

# Aging with the Glow of Authenticity

We come to know ourselves fully as we age, and perhaps that's why our desire for more authentic relationship increases with time. We grow impatient with superficial acquaintance and want the stuff of real friendship: abiding commitment, steady faithfulness, refreshing honesty, and endearing affection. To love and be loved for our true selves, that's the standard I'm unwilling to compromise in my own second-half-of-life relationships. As Mary Carnes, a pastor and advocate of the Senior Companions program says, "We are more than our bodies. We are also mind and spirit. At every age we crave not just life, but enrichment of our lives through authentic relationships with others who care about us."

So, what, exactly, is the connection between a whole life—one that integrates our physical, mental, and spiritual self—and authentic relationship? James Hollis, a Jungian analyst and author of *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life—How to finally, really grow up*, says, "Despite the blandishments of popular culture, the goal of life is not happiness, but meaning." The central paradox of our feel-good culture, he says, is that we grow progressively more uncertain and less persuaded that our lives really mean something. "Feeling good is a poor measure of a life," he says, "but living meaningfully is a good one."

I like Hollis's claim because I believe that aging is part of a developmental process in which we keep on growing in pursuit of meaning. Everyone who has breath, whether 8 or 80 years old, is growing. Our culture would like for us to think that there's a point of "arrival." I have to admit, it's tempting to

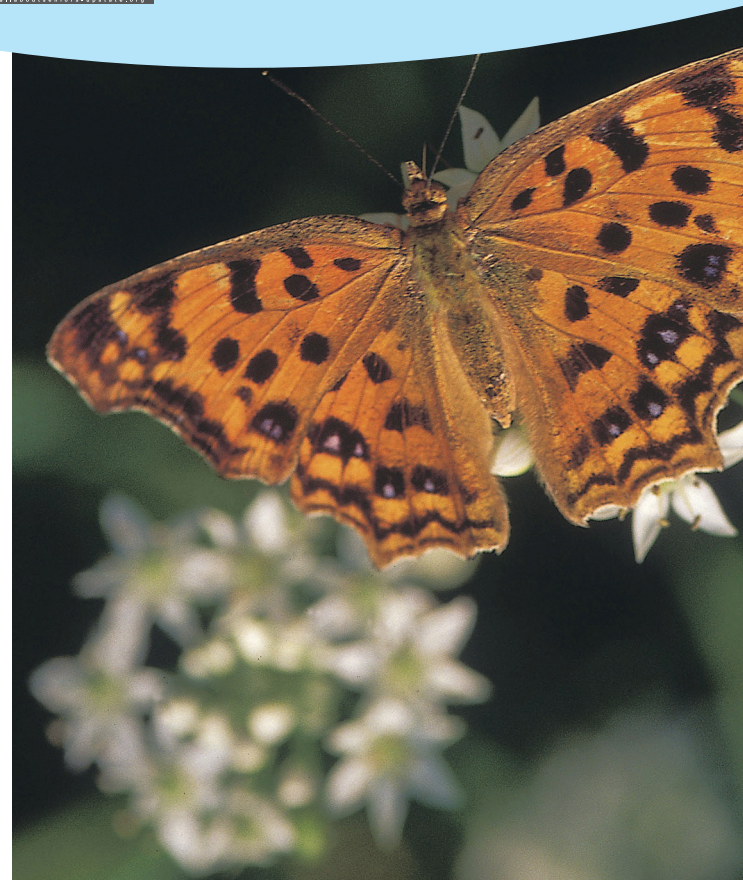
think that there could be some sun-lit glen without struggle or conflict, without demand for increased consciousness and deeper reflection.

Interestingly enough, says Hollis, "There is such a place—it is called Death. Without journey, risk, conflict, we are already spiritually dead and are simply waiting for the body to drop away, as well. Then we will have missed the meaning of our being here in the first place."

So let me again pose my original question. What is the connection between a whole, integrated life, and authentic relationship? The simple answer is that to relate authentically, we must first become authentic. So how do we do that?

Personally, I've made three decisions that I think are helping me become a more authentic human being. First, I've decided to commit myself to life-long growth. In the second half of life, this means soul work, the often painful work of bringing the ego into alignment with the will of the soul. I think of the soul as that intuited sense of presence that is other than, larger than, and sometimes at odds with the ego, that smaller self-serving part of ourselves that can't see beyond its own needs and wants.

Soul work is demanding work. It often requires that we ask ourselves: How will I embrace life even when I'm in peril and afraid; how will I find the meaning for me in this suffering? In my life, I've had to face the fears that rise with the loss of a spouse, a major career change, a cross-country move, and an empty nest. It's scary to be 50, 60, or



70-something and find your identity suddenly altered with little sense of what will replace it. I'm sure that many of you can tell your own stories of loss, suffering, and the consequent adjustments life demanded of you. Identifying and accepting this work contributes to the enlargement of soul; flight from it perpetuates a "victim" mentality and keeps us on the run from our own larger life. I am convinced that this larger life awaits us, right here and now, if we have the courage to pursue it.

The second way I've decided to live more authentically is by attending to my soul and its invitation to a larger frame of reference and an eternal perspective beyond time, fear, and security. In doing so, I've become acquainted with a larger presence that reminds me I am never alone when alone, that there is another that provides continuity to my fractured days and a transcendent wholeness to my broken life. I'm learning to recognize the sound and authority of that still small voice within.

The Buddhists tell the story of a man fleeing from a tiger who plunged over a cliff and saved himself only by catching hold of a small strawberry plant growing between the rocks of the precipice. Caught between the tiger above and the gorge below, the man clung to the bush with one hand, thought for a moment, and with the other hand picked

the most luscious strawberry he had ever eaten in his entire life. In an essay on the spirituality of aging, Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister and spiritual director, says, "It is age that teaches us to enjoy life, to savor every moment of it, to spend our time on what counts, to be present where we are and see it for the first time."

This brings me to my third point about growing into authenticity, and that is to practice stillness with the anticipation that this presence that is larger than ourselves will reach out to us with the gift of grace and that we will have the eyes to see it. In our Senior Companions program, we train volunteers in a ministry of presence. This is another way of saying that we teach them to be still before another human being, as if for the first time. We ask them to openly receive and reflect back whatever gift their senior gives them. Our volunteers, especially those who visit poor and disabled elderly persons, are constantly amazed at the presence of strawberries everywhere! Grace abounds but we have to become still to recognize it.

Authentic living teaches us how to live without living for things; how to love without loving for personal gain; how to embrace life beyond the million little deaths we experience along the way. This is the legacy that authentic

living and aging begets for those who share our lives and follow behind us. Bioethics Professor and Author Sherwin Nuland says, "Old age is a time to become contemplative, to recognize our value to people younger than ourselves."

One of my dear friends often reminds me that living in the present flow of grace is something that is better "caught than taught." The best way I know of to pass on the legacy of graceful presence is through participation in intentional relationship. I call it spiritual friendship--journeying with others in a way that we "catch" the principles of authentic living by the way we relate to each other. Over the next few days, when you're with family and friends, pause to be mindful about what it is that others "catch" when they're with you. Is it grace?

Spiritual friendship creates relational safety as we commit ourselves to honoring one another even when we disagree on matters of opinion or lifestyle. Our corresponding soul work enlarges our capacity to accept the unfinished work in other people because we have been willing to face things in ourselves that are in need of more growth or correction. Spiritual friendship is patient, and depends on that eternal perspective that we gain when we entrust ourselves and our relationships to a greater presence. It is then that we remain faithful

to and honest with one another over the long haul. In the meantime, we avoid judgments and remain open to moments of sweet surprise and unexpected possibility. The strawberries are out there, often in the place we least expect them!

I'd like to invite you to give yourself as a gift, the kind that rises from a still place in yourself and allows you to enter the heart of another, all the while listening for the divine heartbeat. May you share moments of real inner presence with others, along with the sense of fullness, joy, and meaning that accompany it! And may your heart be touched by the inexpressible beauty of authentic human connection that is yours for the choosing every day of your life.

*Kathy Russ coordinates the Senior Companions program, an ecumenical ministry of presence that matches seniors with volunteers whose friendship adds vitality and meaning to their lives. For more information on how to apply, either as a senior or a volunteer, contact Kathy at 864-242-2233, ext. 207(office), 864-320-2385 (mobile) or [kathyr@ccharities.net](mailto:kathyr@ccharities.net). Senior Companions is a community program sponsored by Catholic Charities in cooperation with Bon Secours St. Francis Health System.*