

# All Souls Church, Unitarian

Covenant Group Guide

November, 2015

## “Longevity”

The afternoon knows what the morning never suspected.

Swedish proverb

In our own lives the voice of God speaks slowly, a syllable at a time. Reaching the peak of years, dispelling some of our intimate illusions and learning how to spell the meaning of life-experiences backwards, some of us discover how the scattered syllables form a single phrase.

Abraham J. Heschel

I'm not unhappy about becoming old. I'm not unhappy about what must be. It makes me cry only when I see my friends go before me and life is emptied. I don't believe in an afterlife, but I still fully expect to see my brother again. And it's like a dream life. But, you know, there's something I'm finding out as I'm aging: that I am in love with the world.

Maurice Sendak, quoted by Parker Palmer, blogging for *On Being*

Another belief of mine is that everyone else my age is an adult, whereas I am merely in disguise.

Margaret Atwood

A graceful and honorable old age is the childhood of immortality.

Pindar

What is real wisdom? It comes from life experience, well digested. It's not what comes from reading great books. When it comes to understanding life, experiential learning is the only worthwhile kind; everything else is hearsay.

Joan Erikson

## The Intelligence of the Aging Process

What can God and nature have had in mind when they designed the aging process? Why is it that just when our mental prowess, our human maturity, and our emotional freedom are at their peak, the body begins to fall apart?

James Hillman, in a brilliant book on aging titled, *The Force of Character and Lasting Life*, takes up these questions. He answers with a metaphor: The best wines have to be aged in cracked old barrels. The last years of our lives are meant to mellow the soul and most everything inside our biology conspires together to ensure that this happens. The soul must be properly aged before it leaves. There's intelligence inside of life, he asserts, that intends aging just as it intends growth in youth. It's a huge mistake to read the signs of aging as indications of dying rather than as initiations into another way of life. Each physical diminishment (from why we have to get up at night to go to the bathroom to why our skin sags and goes dry) is designed to mature the soul. And they do their work without our consent, relentlessly and ruthlessly.

The aging process, he asserts, eventually turns us all into monks and that, indeed, is its plan, just as it once pumped all those excessive hormones into our bodies to drive us out of our homes at puberty. And God again is in on this conspiracy. Aging isn't always pleasant or easy; but there's a rhyme and reason to the process. Aging deliteralizes biology. The soul finally gets to trump the body and it rises to the fore. . . . Increasingly, as we age, our task is not productivity, but reflection, not utility, but character. In Hillman's words: "Earlier years must focus on getting things done, while later years consider what was done and how."

Father Ron Rolheiser, writing in his blog about James Hillman's *The Force of Character*

## In the Nursing Home

She is like a horse grazing  
a hill pasture that someone makes  
smaller by coming every night  
to pull the fences in and in.  
She has stopped running wide loops,

stopped even the tight circles.  
She drops her head to feed; grass  
is dust, and the creekbed's dry.  
Master, come with your light  
halter. Come and bring her in.

Jane Kenyon, *Collected Poems*.

Jane Kenyon was poet laureate of New Hampshire when she died of leukemia at age 47.

Her husband, poet Donald Hall, writes beautifully about the narrowing circles  
in his own life in his book, *Essays after Eighty*.

## **What We Owe the Old**

What we owe the old is reverence, but all they ask for is consideration, attention, not to be discarded and forgotten. What they deserve is preference, yet we do not even grant them equality. One father finds it possible to sustain a dozen children, yet a dozen children find it impossible to sustain one father.

Perhaps this is the most distressing aspect of the situation. The care for the old is regarded as an act of charity rather than as a supreme privilege. In the never dying utterance of the Ten Commandments, the God of Israel did not proclaim: Honor Me, Revere Me. He proclaimed instead: Revere your father and your mother. There is no reverence for God without reverence for father and mother.

In Jewish tradition the honor for father and mother is a commandment, the perfect fulfillment of which surpasses the power of man. There is no limit to what one ought to do in carrying out this privilege of devotion. God is invisible, but my mother is His presence...."

Rabbi Abraham Heshel, at the 1961 White House Conference on Aging,  
and from his published essay, *To Grow in Wisdom*, collected in his book, *The Insecurity of Freedom*

## **Learning Life Lessons from One Another**

As I've gone through life, it's rarely been the words of history's great thinkers — Aristotle, William Blake, Confucius, the Dalai Lama, Jesus or even Deepak Chopra — that have most influenced me. Instead the most invaluable guidance has usually been an offhand remark or observation by an everyday person, often a friend.

When I was moving from Boston to Minneapolis last year, I didn't know what to do with all the stuff I had from my late parents' estate. How could I get rid of my mother's high school diploma, or my father's Navy discharge papers? Or their love letters from World War II? I was talking about my dilemma on the phone with my friend Kathy, who lives in San Francisco. "Everything has a life," she said.

With those four little words I was finally able to let go of my parents' space-taking objects, even if some of them had to go into trash bags. Now whenever I drop an expensive wine glass on the kitchen floor, I don't waste too much time getting upset. Its life is over, I figure, even if it was a short one.

Excerpted from John Stark's blog post, *Learning Life's Most Valuable Lessons from Friends and Ordinary People*, for the website, *Next Avenue*

## **We are a River**

Our life has not been an ascent  
up one side of a mountain and down the other.  
We did not reach a peak,  
only to decline and die.  
We have been as drops of water,  
born in the ocean and sprinkled on the earth  
in a gentle rain.  
We became a spring,  
and then a stream,  
and finally a river flowing deeper and stronger,  
nourishing all it touches  
as it nears its home once again.

Don't accept the modern myths of aging.  
You are not declining.  
You are not fading away into uselessness.  
You are a sage,  
a river at its deepest  
and most nourishing.  
Sit by a river bank some time  
and watch attentively as the river  
tells you of your life.

Lao Tzu, from *The Sage's Tao Te Ching: Ancient Advice for the Second Half of Life*

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

1. Do you have a sense of yourself evolving or having evolved over time? Are there positive aspects to your evolution? Negative aspects?
2. What do you think of James Hillman's ideas about the meaning of old age and disability? What are your own ideas?
3. Can you name one or two memorable life lessons that you've passed along or that have passed along to you?
4. Is your experience of All Souls helping you more deeply understand lifespan and longevity?

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