

# Hungryhearts

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## *The Second Half of Life*

# Contents

## In This Issue

The Art of Redirection . . . . .	3
Tammy Wiens	
The Everyday Quilt . . . . .	4
Donna Coffman	
Friendships for the Journey . . . . .	5
Dave Carver	
Finding Grace on Thunder Road . . . . .	7
Dennis Zimmerman	
Grace, Grit, and Gratitude . . . . .	8
Jan McGilliard	
New Possibilities for the Aging . . . . .	9
Ben Johnson	

## Hungryhearts Looking Ahead

### Summer 2010: *Finding Fish—Finding God*

Fish and fishing are mentioned and given symbolic meaning several times in the Gospels. The *ichthus* (Greek for “fish”) is a traditional symbol of the Christian church. Even today there are many “spiritual stories” that are related to fish or fishing. This issue of *Hungryhearts* invites you to tell us about your fish stories, human stories, and encounters with God.

### Fall 2010: *The Rest Between Two Notes*

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote: “My life is not this steeply sloping hour in which you see me hurrying.” Rather, says Rilke, “I am the rest between two notes which are somehow always in discord.” This issue asks contributing writers to wrestle with the variety of ways we experience our lives as “two notes always in discord” and to reflect on the meaning of “the rest” between these two notes.

### Winter 2010: *Poets, Mystics, and Bloggers*

What poems resonate so deeply with you that you feel as if the poet’s words disclose the very depths of your own soul? Who among the spiritual writers of the mystical tradition has drawn you toward a more intimate relationship with the Beloved? Are these ancient mediums finding new expression among bloggers? How is the online dialogue among Christians serving as both a tool for expressing one’s faith and as a network for Christians to ask their faith questions?

## Spiritual Formation Advisory Board

Deb Avery	Marilyn Hedgpeth	Elizabeth Nordquist
Joan Gray	John Indermark	Steve Shussett
Mark Greiner	David Johnson	Sam Stone

## Writers in This Issue

**Dave Carver** has been in ministry since 1982. More than twenty years of that time has been spent with the people of the First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights (Pittsburgh Presbytery) and the extended web of friendships made possible by sharing the road with faithful believers.

**Donna Coffman** is a health ministry educator and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Her love as a registered nurse was ministry with older adults and their caregivers in clinical and community settings. She lives in Winchester, Virginia, and enjoys serving the church as moderator of PHEWA’s Presbyterian Health Network leadership team.

**Ben Campbell Johnson** is Professor Emeritus of Columbia Theological Seminary, where he was originator of the Certificate in Spiritual Formation and the Doctor of Ministry in Christian Spirituality. He has lectured, conducted seminars, and led retreats for churches and governing bodies nationwide. Learn more about him on his Web site: [www.bencampbelljohnson.com](http://www.bencampbelljohnson.com)

**Jan McGilliard** is a specialist in older adult, intergenerational, and health ministries, working primarily with congregations and governing bodies of the PC(USA) and ecumenically as a speaker, a workshop leader, an educator, a lay preacher, and a consultant through ElderConnections. She does endurance sports with Team in Training to benefit the The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

**Dennis Zimmerman** is pastor of the United Presbyterian Church of Slatington, Pennsylvania. He admits to a misspent youth playing in various bands but now plays guitar and writes for the praise band *Looking UP*. He first started taking Bruce Springsteen’s music seriously when he learned that “one of the first places Bruce played was a talent night at an Episcopal church near my hometown.”

### Editorial Offices

100 Witherspoon Street  
Louisville, KY 40202-1396  
Toll-free: 888-728-7228, ext. 5306  
Ada Middleton, Administrative Assistant  
E-mail: [ada.middleton@pcusa.org](mailto:ada.middleton@pcusa.org)

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# The Art of Redirection

Tammy Wiens, Editor

I asked a lot of questions as a child. I asked with the firm conviction that the answers were available if one dug deeply enough to find them. But not just any answer would do. It was getting the “right” answer that was vitally important. As I get older I find I have just as many questions but my demand for answers—let alone *right* answers—no longer insists on being satisfied this side of heaven. Some questions may never be answered. I’m okay with that.

This question-and-answer theory of mine may be especially true in the realm of our spiritual formation. Take Jesus’ behavior in the Gospels, for example. When anyone asks Jesus a question Jesus almost always responds to questioners with a question of his own, or with a parable. Jesus’ skill in avoiding a direct answer seems to be a good defense in dealing with those looking for an excuse to arrest him. But what about those people whose questions arise out of an honest search for the truth? Jesus redirects the conversation in these situations too.

Take the disciples of John the Baptist, for example. They genuinely wanted to understand why Jesus’ disciples did not engage the same spiritual disciplines that were part of their own regimen. “*We* are fasting, so why aren’t you and your disciples fasting, too?” they asked. Jesus replied, “The wedding guests cannot

mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them . . . . The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak . . .” (Matt. 9:14–17).

Really? Was that the answer? Did John’s disciples find Jesus’ reply to be immediately illuminating? And to confound matters further, the conversation is interrupted by some big-shot religious leader making a dramatic plea for Jesus to come and heal his daughter. Jesus leaves John’s disciples to ponder the mystery of unshrunk cloth so that he can attend to the daughter’s illness (Matt. 9:18–26). Matthew doesn’t give any further explanation of Jesus’ curious response to John’s disciples, and he does not tell us anything more about their reaction. Did they figure out the connection between fasting, bridegrooms, and sewing? Is it possible even for today’s listeners to offer some explanation of Jesus’ words with absolute certainty?

The conversation between Jesus and John’s disciples is just one of many Gospel scenarios in which Jesus’ response to questions leaves the hearers puzzled and amazed. I find it both comforting and disconcerting that the Almighty Knower responds to my questions—and yours—in much the same way. We bring our questions to God and whether we

ask with a heart full of trust or with the burden of doubt, we rarely get a direct answer—if any answer at all. In the first half of my life I was discouraged by God’s apparent lack of concern. In the second half of my life I find that my faith is somehow “thicker.” It’s more durable and unflappable. I still have lots of questions and far too many doubts, and yet the lack of any clear response does not diminish my sense of belonging wholly to God. I am learning through prayer that God has a holy art of redirection that takes my focus off both the question and the answer so I can be more attentive to the wind of the Spirit. I’m finding greater meaning and purpose in life, not through finding answers to my questions, but through an added richness and freshness that life in Christ is bringing to my relationships with friends and family. And as my love grows, so does my capacity for receiving and responding to the kindness of strangers.

Blaise Pascal may not have realized it, but he spoke the gospel truth when he declared that love has reasons that reason cannot understand. God’s love for us has reasons that no amount of questioning can fully discover. By insisting too much on finding answers we may inadvertently draw our attention away from the love of God that awaits us. God’s art of redirection moves our minds off solving the mystery and fills our hearts with love. 🙏

To read more, visit us online at [www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/](http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/)

## Purpose

**Debbie Blane** is a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) minister. She is currently serving as a Theology Lecturer at the Nile Theological College in Khartoum, Sudan. Some of her passions include reading, writing, photography, and relational ministry.

## Five Spiritual Tasks of Growing Older

**Peggy Sterner**, who is the wife of Certified Lay Pastor John Sterner, lives in Albion, Michigan, and cares for her mother who turns 88 this year.

## The New Year’s Resolution that Changed My Life

**John Davis** is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Over the years, John has worked as a painter, a bartender, a rock-and-roll musician, and a salesman. Currently, John serves as pastor of Springdale Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

# The Everyday Quilt

Donna Coffman

My life is deeply rooted in the lives of courageous women who had to “make do” in order to make a life for themselves and their families in the Alleghany Highlands of Virginia. Such creative women they were! It comes as no surprise that most of them were quilters! However, they didn’t make many “company quilts,” quilts cut from new cloth, precisely made, and brought out only on special occasions. These women didn’t have the resources for new cloth, so they pieced their everyday quilts from worn clothes, feed sacks, and samples from the traveling suit salesman—any color, shape, size, and texture of cloth they could find. While not grand, everyday quilts were useful, comforting, and warm. Their beauty came from the stories found in each scrap of cloth—stories of sickness, death, birth, celebration, scarcity, abundance, hard work, and grateful hearts. Their beauty came from the women’s awareness of God’s presence in their “ordinary-make-do-pieced-together-everyday-quilt” world. God was the thread that held together the pieces of their often difficult lives.

With each passing day, the everyday quilt of my ancestors becomes more and more the metaphor for my spiritual life. When I pick up one of their quilts, I am reminded of who and whose I am. My spiritual life is so like an everyday quilt! It is nothing grand—no great visions or revelations. It is not precise—no prescribed spiritual practice or pattern that comes together just so. It is not neatly bound, ready to pull out and show off at a moment’s notice. I don’t have the resources to go on regular retreats or travel to sacred spaces, or visit a spiritual director. I’ve had to “make do,” especially in the past few years.

Sometimes it feels as if I am being trimmed with very sharp scissors! For me and for many others at this same juncture, it is a time of rapid diminishment. In the past three years several of my closest companions have died—my 92-year-old father, an uncle who was like a second father, my best friend who had Alzheimer’s disease, and two revered professors from seminary who had cancer. In addition to these losses, an above-the-knee amputation of my left leg, followed by removal of part of a lung due to a rare tumor, has greatly diminished my physical strength, stamina, and mobility. I can no longer walk the mountain trails, gather shells, and play tag with my grandchildren at the beach, or make it up to the study of my dreams on the second floor of my home. Leading worship and preaching takes more breath than I have most days. And to everyone’s dismay, the tumors keep recurring and I find myself to be a lone pioneer on the edge of the wilderness of medicine. Diminishment is so painful! The loss of loved ones, a body that seems so rebellious, the narrowing of my world—it hurts! The rips and tears in the old, used pieces in my everyday quilt of a spiritual life make God seem so far away at times.

Out of this pain and chaos has come the realization that relinquishment, intentionally letting go, helps to sooth the pain. I am sorting through my old scraps or, as Mary Morrison writes in *Without Nightfall Upon the Spirit*, a “lifetime store of soul-furniture.” Relinquishment lets me decide which pieces to keep and which to throw out. It is a time of peeling away self-constructed layers of notions about what and who I am. It is about stripping

down to my core and letting God put me back together. Relinquishment brings freedom. It makes room for new dreams, new ideas, new opportunities to serve, and new ways of being in relationship with God and others. Relinquishment releases new energy and creativity. After relinquishment, all God requires is that I show up at the quilting bee—ready, open, and willing to have my pieces butt together.

I find comfort, beauty, courage, and challenge in knowing that God is doing a new thing in me! While this new thing or call may be informed by old, worn experiences, I don’t believe moving about quickly or speaking and teaching for long periods of time will be essential. Over the past few months, I have found myself being drawn more than ever to a life and ministry of prayer. I yearn to “be a prayer”!

My diminishments and relinquishments have helped me to become increasingly sensitive to others who are experiencing losses. I seem to be giving more and more time to prayers of intercession—as I sit in the doctor’s office or the oncology clinic, stop at a red light, stand in line at the post office, rock on the front porch, or read my e-mail. The slowing down of my body is giving me a better opportunity to see God at work in the world. Thus more prayers of thanksgiving rise out of my heart. The gift and challenge of each new day finds me whispering my father’s Morning Prayer from Psalm 118: “This is the day that the Lord has made; let *Donna* rejoice and be glad in it!” I am discovering the peace that creating tangible prayers brings to my spirit. (Tangible prayers are touchable



## Friendships for the Journey

Dave Carver

*My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The Child is father of the Man;  
I could wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.*

(*The Rainbow*, by William Wordsworth, 1802)

As I consider “The Second Half of Life,” the theme of this issue of *Hungryhearts*, I am drawn to three core experiences in what I fully expect to be the first half of my life.

On February 12, 1979, my roommate Tim had a heart attack and died at the age of 18. While any experience of death is liable to be significant, especially at an early age, Tim’s passing struck me deeply. In addition to sharing dormitory space at college, Tim and I shared a birth date: We both entered this life on June 22, 1960. For weeks, the question haunted me: Why did Tim’s heart fail and not my own? What did I do to deserve the opportunities that apparently awaited me, while his course had finished? What had he done to deserve such an abbreviated existence? As our community went through the weeks and months of grieving and healing, I was left with a deep awareness of the fragile nature of life, as well as a commitment to move forward each day in response to the gift of life that God gives me—no matter how much of that life remains.

On January 20, 1990, my mother had a heart attack and died at the age of 58. I was 29 at the time, and was struck by the thought that, given my family history, I could be considered “middle-aged.” At 29! As I contemplated my mother’s death

in the light of the commitments that I’d made when Tim had died eleven years previously, I became even more certain of the fact that while the Scriptures may seem to indicate that threescore and ten may be a reasonable expectation for a person’s life, there are no guarantees at all.

The third formative event in the first half of my life came in the fall of 1987. I had been working in a very fruitful youth ministry; I felt loved and was able to share and reflect that love into the lives of others in my community. God’s call came for me to leave that city, and I did not want to go. That sense of loss triggered an overwhelming sadness in me, and I was left essentially incapacitated for a season. A longtime mentor, Jim Burns, called from several thousand miles away and after just a few moments of conversation, he said, “Dave, you are profoundly depressed. You need to call someone today and see about getting some help.” Jim stayed on the phone with me while I checked my insurance information and found the contact information for a local psychologist and he made me promise to call within the hour.

As I was being treated for this depression, Jim called often to make sure that I was moving forward. One of the most important things that he said to me—and one of the most important things anyone has ever said to me—was this: “Dave, you are not yet thirty. I am convinced that most of us do our best service for the kingdom of God after the age of forty. In those years, typically, we have some freedom with our time and our finances that we don’t enjoy prior to that. We have experience. And we have energy. Your task, my friend, is to make

it to age forty as a physically, spiritually, emotionally healthy person, and then watch what God will do through you.”

What a gift that conversation was! It was with joy and anticipation that I celebrated—yes, celebrated—my fortieth birthday. Ever since then, I have wondered, How can God use me today? It has given me a deep hope in my ability to participate in the amazing things that God is doing.



With these three life events as a backdrop, I am about to enter my fiftieth year. Surely by just about any reckoning I MUST be in the second half of my life now. As I walk farther into this part of that life, I find myself hungering more and more for spiritual friends with whom to share this journey. In *Preaching to Strangers: Evangelism in Today’s World*, Will Willimon points out that whereas many of our sisters and brothers in the early church experienced the Christian life as a group of pilgrims who were progressing toward a common end, the contemporary North American church is better compared to a bus full of strangers interested in seeing the same

tourist attractions. We are an increasingly individualistic people who perceive the whole of our lives—body, mind, and spirit—to be ours, and ours alone.

What a contrast that is to the scriptural understanding! Let's look for just a moment at the web of spiritual friendships that constitute the experience of the apostle Paul. After his conversion (Acts 9), nearly all of the believers are afraid to meet with him. The lone exception is Barnabas, who accepted and mentored Paul for more than a decade (Gal. 1:18—2:1). I would suggest that any fruit in Paul's later ministry was borne out of the profound encouragement that he received from Barnabas.

Later we see Paul walking alongside other Christians who shared his passion for ministry in the name of Jesus. Acts 18 describes the life-shaping friendships shared by Paul, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos. It seems as if these leaders functioned as peers, sharing the work of the day (whether that work was making tents or preaching Christ). Yet those friendships were not all that sustained and motivated Paul. I marvel at the ways in which the apostle reached out in intentional friendship to those who were younger than he. While the names of Timothy, Silas, and Epaphroditus come to mind, the model of friendship that has been particularly instructive to me is that which grew between Paul and Titus.

Titus was a young Gentile when he met Paul, but was soon led to embrace Christ. Over the course of many years, their relationship grew from that of a teacher and a student to that of friends and fellow-workers for the Lord. I would encourage the reader to stop for a few moments and turn to Scripture. While there is not a single narrative describing the friendship between these

two men and its impact on their world, it is possible to "connect the dots." Look, for example, at these passages: Galatians 1:18—2:10; 2 Corinthians 2:5—13; 2 Corinthians 7:8—16; 2 Corinthians 8:16—24; 2 Corinthians 12:14—18; and Titus 1:1—9. It is easy to see a pattern emerging—Paul has engaged in ministry with Titus, and comes to love him, to depend on him, to enjoy him, and to be fed by him. What a wonderful model for believers in the twenty-first century—to grow in our ability to be friends, not merely "colleagues" or "members" or committee people, but true friends who call each other to rich and full lives in service to God and the world God has made.

Several times a year my friend Kelly and I get together for intentional and intimate conversation about our lives, our relationships, our sense of where we see God at work in the world. It's an odd friendship: I've known Kelly for her entire life, and I'm twice her age. But it is a rich friendship. During one such conversation a few years ago, I asked her, "Kelly, who else do you talk with about these things?" She laughed and she said, "Dave, you are the only person I know who asks questions like this!" And at that point I asked my friend Kelly why that was—and whether she could think of anyone with whom she might enter into similar conversations.

I don't think I'd have been able to have these conversations with Kelly (or anyone else) when I was 18 or 29. But resting in the accumulated stories of 49 years, these are the conversations to which I most look forward now.

To those readers who are active in what they think of as the first half of their lives, I would ask, "What are you doing now to prepare yourself for that season beyond age 40 or 50 when you are most apt to be

best-positioned for lavish and generous participation in the kingdom of God?" To those who sense that, like me, the second act may have started, I would ask, "How are you reaching back across the generations to share the riches God has given to you?"

And to all who follow Christ, I'd ask, "What can you do to nurture friendship that allows you to see each day as holy, each week as a pilgrimage, and each year as an opportunity to participate in something bigger than yourself?"

I don't know how much time the Lord will give to me or to you. But I do know that each of us has the opportunity to plunge fully into this day. My prayer is that we will seize this opportunity and enter into it with joy and with a depth of friendship that will perpetuate the great adventure of life in the kingdom of God. 🍷

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#### **The Everyday Quilt, continued from page 4**

reminders of God's love and care that I can offer to others.) As I write prayers and mail them to people with whom I have lost contact over the years, the web of connection that God so desires for all of us is being repaired and strengthened.

I thank God that my everyday quilt of a spiritual life is not finished! There is joy in my oddly shaped and worn pieces, my very ragged edges and unfinished condition. There is peace in knowing that God will keep on piecing me together for new purposes until the day I join the communion of saints! There is hope in an imperfect everyday quilt that is not hidden away and never used. There is grace in my everyday quilt of a spiritual life. Under its protection, I can be useful in God's plans, comforted by the stories of God's people, and warmed with God's love. 🍷

# Finding Grace on Thunder Road

Dennis Zimmerman

One of the things that make getting older “interesting” is seeing your heroes and idols getting older, too. This came home to me the other day when I was watching the Kennedy Center Honors of 2009 on TV.

For those who are not familiar, the Kennedy Center Honors recognize the best of the best of American performing artists. Honorees include actors, filmmakers, singers, instrumentalists, dancers, composers, playwrights, directors . . . you get the idea.

Among the 2009 artists to be honored was none other than Bruce Springsteen. Yes, *that* Bruce Springsteen. “What?” I thought, when I heard his name announced as one of this year’s winners. “A Kennedy Center Honor for Bruce Springsteen? Induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? Sure. A *Billboard* Magazine lifetime achievement award? Absolutely. But a Kennedy Center Honor? How could the same award given to opera singers and Shakespearian actors and classical pianists and cellists and symphony composers be given to Bruce Springsteen? You’ve got to be kidding! The Kennedy Center Honors are for fine artists. We all love Bruce, but the Kennedy Center is just not his scene.”

Until, that is, you start to think back on The Boss’s body of work, which is clearly art. Art (and artists) are about helping us to see ourselves and our world in a new way. Art is supposed to make us think, to feel, to wonder about life and living, and perhaps even to give thanks for the beauty that artists are able to create from what is often less than beautiful surroundings. Art puts into images and sounds and movement the ideas and emotions that we all know and feel, but

cannot express in words. Art serves as our common unspoken language and connects us to one another in ways that nothing else can.

By this definition, Bruce Springsteen is indeed an artist, and a fine one at that. Springsteen has taken the blue-collar, down-on-your-luck, small-town-and-ain’t-goin’-nowhere experience and articulated it in a consistently noble way. In the hands of The Boss, being born behind the eight ball, young, unskilled, and clueless is almost honorable. Having no more ambition than taking your beat-up old car and escaping down Highway 9 sounds like a worthy adventure when Bruce sings about it. Looking in the mirror and seeing that you “ain’t a beauty, but hey you’re alright” isn’t an admission of failure, but a declaration of grace, an assertion that imperfection is not a fault, but a simple reality. Springsteen’s music makes it okay to be working class, okay to be a “loser” in the eyes of the elite, okay to discover that in spite of the power of ambition and positive thinking we’re never going to make CEO of a Fortune 500 company or write the Great American Novel, or cure cancer, or raise perfectly well-balanced kids, or be the perfect witness to our Lord and Savior.

The gritty, paycheck-to-paycheck world Bruce Springsteen ennobles in his music is a reminder that even God sees something worthy in imperfection. Incarnation, God with us, God “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14; *The Message*<sup>1</sup>) is the Bible’s proclamation that regular people are as worthy of God’s attention and blessing as anyone else. Being born in a barn, Jesus’ appearance among us in a humble state reminds us that God judges us from the inside out rather than from the outside in.

So, thank you, Bruce, for seeing something in us that is good and worthy and decent even though we are less than beautiful, only marginally successful, a little potbellied and nearsighted and thinning out on the top, not quite the high achievers our parents wanted us to be, not the images of our Lord that our faith charges us with becoming. Thank you for lifting up Thunder Road as a reasonable proximity for the King’s Highway. Thank you for your art that makes God’s invitation to be his people seem just a little more possible. 🙌

## Note

1. Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.





# Grace, Grit, and Gratitude

Jan McGilliard

Note: The following is an abridged version of Jan McGilliard's original piece. You can read the unabridged version on our Web site: [pcusa.org/spiritualformation](http://pcusa.org/spiritualformation).

What, for you, marks the second half of life? Is it chronological age, functional age, life events, or health? More than likely, it is some combination of these variables, and our responses to midlife and beyond are informed and affected by our attitudes about aging, our spiritual foundation, our life experience, cultural norms, the media, and the role models we encounter among family, friends, and community. We might imagine life as a series of mountains to climb and descend, with resting places along the way. From the peaks we can look back at where we've been and what we've accomplished, and we can look forward to see where we're going. If we're wise, we'll take along a friend, a map, a compass, or, these days, a GPS and a cell phone to assist in our planning. Whenever a life event causes us to hit the pause button and "recalculate" our route, it's a pretty fair indication that we have reached the middle years. Times of transition hold great potential for spiritual awakening and growth, especially if we trust that God is above and below, beside and behind, within and through us as we make this journey.

The first time I made a recalculation of my life was at age 40. I looked forward to the fourth decade of my life with great anticipation, poised to defend a master's thesis, launch a career with the PC(USA) in older adult ministries, *and* celebrate a Hallmark birthday. Life was very full and fulfilling with a young, active family, new professional goals, a juggling act that I embraced with joy and thanksgiving. I had not counted on the

stress of getting there, which culminated in a herniated disc just a week shy of my fortieth birthday. It marked the beginning of a long, slogging recovery that taught me some valuable life lessons: to choose laughter over tears, to be a gracious receiver of care, to delegate tasks, to be patient and vigilant. All of this was training for a bout with breast cancer three years later. This time, I learned two new lessons: to be proactive about my wishes, and the power of prayer.

During this season my dad was perhaps my greatest teacher, spiritual guide, ambassador, and cheerleader. He had a wordless way of slowing me down. His gentle, carpenter/farmer's hand often found the top of my head as if he were giving me a blessing. It was a sign of affection, a response to my ranting about some injustice, a loss, or a lost opportunity. Whatever the reason, his hand had a calming effect on me, as if invoking the psalmist's words, "Be still, and know that I am God." For many years, I had the joy of watching him stretch out his hand to the heads of our children and even our canine companions. It was a gentle reminder that we can stop for a moment and regroup, that God is patient and kind even when we are not. For me, the second half of life began when my father died in 1995 at age 73 from acute multiple myeloma. His sense of God's grace; his gratitude for the gift of life and years of remission; the grit to carry on optimistically in the midst of uncertainty were gifts of the spirit that have informed and infused my life ever since.

Most people experience the boulder cascading down the mountain toward them at least once between the ages

of 40 and 60, or a landslide of smaller rocks that together have the impact of a boulder. It might come in the form of the empty nest, a change in employment or income status, the loss of a spouse or a pet, a health challenge, a divorce, a need to provide care for multiple generations, or a natural disaster. Sometimes the change is slow and subtle; sometimes it is sudden and swift. Too often we are expected to move through the experience with a minimum of disruption or emotion, putting on a brave front so others are not affected or made to feel uncomfortable. These are the times we must lean into Jesus for support, to be still, to pray, to listen and discern. God has had my attention most fully when I've struggled with change, when I am faced with my very essence . . . asking who I am, why I'm here, and what I'm supposed to do now that . . .

Once we have navigated one or more life changes, we are far more prepared to practice "soulful aging." The big difference in the second half of life is that I live more mindfully, increasingly open to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit, and with ever greater awareness that everything could change tomorrow. My goals have a sharper focus, and there is an urgency to make every day count for something, even if it is to rest. I am confident that God will be with me on the mountain peaks and in the valleys of life, and that God sustains and celebrates my continuous seeking of Truth. God can handle my outrageous questions and queries, my doubts and insecurities. Maybe, God has been waiting for me to wake up and ask more questions!

continued on page 10



# New Possibilities for the Aging

Ben Johnson

When we consider the options, getting old is not bad at all! As we age, we join a large group because every person on earth is getting older. Since the day of our birth we all have been aging; aging is a fact of birth. However, we all have a choice about how we respond to it.

As a kid I had a terrible time with aging. Aging was equivalent to dying, and the thought of death invaded my consciousness long before it should have. My first remembrance of death occurred when I was ten years old, walking past a gardenia bush in the yard of my uncle, who lived deep in rural Alabama. As I walked past that gardenia bush, the awareness of my death came to me. Perhaps having heard the account of my great-grandfather being struck by a speeding car and tragically killed at that spot had an influence on me.

A growing freedom accompanies aging, a freedom of spirit and of choice.

As a teenager the specter of death troubled me; the thought of it shook me so deeply that I could not enjoy our family vacation at the beach or fishing with my dad. These episodes continued through my college days when as a freshman I thought, What kind of God is it that creates us and gives us such delight in living, but hangs the dark door of death before us? In my early years, aging meant moving unalterably to the end, dying and leaving this beautiful world.

Not until I was fifty years old did it occur to me that death's threat had weakened.

At midlife I even had the thought that dying was not so terrible. From that point on, the plague of fearing death began to heal until one day in my sixties, when I realized that I no longer feared dying. What a relief! What a burden to lay aside! But coming to terms with my own death solved only one problem of growing old; there are other issues.

What are the other challenges of aging? The first challenge I faced was the diminishing of innate capacities that had been givens in my younger days. For example, several times I ran the Peachtree Road Race. Now I do well to walk three miles several times a week. My eyesight is no longer 20/20 and the ophthalmologist says that I should be grateful for 20/30 vision. I still have hair but it seems to drop out more often and in greater quantities. I asked a friend who has thinning hair what he does about this development. He answered, "Brush it off my shoulders."

Perhaps these little changes adequately illustrate the losses experienced in aging. No need to bore you with a list of other losses that we all experience as a result of the wear and tear of years. Suffice it to say, I feel very much like the city bus driver in Louisville, Kentucky, who succinctly described the losses of aging in these words: "When I was a young man growing up," he said, "I praised Mother Nature for all the new gifts that awakened in me almost daily. Now that I am old, I curse ole Lady Nature for taking all her gifts back, one by one." About these changes, I have made one decision that I hope to live by: I will accept with grace the losses that naturally come to older people; and I refuse to complain as it will only make me a negative, sour

grumbler. Enough of the challenges; what about the new possibilities for a person in the eighth or ninth decade of life?

For one thing, a growing freedom accompanies aging, a freedom of spirit and of choice. In my earlier years I was controlled by the expectations of other people. It was too important to me to know how others viewed me, and so I acted in a way that gained affirmation and acceptance. In the later years of life, the approval of others matters less and less. I do not mean that we lose civility or become brash in our dealings with people, but we accept the person that we are and celebrate the joy of being! Not long ago I was conducting a seminar on Christianity and Islam. An antagonist approached me after the lecture and asked, "What do you hope to get out of this work you are doing?" My response was: "I hope to gain the satisfaction that I have done the will of God."

I also find it challenging to be a mentor and guide to younger men and women. At this stage of life when my hair is white, as it was when I was ten years old, people assume that I have wisdom obtained through the years and they ask me for help. I have found delight in mentoring a group of leaders who have a global vision for spreading the faith and serving the pressing needs of third-world people. Having been a professor, a writer, and also an entrepreneur has provided me with a number of resources to draw from in my effort to be a mentor. I experience great delight in passing on insights and strategies as well as warnings to these young leaders who have embraced a huge vision.

Yet, it is not always mentoring that younger people need; they also need

encouragement. The work of ministry (the task of living, for that matter) is very demanding today. The loss of jobs, the breakup of marriages, the stress of dealing with frustrated people and with disruptive personal spiritual struggles have caustic effects on a life. To encourage struggling people, to offer them hope, and to promise to be with them in the struggle enable them to move forward. A middle-aged minister calls and says, "I want to come and spend a few days with you. I think that you can help me." The stage of life I am in equips me to respond to cries like this. I am driven to help by my memory of all the mentors and supporters that stood by me.

Another possibility comes to maturing people in the form of a larger world, enabling our small world to be stretched. Years ago I read James W. Fowler's *Stages of Faith*, in which he speaks of six stages of faith development. The last of these is "Universalizing Faith." He describes this stage of faith as one's having an enlarged awareness of justice, a more comprehensive vision of truth, and an understanding of the commonwealth of faith that seeks to heal the divisions in the human family. Fowler says that persons in this stage are driven by a vision that makes them heedless of their own security because of their willingness to sacrifice themselves for others. They have found something in life larger than themselves.

Younger people may have this "Universalizing Faith" as evidenced in Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the young Gandhi, but I believe the attraction of this type of faith pushes all of us forward in our later years. Having this urge from within does not guarantee that we will respond to it. Some may not only reject this inner urge, but they may retreat in the opposite direction into cocoons of protection. I think that at the core of this

rejection is the fear of change; the aging person often resists change, hoping to preserve his or her life in a fixed form for all time. We must realize that security is not found in sameness but in living in rhythm with our one and only life, embracing and responding to what comes to us, and living with openness and hope for the future.

In no way would I compare myself with the models that Fowler points to—Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Dag Hammarskjöld, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet I do believe that some of the same energy they felt is also in me—a dream of a new world, a passion for change, and compassion for the poor and marginalized. For example, from the day that I looked into a Muslim woman's eyes and realized that she prayed to the same God that I love and worship, I have seen the world in a different light. There is one God, the Creator, and this God is the God of all people. In different ways God has worked in the lives of every human being who has lived on the face of the earth, seeking to draw them to God's self. I believe that all of us must find ways to respect, love, and work with each other for the betterment of the world, even for the saving of the planet.

I regret to say that I spent most of my life in a carefully guarded, theologically shrunken world designating God's people as those who believed like me. At seventy-two years of age, a larger, more inclusive vision of God has grasped me, and still compels me to spend the remainder of my life creating loving relationships with people of different faiths and lifestyles. This vision of a New World Order gives me energy, strength, and passion to live toward the fulfillment of God's intention. I am engaging in work that I will never see completed, but this matters not because ultimately this work is the work of God. Life is a challenge! I don't want to miss out on it. 🍌

## Spiritual formation is . . .

the activity of the Holy Spirit that molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as Sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, Scripture study, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.



### Grace, Grit, and Gratitude, continued from page 8

I have many "wonderings" about what is to come as I play out this gift of years. A friend's father said it best: "I do not know what it will be like to be an age I've never been." I can learn from the great cast of characters that live and breathe and plan and process all around me as they age, but I won't know, will I, until I get there myself? I'm convinced it's important to dream dreams and make plans for the future, to share them with others, and to adapt as needed. I hope to have the grace to accept the changes and challenges that will inevitably come, the grit to persevere, with gratitude to God for all that has been, is, and will be. 🍌

## Hungryhearts Is Going Online

Over the past thirty years we have seen a steady increase in the number of newspapers and magazines that are moving to an electronic delivery format. Print publications are becoming increasingly obsolete. In a Senate hearing about the publications industry, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry said, "... paper and ink have become obsolete, eclipsed by the power, efficiency and technological elegance of the Internet."<sup>1</sup> The plan is to continue publishing *Hungryhearts* throughout 2010, but we will print a smaller edition with a view to expanding our online content and format. By 2011 we expect *Hungryhearts* to be a fully online publication. The factors influencing this decision are similar to the factors affecting the larger industry of print publications as a whole. In these economic times we cannot keep pace with the increasing costs of producing an item that is a gift to readers and therefore generates no revenue. This in no way diminishes the value of the publication to the church, but rather we are boosting our creativity in saving money without sacrificing the quality of our content. Online delivery seems like a great vehicle to do just that. When you consider the financial savings alongside the fact that in 2009 the Internet was the second most used medium for national and international news (TV being number one), moving *Hungryhearts* to an online format seems like a very positive step.

If you have ideas about what you'd like to see in our new format, please contact the editor at [Tammy.Wiens@pcusa.org](mailto:Tammy.Wiens@pcusa.org). 🍌

### Note

1. PBS Web site of the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer. Accessed February 1, 2010. [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/arts/jan-june09/newspapers\\_05-08.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/arts/jan-june09/newspapers_05-08.html)

## Information Exchange

### Montreat Conference Center

#### 2010 EXPLORITAS PROGRAMS

Exploritas participants come to Montreat from every walk of life to learn together, to exchange ideas, and to explore the world. Visit [www.exploritas.org](http://www.exploritas.org) or call 800.454.5768 toll-free for fees and registration information. *Tip:* Type "Montreat" in the search field on the Web site, and it will bring up all current programs they sponsor.

### Presbyterian Older Adult Ministry Network (POAMN)

This church-wide network includes pastors, Christian educators, and many others who work with older adults within congregations and retirement communities. POAMN provides opportunities to network with colleagues who are serving in this particular ministry through national and regional trainings and conferences. In no other setting can they benefit from specialized educational workshops and, at the same time, share ideas and experiences with others from across the nation. To read more about POAMN visit the Web site at [www.poamn.org/](http://www.poamn.org/) or visit the PCUSA Web site at [www.pcusa.org/olderadults/](http://www.pcusa.org/olderadults/)



*Jesus said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water" (Jn. 7:38). Many today are slaking their thirst with things that do not satisfy because they do not know where living water comes from. When Jesus refers to those who "believe," he is talking about a living, visceral relationship that shapes who we are as persons and enables us to be channels of living water for the world. HUNGRYHEARTS is one of the places where that kind of relationship with God is attended to and cultivated. HUNGRYHEARTS pushes me beyond the surface concerns*

*of life and church down to where the wellsprings of mission, justice, worship, and evangelism flow.*

—Joan S. Gray, Moderator of the 217th General Assembly PC(USA)

### Join Joan Gray in supporting Hungryhearts

For the past eighteen years the Office of Theology and Worship has offered *Hungryhearts* without charge to all those interested in receiving the quarterly. Happily we will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. *Hungryhearts* does not come without cost, however. As someone who benefits from this excellent publication, please consider how you might support our longevity. Help to secure the future of *Hungryhearts* by making an annual donation of \$10, \$20, \$30, or more to the "Spiritual Formation Resources" fund. You can make contributions online through the Extra Commitment Opportunity Web site: [pcusa.org/give/online/default.jsp](http://pcusa.org/give/online/default.jsp). The Spiritual Formation Resources project number is 051217.

Or, you can make a donation to a permanent fund through the Presbyterian Foundation. Make checks payable to Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and write "account #1020058886, Spiritual Formation fund" on the memo line.

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## The Spiritual Formation Leadership Network needs a home

Since the late '90s the SFLN has existed as a way of connecting spiritual directors, retreat leaders, and conference speakers with Presbyterians interested in finding guidance and resources to assist with spiritual growth and renewal. Currently there are over five hundred names in the SFLN database. We are well overdue for this list to be updated, but unfortunately we do not have the staff or resources to make this possible. We need help! The SFLN has the potential of offering vocational support and opportunities for face-to-face networking. If you, along with your church, organization, or seminary, would be interested in forming a partnership to support SFLN, please contact the Associate for Spiritual Formation, Office of Theology and Worship: [Tammy.Wiens@pcusa.org](mailto:Tammy.Wiens@pcusa.org).