Anthony Messenger Press. The material is copyrighted and used with the publisher's permission.

"Growing older" is a human phenomenon from which there is no escape. All of us, whatever our age, are each day growing older. The fifteen-year-old, desperately wanting to get that driver's lesson, is impatient to grow older. The eighty-year-old, on the other hand, is quite content to grow older at a different pace and for different goals.

There is no doubt that we live in a culture that glorifies youth and has little room for the aged. People resist getting old. A multi-billion dollar industry caters to the tastes of those who want to remain youthful-looking at all costs. As I was reflecting on this phenomenon, I remembered an event from my past. It was a Saturday more than 40 years or so ago. I went to Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Rochester to take part in a wedding. Fr. Donald Cleary was also involved in the wedding. Before Mass, he said to me: "Bill, I wish tomorrow would never come." Surprised, I asked him why. His answer was: "Because tomorrow I am going to be 50 years old." I suppose that, as I was in my thirties then, I felt sympathetic toward him as age was beginning to take its toll. Funny how my perspective has changed. Now I look back to fifty as the flowering of youth. But Don Cleary's fearfulness of growing old was symbolic of an attitude in our culture. In a culture that worships youth to the point of obsession, old age is simply not understood.

Indeed, people feel they are paying a compliment if they praise an elderly person for looking youthful. Would it maybe be much more appropriate and accurate to praise them for the dignity and beauty of their age. Thomas Merton has written: "There is a kind of foolish legend about old people, a legend by which the old are rendered acceptable because they retain some vestiges of youth. The foolish platitude that praises the old for being 'like kids' rather than for the dignity of their age." He goes on to say: "Their age has a wonderful quality which makes them worthy of special respect and love." There is a sense of mystery and wonder about them, as they are — some more than others — on the last stages of a journey that

will bring them to the threshold of eternity.

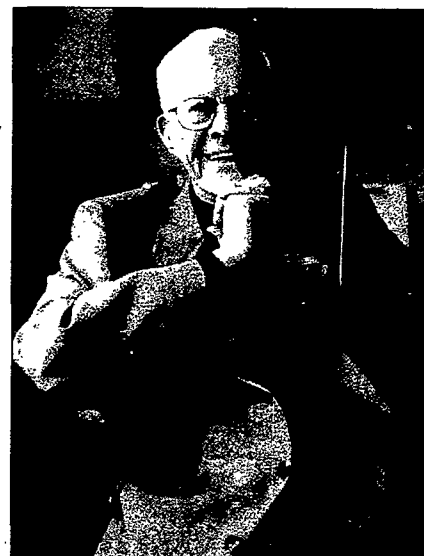
Diminishments of old age

To be sure, old age is a time of diminishment: diminishment of one's circle of friends and of one's involvement in family and society, also the diminishment of mobility and of some of life's activities. It is a time of bereavement, of letting go of activities that once were a normal part of one's life. Thus, visiting the local shopping plaza — formerly a brief part of a number of a day's activities becomes the major achievement of the day. Actions, like climbing a stairs or a satisfactory trip to the bathroom — once done almost without thought — become major accomplishments. Giving up your driver's license, because you realize that your slower reflexes are no longer an adequate match for today's rapid traffic, can be an agonizing and traumatic experience. Old age is a time of letting go; happy are those who learn to do it graciously. And blessed are those who understand what is happening and continue to deal with the aged in a way that respects their dignity and maturity.

Yet it is important and healthy to realize that life's inevitable diminishments need not mean the cessation of meaningful growth in various unexpected areas of human life; indeed, in significant areas of life, they may become opportunities for growth. It is not just that one grows in spite of diminishments, but rather a person can in some ways grow precisely because of these diminishments. Let me offer some examples of a positive approach to these diminishments.

First, old age unclutters our lives. It can give us what we are continually clamoring for during the earlier years of life: time — time for reflection, time to evaluate ourselves and our lives, time to realize the store of wisdom one has accumulated through the years. Much of the time we struggle (often unsuccessfully) to bring some kind of balance into our lives between the demands our activities impose on us, on the one hand, and the deeply human need for contemplation and reflection, on the other. The diminishments that come with age resolve that struggle and offer unrivaled opportunities for deeper growth in knowledge and wisdom.

Second, old age can become a time of self-realization, when we come to know ourselves in a way we never have before. For so much of our lives centrifugal forces draw us away from our true center. Old age



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier
Msgr. William H. Shannon.

can be a time of centration in which we find our deepest identity, our true selves. For we have reached a point where we no longer have to prove ourselves. We have a consciousness that we have succeeded in some measure in managing our lives. The seeming failures of the past no longer appear as catastrophic as they once did. Age gives perspective.

Third, old age is a time of mending fences, of repairing relationships that may have become tattered over the years. It can be a time for reconciliation and forgiveness for the past failures, whatever they may have been and whomever they may involve. This calls for courage: a willingness to talk about things that have for a long time been avoided, such as painful memories, hurt and buried feelings.

Yet another way of looking at the later years of life: they can be a time of joyful hope in a transcendent future, a future with God. They can be, for those who believe, a time to pre-

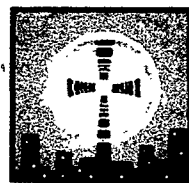
The Forum

For this month's viewpoints section, the *Courier* invited health-care experts to share their views on end-of-life issues. Their essays appear on this page as well as on pages A16 and A17.

pare, not morbidly but realistically, for that final transition to what Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* called "a far, far better life than I have ever known before." For people of faith impending death takes on a positive meaning as we experience the presence of God and answer God's call to enter into the fullness of eternal joy.

In addition, life's later years are the appropriate time to make sure that you have prepared, if you have not already done so, "A Personal Data File" that will contain the necessary information and the documents that will be needed by the person or persons who will care for you in case of your incapacitation and/or death. This will include, among other necessary documents, your Health Care Advance Directives indicating your end-of-life decisions. You should share this information with your family, loved ones and your primary care provider. The National Hospice Foundation, in researching end-of-life care, found that Americans are more willing to talk about safe sex and drugs with their children than to discuss end-of-life care with their terminally ill parents. It is estimated that only 24% of Americans put in writing how they want to be cared for when they become terminally ill.

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