Graceful Aging

A Reflection

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Through sharing his own personal journey, the author shows how attending to and cultivating relationships of love, striving to practice forgiveness and embracing an attitude of thankfulness can provide building blocks for a graceful journey of aging.

For many of us, the idea of gaining a few more years of life would be a welcome gift—if only that gift came without further aging. Society’s emphasis on youth attempts to sell a concept of aging as something to fear. Yet, graceful aging places a measure on aging beyond such things as money, success, and social status, and thrusts it in the realm of disposition, character, and fulfillment. Inherent in graceful aging is that our lives have mattered and still do matter to others. With graceful aging, we learn the art of giving love and receiving love. We find a way to make sense of our past, forgive those who’ve harmed us, seek forgiveness from those we’ve harmed, and desire to give back what we can.

Graceful Aging: Receiving Love, Giving Love

The felt experience of being loved is quite remarkable. Research indicates that being in a loving relationship can alter brain chemistry and thus quiet the demons of depression and despair (Cozolino 2008). A loving relationship will have this affect on our brains no matter our age, provide a corrective experience (to any experience that has occurred leaving the recipient with persistent doubts about

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his or her self-worth), and reduce our tendency toward despondency (Vaillant 2002; Cozolino 2006).

There is little doubt that the impact of a loving relationship on well-being leads to greater life-satisfaction. There is also little doubt that giving love is as important as receiving love (Vaillant 2002). The great endowment each human has received by virtue of God’s creative act—that we are good, we are loved, and therefore we are lovable—must be shared in order to build the endowment to ever increasing heights. This endowment is immutable no matter what others may do to convince us otherwise. The more we understand this endowment, the more we practice giving it away, the more our endowment will increase. It is the paradox of loving: by loving another, I find love and grow in my capacity to love.

Of course there are limits to this. It is not easy loving an addict, a liar, a cheat, a murderer. We could not be good at loving unless we were being loved by someone in return; remember, Jesus always had the Father. The risk associated with loving another requires that we step outside of ourselves and engage in the messiness of relationships. It is the risk of loving a suspicious population called humanity.

**Graceful Aging by Making Sense of the Past**

I have often thought about a comment my father once made while I was in my early twenties. We had been discussing religion and God’s love, a subject neither of us were well equipped to discuss. I happened to say, without ever having the felt experience of it at the time, that our lives were a sign of God’s great desire to love. My father looked at me, raised his knobby finger, and said, “God doesn’t love us!” I was aghast. My father continued, “If God really loved us, then why are we here?” Derision was written across his sneer.

“Didn’t you hear what I just said, Dad? We are here because God loves us!”

He waved me off like a pesky fly.

I thought about the conditions of my father’s childhood, the way he was raised, the amount of death he witnessed as a child, and the struggles his parents had in demonstrating their affection for him. In my father’s words, I heard the pain of rejection he often felt, the dreams unrealized, the drudgery of life. I more fully understood him and more fully understood his deep sadness. And yet, my father went to Mass every week and confession at least twice a month. No god of my dad’s could accuse him of not doing what was required, no sir-eee. Love—shmove! Like the song says, “What’s love got to do with it?”

My father heard the message of God’s love each week he attended Mass—a message he never felt. My father died at the age of seventy-two, cancer riddling his body, surrounded by a family with little understanding about how to care for him. The image of my father lying on that hospital bed and me having no idea how to comfort him has been etched in my mind.
My father cannot speak, he cannot move, his eyes are glassy, but I know he knows we are there. I think about how sorry I am I cannot love him better. I take a little pink sponge stick, soak it in water, and place it on his lips. He sucks up the water. It seems to help. I repeat this six or seven more times. He coughs… Oh, God, have I hurt him? The next day he dies while my mother and some of my siblings are in the room having a conversation. My sister turns just when my father takes his last breath and lets it out slowly.

Seventy-two! As I near my fifth decade, I imagine seventy-two being so young. My father smoked unfiltered Camels from the age of sixteen until he was forty-one. He never drank alcohol until he turned forty-two, exactly twenty minutes after he laid his mother to rest. My grandmother had a tight hold on her children and he was a dutiful son: he would not imbibe. He started making up for lost time at that point and began an unhealthy love affair with the “spirits.”

When I think about all the vice that negatively influences longevity: smoking, drinking, negativity, cynicism, mutually reciprocating toxic relationships, no exercise; I think that my father beat the odds to last as long as he did. I wonder how he made sense of his childhood, why his parents treated him the way they did, and whether or not he really separated from the iron hold his mother had on him.

Daniel Seigel in his book, Mindshift: the New Science of Personal Transformation, suggests that our ability to establish happy, healthy relationships with others is affected, in great measure, by how we have made sense of what we have lived through, most especially the manner in which we were raised by our parents. I wonder about how much more life my father would have had had he thought about a few questions: What was good about growing up in old New Castle? What did you appreciate about your friends, school, your siblings, parents? What was your parents’ story that led them to treat you the way they did? What were some of the successes you experienced in your life?

How can answering questions such as these affect the aging process?

Graceful Aging versus the Prison of Emotional Forts: Beware

Students of human development know that the process of psychologically separating from primary caregivers and becoming autonomous is revisited throughout our lives. This process initially occurs through the ministrations of our parents. When the process is thwarted by overly domineering parents or overly domineering experiences (e.g., trauma), we build emotional forts that protect us from perceived threats and yet encage a clever enemy within those forts. Failing to take the time to consider what we’ve lived through and why leaves us with an opaque filter, leading us to live at the mercy of our impulses and emotions, seeing danger where none lies.
Experiences, especially those in which we have been mistreated, construct the walls of our emotional fort. An emotional fort provides the appearance of protection against pain and buffers us from personal growth. In our emotional forts, we are quick to perceive everyone’s behavior through suspicion and mistrust, categorizing those actions as a threat. Our bodies go on alert and we are prepared to defend ourselves from unwanted breaches of our personal protocols. What I mean by a “personal protocol” is that set of thoughts and behaviors that governs the manner in which we welcome another’s desire for relationship.

The more vigilant or suspicious we are, the easier it is for us to leap into our emotional forts and protect ourselves from another’s advance. The walls of our forts are constructed of emotions that turn another’s innocuous and/or genuine desires for relationship into spears and arrows that must be deflected. The incredulity on our faces can blast away such arrows as will our sharp tongues or hostile tones. All the while, the enemy within our emotional forts eggs us on, reinforcing the defensive structures of our walls, saying things to us like, “Don’t believe him, he’s out to harm you”; or making definitive statements of isolation, “Don’t ever allow yourself to be vulnerable to a single person, otherwise, you will set yourself up for the kind of pain you’ve always experienced.” Sadly, our emotional forts create enemies where friends may have been and we develop the protocol for a self-fulfilling prophecy. Loving relationships are thwarted by emotional forts and thus are antithetical to graceful aging.

The more we live without making sense of what we have lived through, the more powerful our emotional forts become. Eventually, we live with such cognitive distortions regarding people’s intentions that they become the norm. Individuals like my father, whose wounds are so deep, live as if they are powerless to change, adopting a self-imposed incarceration, always feeling the victim, never a survivor.

Graceful Aging and Self-Compassion

At my father’s funeral, I told my siblings that my father’s greatest treasure was his children, and though he struggled as his parents did demonstrating his affection for his greatest treasure, we were privy to a new relationship with him, if we were so inclined. He could now say, with a deep abiding sense of joy and a genuine desire to reconcile, what many children hunger to hear: I love you and always have.

Knowing my father’s story assists me in making sense of my life and propels me on the road to knowing myself, my values, my beliefs, and how I affect those around me. Thinking about what has happened, how I was affected by it and its continual influence on me, leads me out of my emotional forts and the cognitive distortions that thwart graceful aging. In this process, I am moved by my own suffering and seek ways to change my reactions in order to minimize my angst.
and maximize my capacity to love. This is one of the tenants of self-compassion (Neff 2008).

I ask myself the very questions I had wanted to ask my father, and if need be, return to them whenever life requires me to do so. Humility and unconditional acceptance are my companions. This tandem strengthens my resolve to surrender my heart, seek reconciliation with my God whom I have come to believe will never stop loving me, and repair my relationships with those I have harmed. This type of self-compassion leads me to take responsibility and hold myself accountable for my actions. Self-compassion is not about making excuses; it is about the work of self-love that Jesus has commanded me to do (Mk 12: 31).

Reconciliation and Forgiveness: The Building Blocks of Graceful Aging

I have harmed many. I do it on a daily basis. At times, I wonder if I should simply carry around a recorded message, “In the likely event that I cause you harm, understand that my fervent desire is to prevent such events. Please accept my apologies.” And yet, that would be a selfish thing for me to do. Reconciliation requires that I act in humility and solicit another’s forgiveness. Graceful aging involves forgiveness and reconciliation (Vaillant 2002).

I am reminded of the passage from Luke (7:47), in which Jesus tells Simon the Pharisee that the “the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” If I recognize that I have harmed my friend or acquaintance and have not sought to repair the relationship, then I am either insensitive to a fault or under the delusion that I do not need to engage in such actions. If I recognize that I have caused harm but I am fearful of seeking repair, as that may cause me more harm, then I am storing within the seeds of insensitivity that wither my heart and increase the walls of my emotional fort; once again, I will show little love. Actively seeking to repair or reconcile after I have caused harm to another is critical for my integrity and the integrity of the relationships in which I am engaged. Yet, I must be willing to demonstrate such a desire from the disposition of authenticity. Psuedo-sincerity can only fool others for so long.

The activity of seeking forgiveness demands humility and a comfort with vulnerability. Seeking to reconcile through sincere apologies facilitates the victim’s capacity to forgive (McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang 2003). As a marriage therapist, I have witnessed the consequences of years of strife at the hands of transgressors who offered insincere apologies for the harm they have caused. When the transgressor refuses to seek reconciliation or offers insincere apologies, the victim struggles to make sense of the harm he or she has experienced. The individual’s world assumptions that have been broken due to the transgression remain fractured, protracted by deep questions of personal inadequacy, for example,
“What’s wrong with me?” or “Why did this happen to me?” and/or convictions of a threatened self-image, “This happened because I am an unworthy person.”

Forgiveness research also suggests, however, that the victim of an act of harm, to whatever degree, who does not receive a genuine and authentic act of penance from the perpetrator, will cause him or herself more intrapersonal anguish by forgiving what has not been sought (Luchies, Finkel, McKnulty, and Kumashiro 2010). Attempting to forgive the transgressor when that person has not sought reconciliation exposes the victim to intrapersonal distress. Then how can forgiveness play such an important role in graceful aging?

Forgiveness Promotes Resilience in Graceful Aging

The dynamic seems to suggest that forgiveness represents an ingredient in the health status of graceful aging as it relates to resilience (Cox-Boyles 2006; Valliant 2002). The capacity to let go of our desire for retribution or vengeance, to let go of the pain caused, diminishes the impact of negative emotions on our bodies. Negative emotions have a terrible affect on the brain's functioning and can actually shrink portions of the brain, thereby causing more distress, poorer coping, and physical ailments (Amen 2005; Cozolino 2006; LeDoux 1996; Siegel 2010; Valliant 2002). Yet, this is not to say “you better learn to forgive or else”—that in and of itself will cause more distress.

Forgiveness without faith makes no sense, save for an understanding regarding the impact of prolonged internalized experiences of resentment and vengeance on the mind and body. Forgiveness is a gift that emerges from self-healing initiated through faith in which the victim has gained freedom and personal agency that cannot be found elsewhere. Thus, forgiveness is a movement within and an application of how God makes all things new. My faith helps me to rely on a God who restores me, but let me be clear; my faith does not coerce or manipulate me into forgiveness—that is not faith, that is the enemy in disguise.

Another Building Block: Attitude

What are some of the variables that ought to measure quality of life? Certainly physical health is a critical factor. Yet, modern medicine will provide opportunities for longevity, and, for some, it will provide more years of misery. Emotional health provides for a quality of life of which forgiveness is a player. Praying, serving others, maintaining connections with loved ones will also do the trick. It seems the system of graceful aging would include all of these things that ultimately may best be explained by attitude.
In contrast to my father, I consider my mother an amazingly resilient woman who continues to age gracefully. She comes from hardy stock, as her mother lived to ninety-six, bowling a 185 two weeks before she died. My parents were the typical 1950s and 60s conventional couple. My father went to work, my mother stayed home to raise eight children. My mother taught me how to dance, let me stay home from school when I was faking illness, and can still make me laugh with her eighty-one year old wit. Soon after my father died, she had a bout with breast cancer but has been cancer-free for the past eleven years. “The good Lord looks after me,” she will say.

My mother did not complain about her cancer. She did the radiation and the chemotherapy and managed quite well. I have heard my mother counsel women who have been diagnosed with cancer in a way that reflected years of sage wisdom a veteran psychologist would be hard-pressed to demonstrate. There is something about her worldview, her attitude, that offers me a vision of contentment, taking what life gives and making the best of it. She is not prone to rumination and actually told my father when he was diagnosed with his cancer, “Vince, you can’t think ‘Woe is me,’ or it’ll kill you.” She could never understand that about my father, how prone he was to pessimism and negativity.

I think about the cold environment my father grew up in, and then I think about my grandparent’s story. My grandmother, who ruled with an iron fist, grew up in an alcoholic family. I can only imagine the pernicious culture of her family of origin. She was raised in a tough environment and remained tough. My father was thirty-five, married with four children, and when he stayed at his mother’s house, he had a curfew. When my grandmother first met my mother and heard my mother’s last name, Hudson, she snidely exclaimed, “That name’s not Catholic!”

That set the tone for the type of relationship my mother would have with her mother-in-law. My mother, quoting a number of her sisters-in-law, often said, “There was no love in that house.” In many ways, it is rather remarkable that my father gave me all that he did. I will be forever grateful for his sense of responsibility, his capacity to smile, and a level of sensitivity that, though he never fully harnessed, is for me a gift that influences my desire to embody kindness and gentleness.

Attitude prepares us to encounter ourselves and allows us to forge a new legacy. It affords us a choice: to learn gratitude (and therefore, pray for the grace to be grateful) or to learn how to reinforce the walls of our emotional forts with misery.

**Graceful Aging and a Final Question:**

*What Am I Living For?*

In my existential psychology class while I was pursuing a Ph.D. in pastoral counseling, I was asked to create a timeline from my birth to the present. Then the professor asked us to create a timeline from the present to our death.
I chose September 21, 2052, as the date of my death. At the time, it seemed like a good month for a death, no holidays nearby and the weather is usually pleasant. I would be close to ninety-two-years old. I imagined in the last days of my life, looking back on the previous fifty years since I had received my Ph.D., thinking about the places my wife and I had visited; the home we purchased, lived in, and happily welcomed our grandchildren to; the books I had authored; the friends I had made; and the peace of mind I had finally found. I still believe that those things would be a great answer to the question, “What are you living for?” But today there’s more.

I want to add that I am available to go where God sends me. I desire to mentor and teach the skills necessary in the art of loving and receiving love. I want to catch the fire of the Spirit through the faith of others and be a spark to fan their flames of faith as well. I want to rid myself of violence, cynicism, and negativity, and be a source of joy and compassion for others . . . and it would be great if in doing all of that, I could lose a few pounds!

The process of graceful aging today is a daunting task. It requires that I must never forgo the personal growth I need to be a better human. As a matter of fact, I embrace it. I take advantage of the new relationship I have with my father and seek his forgiveness for the times when I was ungrateful and speak to him when I struggle with life that reflects his struggles. I tell my mother I love her and that I am grateful for all that she did, recognizing that I will probably never fully understand what she and my father sacrificed to raise me. I apologize to my wife and children for those times when I was a bear and desire to change my character and attitude in order to be a better dad, a better husband, and a better man.

The great beauty of God’s creation within me is that my body is “hardwired” to respond well to love, giving it and receiving it; that my body responds well to forgiveness, seeking it and extending it; and that my body responds well to attitudes of gratitude. Such are the activities of one placed on the trajectory of resilience and graceful aging.

Lastly, I am very grateful for something that has been emerging within me since my conversation with my father those many years ago: that the God I am coming to know is the God I hope my father encountered in the few moments after his earthly death. Yes, I am actually starting to understand, in the dark and dangerous places of my psyche, the concept of an unconditionally loving God. I imagine this God, and I can feel my interior altered. In God’s presence, I can relinquish my fear, my pain, and my grief. In doing so, I am available to love and receive it; in doing so, I find my peace.
References


