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Spirituality & Aging

Let me tell you about my friend Naomi. I met her in her early 90s when her second husband of 30 years was very ill. She took her one morning of weekly respite to come to our writing group. We had to work hard to remember what she was going through because she was so interested in what was happening to each one of us and expressed such joy in little things.

Deep connections have been forged in our group over the years, as we share our personal thoughts by reading aloud the results of fast writing exercises. Naomi thrills us repeatedly when she reads (or more recently has someone read for her due to macular degeneration). She might write about looking at a flower nearly a century ago while lying on the ground under the Prairie sky, about the pain of watching a loved one fade toward death, or about anticipating the birth of her first great-grandchild. We have absorbed so much for our own aging from her matter-of-fact manner of naming the losses of age and accepting them just as naturally as the happy and sad events of earlier stages of life.

Now at 97, twice-widowed, she has lost much of her hearing, vision, and mobility and resides in assisted living near her daughter, but far from her sister and friends. When members of our group (35 years younger) connect with her now, she is mostly the same person -- keeping track of what's happening in our lives and finding something in which to rejoice. She continues to ask our opinion of a poem stirring in her mind.

Naomi has taught us about her God through the poems she began writing about 15 years ago (in her early 80s). She distills experience into a few direct words and vivid images. Her God is near; she longs for a closer relationship still.

Approaching the century mark and having lost so many family and friends, Naomi contemplates death and dying. She tells us that heaven would be "a rushing river/on my way to God" and that "Loving, the very best/goes on and on/past shadows, past Death."

Life review is a central ingredient of the spiritual work of old age. Taking advantage of the reflection propelled by frequent writing, she has been harvesting memories through all seasons. Recording memories within poems has become her passionate legacy. It has also supported her search for spiritual wholeness, even while relinquishing roles and letting go of possessions and home.

In grief, she realizes that forgetting can be too great a loss: "If memories are fading blooms/
I welcome pain to keep them fresh."

Anticipating heaven within her memories, she wants again: "to see the bannock bread/half eaten/to taste the wild grape jelly/to taste the tartness/to see it as communion."

A central purpose of old age is to draw closer to God by finding the true self undiminished by losses of age through eyes enlivened with life experiences. We have been learning about spiritual eldering from Naomi. Her choice for joy opens unforeseen doors for us and makes her definitely worth sharing.

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Am I Old?

If clouds excite me remembering;
If babies, small children
and old hymns start tears;
If mornings bring thanksgiving,
and evenings gentle peace;
If older ones still need me,
and younger ones seem
not to mind my years,
Am I old?

by Naomi Wingfield