

Counselling and Spirituality, in press.

SPIRITUALITY AND AGING.

Robert Atchley

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*We deem those happy who from the experience of life
have learnt to bear its ills without being overcome by them.*

~ Carl Jung

Character is refined in the laboratory of aging.

~ James Hillman

*Every life matters immensely.
Every well-lived and completed life
helps in healing the world.*

~ Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi

*The only thing that can save us as a species is seeing how
we're not thinking about future generations in the way we live.
What's lacking is generativity, a generativity that will promote
positive values in the lives of the next generation.*

~ Erik H. Erikson

This comprehensive text, intended for both clinical and academic audiences, has rich offerings for pastoral care practitioners, parish nurses, and educators of spiritual professionals.

A recognized North American leader in the area of Aging and Spirituality, Bob Atchley has conducted a 20-year longitudinal study of aging and adaptation. Learning from elders along his own spiritual journey has also shaped his view of spiritual development across the life span. This volume is founded upon an intriguing integration of these perspectives as well as gerontological research, philosophy, and the writings of sages. At the same time, Atchley highlights the need for more research, especially following spiritual development from middle age through to very old age -- now that living to one's 80's and 90's is becoming a norm.

Atchley provides a framework and resources to consider the ways in which spiritual development occurs in later life – concepts for working with aging individuals from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds. The term 'spiritual' encompasses "beliefs, practices, and experiences that loosely revolve around an inner domain of human experience." Qualities of spiritual experience identified by older research participants include stillness, peace, mystery, clarity of seeing, meaning, universal love in the face of suffering, connection with the ground of being, wonder, trust,

transformation, call to serve, and desire to pursue a spiritual journey. Spiritual development can occur both naturally and consciously as one ages and represents the higher possibilities of adult development. The spiritual narrative is particularly valuable for looking at how spiritual identity emerges with life experiences over a lifetime.

The author's vision for later life is informed by the seminal work of gerontologists Erik Erikson, Lars Tornstam, and H.R. Moody, among others and by the lives of teaching sages Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi and Ram Dass. Atchley highlights spirituality as one domain targeted for growth by the aging process: "Focus on the inner life, service to others, and deepening connection with the sacred are bright spots of growth and development for most elders." Specific chapters focus on the ways in which people can grow by reflecting on life experiences in the context of an inner spiritual journey and how the opportunities and ever increasing losses of old age contribute to this process toward elderhood, toward becoming a sage. As well, one chapter addresses how our evolving personhood from active aging to increasing physical and/or mental frailty can underlie a "service rooted in spiritual being" as we shift toward 'being vs. doing'.

In regard to these central aging themes, Huston Smith's autobiography offers a unique look into the spiritual development of this nonagenarian writing from his residence in longterm care. Smith is widely known for his popular text and media appearances on comparative religions, lifelong study of the world's religions, and his personal integration of diverse beliefs and practices into his foundational Christian faith (Smith & Payne, 2009)

The sometimes complex discussions in this book are enlivened throughout with illustrations of older people dealing with spiritual issues, either explicitly or implicitly. We are encouraged to find highly spiritually developed elders as our own personal guides and to consider what sort of legacy we wish to leave our family, our community, and our world.

Atchley's approach is aimed toward assisting individuals to identify the questions important for them to ask to spur further spiritual development. Appendices include two self-assessment instruments on spiritual identity – one multiple-choice and one with open-ended questions to be completed repeatedly as part of a conscious growth process. Suggestions for helping frail elders with spiritual development include specific attention to fostering personhood of cognitively frail individuals through relationship. We need to learn to listen to the spiritual narratives – this can take extra time and patience – rather than making assumptions about a person's spiritual life. Key among his recommendations for facilitators is that we be consciously working on our own spiritual development as we work with elders – to our mutual benefit.

Atchley (2012) summarizes messages from this book in a keynote article for a new volume on spirituality in later life, excerpted here:

In many ways, aging in today's post-industrial society is like improvisational theater. We have the freedom to decide which 'I' we will bring to our actions—the

personal 'I' with its desires, fears, and agendas, or the transpersonal 'I' with its openness and clarity. This freedom is both exciting and scary. It is exciting because it is life on the frontiers of consciousness. It is scary because we have to pay attention and fully engage the dance of life and we're not sure we can do it. After 45 years of interviewing aging people in all walks of life, I am sure of at least one thing. The overwhelming majority of us can do it.

References

Atchley, B. (2012, in press). Contemplation, mysticism, and the spirituality of later life. In Anthony, B. (Ed.), *Spirituality in later life*. Chapel Hill NC: Second Journey.

Smith, H., & Paine, J. (2009). *Tales of wonder: Adventures chasing the divine*. New York: HarperOne.

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