

“Spiritual Tools for Growing Old, Part 2” by Michele Frome

April 15, 2018



3rd Sunday of Easter

Last month, I presented the first in a series of sermons about the spiritual challenges of aging and what I’m learning from my students at the nursing home. That sermon addressed the spiritual challenge of feeling worthless, and the spiritual tools of acceptance and gratitude.

I’ve been volunteering in nursing homes for over 14 years. Currently, I work as a volunteer chaplain at the Hebrew Home nursing facility in Rockville. For the last two years, I’ve been leading a Bible Study class for Christians there.

These sermons are not about me – they’re about the people who live at the nursing home. It’s about them because they are role models for aging.

If we live long enough, each of us will live with diminishment and disabilities. For those of us who feel we are already living with diminishment and disability, we probably have more to come. I would prefer to deny this reality. But this is where the spiritual challenges of aging lie for me.

I'd really like to introduce you to some of the extraordinary people I've gotten to know at the Hebrew Home.

Five of the participants in the Christian Bible Study class have advanced MS, a central nervous system disease that blocks the flow of information between the brain and the rest of the body, resulting in the inability to use various body parts and body functions. All five of these women are unable to walk; four are unable to use the toilet, two cannot lift their arms to feed themselves, and one has lost most of her vision.

All five of these women are in their 50s and 60s – not what we would call aged, but definitely living with diminishment.

One of the spiritual issues they are teaching me about is insecurity due to the loss of control. As a result of illness or aging, some parts of our body lose the ability to do what they did before. When something we've relied on our entire lives no longer works, it's really unsettling. It damages our psyches. It's common for people experiencing this to say, "I don't know what's happening – I just don't feel right."

We've lost our anchor, and we feel adrift.

When we have to rely on others for things we used to do for ourselves, we feel a real loss of control. And if we doubt the reliability of our helpers, our sense of safety and security is gone. We feel trapped, helpless in a world we can no longer control. Usually, we become anxious. This anxiety may express itself as anger, fear, depression, or stoicism.

Terry, a Jewish resident at the Hebrew Home, frequently

complains about her loss of control. A while back, she said, "it's bad enough that I can't walk and I can't see, now I can't even use the toilet!" Like many, she is now incontinent, and dependent on staff to clean her and change her. Terry was angry with herself, because what she was doing now really violated her own sense of propriety; for a while, she also imagined that a certain staff person who used to be her friend now hated her, because of what the staff person had to do.

Last week, my friend Melanie got a pic line installed in her arm so she could receive IV antibiotics. When I saw her the next day, the IV pole was in her room, but there was no IV line, no antibiotics. "The IV machine didn't work," she told me, "nobody seems to care that I'm just lying here, wasting my time – I'm afraid I'm never going to get over this infection."

One of my spiritual care textbooks says that the way to deal with fear caused by lack of control is to identify the fear, name it, claim it, and talk about why it intimidates you. In that way, our sense of fear is replaced by some sense of control – we don't regain control of the situation, but we regain control of ourselves.

I've been taught that the role of the chaplain is to listen to the sufferer talk about their suffering. It doesn't make the darkness go away; but it makes the cave dweller better able to live and function in the darkness.

But my friends Terry and Melanie did not achieve relief by talking about it. I think dealing with the spiritual problem of insecurity calls for more than just naming and claiming it. And the residents at the nursing home seem to agree.

What are their tools for dealing with this spiritual challenge? Today, I want to identify three of them.

First, they believe in a power greater than themselves. As a chaplain, I've witnessed this belief not just in the

Christians I work with, but also in people of other faiths, or no faith at all. Some of them call this power God, some call it Jesus, some call it universal order, some don't have a name for it. Some view it as something inside of themselves, others as something outside of themselves; regardless, it's something bigger than us humans and it's something that they can rely on somehow.

It's a spiritual anchor.

Second, those who seem to have the strongest faith in this power have some kind of regular spiritual practice. Some of them read a page in a daily meditation booklet, like the *Daily Word* or *Our Daily Bread*. Several of them read from the Bible regularly. Catherine, an Irish Catholic, read the Catholic Daily Missal and prayed the Rosary every morning, without fail.

I've observed that having a spiritual discipline provides my students with something to look forward to, something over which they have some control, and something that reminds them of their belief in a higher power. I think it also reduces their sense of insecurity.

Third, they pray. Each week in my class, I try to ask a thought-provoking question that everyone can answer. The question is often some variation of "what do you do when you are suffering, or angry, or afraid, or whatever." Most of the time, the most frequent answer is "I pray."

Prayer seems to be the most commonly used spiritual tool for dealing with the spiritual challenges of diminishment. It's used by people with a daily spiritual practice, and by those without one. It's even used by people who don't believe in God – I know this, because I witnessed it in my own father in the last decade of his life, before he passed at the age of 96.

Some people pray a familiar prayer like the Lord's Prayer, others speak about what's on their mind. Some pray in the

morning, some in the evening, some only when they think about it. When Francis talks about seeking solace, she usually says, "I talk to the wall at night."

Regardless of the words we use, what we're really saying is what we heard read this morning in Psalm 4: God, "answer me when I call...give me relief from my distress!"

Now, I need to talk about the first scripture reading we heard this morning, from the Book of Acts, chapter 3. In this passage, Peter cures a man who was unable to walk from birth, and then explains this miracle by saying that faith in Jesus gave this man perfect health.

I have a really hard time with this passage. Here's why:

In one of my early classes at the nursing home, a woman said, "I believe in Jesus and I pray, and I know God is going to make me walk again." This was a wheelchair-bound woman with advanced MS. I had no idea what to say, so I remained silent.

The next week, another woman asked to talk with me after class. Maria told me about having a stroke, and the events leading up to her becoming wheelchair-bound and living in a nursing home. Then she started to break down emotionally. "I see these other people in wheelchairs, doing physical therapy, becoming able to walk again, and going home. Why can't I walk again? Why can't I go home? I guess my faith in Jesus isn't good enough.

I do not believe that Maria was disabled because of insufficient faith. I do not believe that greater faith or more prayer would have restored her ability to walk.

I offer up Prayer as a tool for dealing with spiritual challenges, but not as a tool for reversing our disabilities or regaining our control. Prayer doesn't change our circumstances, it changes our heart. As we heard in Psalm 4, many wonder if good even exists anymore, but God puts joy in

our hearts – – “a joy greater than being full of bread and new wine.” In other words, a joy greater than having our material needs satisfied.

I learn this lesson over and over again. Most recently, I learned it from Catherine, the woman who prayed the Rosary every day. For the last few months of her life, she was too weak and too tired to attend class, so I'd try to see her in her room every week. I'd ask, “how are you doing?” In a very weak voice, she'd usually answer, “not good.” When I would ask, “what can I do for you”, she would always say, “pray with me.” Catherine could do almost nothing with her diminished body. But she could still pray.

What did prayer do for her? It gave her comfort. I think it also gave her the strength and courage to endure. How? By opening up the channel for her to receive love from God, and enabling her to give love back to God in return. Amen.