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# Aging Gracefully: The Art of Elegant Kenosis

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

AGING GRACEFULLY: THE ART OF ELEGANT KENOSIS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY MARY A. PANDIANI

PORTLAND, OREGON

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George Fox Evangelical Seminary  
George Fox University  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by  
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Global Perspectives.

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In memory of Greg Forsyth  
who declared my title “Dr.” before I knew it.

Dedicated to my husband, Bill,  
who believes in, supports, and demonstrates his love for me.

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## ABSTRACT

Within American culture, the fear of aging creates an obsessive focus on staying young. The Christian church acquiesces to this fear by avoiding the imperative conversation about aging, putting at risk those in the second half of life. The beauty and shadow side of aging offer a unique opportunity to counter the cultural norm, through contemplation in spiritual- and self-awareness. A contemplative life cultivates a place to face the realities of aging. By deepening a relationship with God and others, the aging follower of Jesus Christ navigates a way through the highs and lows of getting older. Research in spirituality and contemplative practices corroborates the value of paying attention to aging in both its adverse and its affirming qualities. By acknowledging changes that occur in the second half of life, followers of Jesus Christ benefit from spiritual practices that shape wisdom and resiliency - markers of living well. Acquired through gift and practice, the outcome of spiritual awareness engenders greater freedom to walk gracefully in the way of aging as stated in Proverbs 16:31: “Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness.”

This dissertation elevates the value of contemplative practices for the second half of life. Section one describes the aging crisis in America, currently affecting Baby Boomers, the Silent Generation and some of Generation X. As one ages, changing realities present obstacles that require a new perception about aging, spirituality, Christian community, and contemplation. Section two describes various efforts that address aging from other disciplines: health sciences, emotional, theological, and cultural academic fields of study. Section three proposes four particular movements in contemplative practice that shape aging gracefully, seen through markers of wisdom and

resiliency: 1) live intentionally with legacy and purpose, 2) hold creative tension in mystery and paradox, 3) focus on hope with perspective and generativity, and 4) value community through expressions of forgiveness and gratitude. Section four describes the artifact, a ten-week curriculum, “Aging Gracefully: The Art of Elegant Kenosis,” that offers contemplative practices to shape aging through wisdom and resiliency in the second half of life. Section five articulates the specifications for the artifact. Section six summarizes the collective value of my personal learning from the dissertation focus.

## SECTION ONE: THE PROBLEM

### Introduction

*Elegant Kenosis* is an imaginative and inventive theological term of my own creation, a touchstone that helps to discern aging choices. Following Jesus Christ's action in Philippians 2:7, the process of *kenosis* is the choice to empty one form of identity to take on a new one. In the transition of aging, *kenosis* is the intention to release a former way of life to enter another. Significant emptying occurs with losses that accompany aging. To offset the discouragement that comes with loss, the unique contribution of the second half of life focuses on giving one's life away by choice. Decisions based on reflection, choices, and God's grace, replace cultural compulsions or unconscious actions. Combined with *kenosis*, *elegance* reflects a desire to enter the aging process with grace and simplicity. To face losses in this way requires discernment and a sense of things significant. Culture's pressurized axiom, "avoid aging at all costs," creates a din that makes other choices hard to hear. Through *Elegant Kenosis*, one has the choice and capacity to age gracefully by living into freedom that comes from contemplative practices in aging.

### The Problem

American culture and the Christian community both fail to address the issue of aging in a meaningful way. With an aging population that will likely double within the

next generation,<sup>1</sup> the reality of getting older impacts all communities, including the Christian church. Holding a significant conversation on living well in the second half of life means being honest about the issues of aging, both their beautiful and their shadow aspects. The honest conversation requires time to pause long enough to hold it. For the Christian, a fast-paced and image-conscious culture affords little opportunity to slow down. In addition, the traditional Christian focus on meaningful investments in bible knowledge and active service leave little opportunity to develop a contemplative life.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the very word “contemplative” creates problems for a large slice of the Christian community who assume an Eastern religious influence that causes fear of heresy. These problems make it difficult for the Christian community to address aging in a meaningful way.

### **The Story**

Abigail, known as “Abi” to her friends, just turned 63. Her birthday combined with a recent physical and emotional crisis causes her to reflect on her life. Dispirited and disoriented, she no longer has the emotional fortitude and physical strength that once served her. As she looks ahead, she fears the effects of increased aging. In the past, Abi has contributed to her church by leading on boards, teaching Bible studies, and mentoring young people. She no longer feels able to serve in this way.

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer M. Ortman, Victoria A. Velkoff, and Howard Hogan, *An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States* (Washington DC: Current Population Reports, May 2014), accessed June 30, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p25-1140.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Ringma, “Contemplation and Action” (lecture, Tear Queensland, Brisbane School of Theology, August 2, 2014), accessed June 30, 2016, <https://www.tear.org.au/resources/contemplation-and-action-by-charles-ringma>.

Entering retirement, she hopes for something more, but finds her losses overwhelming. From outward appearances, to decreased stamina for prolonged activities, she sees her physical body and strength fading. In addition, she lacks the influence she once had at church. She struggles with self-doubt about what she can offer; she wonders if she has a meaningful and purposeful future. While her friends view her as a kind and encouraging woman, she treats herself with accusations in judgment, focusing on her inabilities.

As a Christian, she believes in a faithful God, but she confesses to a stale and flat spiritual reality. The bible studies that once revived her no longer suffice. Prayer dries up even before she begins. Most significantly, she finds herself fearful at night, alone and fighting what she imagines may be ahead. After years of following Jesus, she cries out that her life is not as it should be. She asks, "Can I handle getting older?" Perceiving only scarcity, she finds a deep longing in her unanswered questions hoping for something more.

She yearns for and desires a deeper place with God that includes grace. She hopes that her life will reflect something of value, perhaps with wisdom and resiliency. She notices a long ignored spiritual hunger and thirst, desiring to wake her up to her life. While she still fears the aging process and the navigation of it, she finds herself hopeful that she may encounter God in a meaningful way. Even through her disorientation, she begins a journey to seek a deeper understanding and experience of God in her second half of life. Aging becomes the crucible through which she grows in knowing God and herself.

## Aging

“Life is difficult.”<sup>3</sup> The first statement in M. Scott Peck’s book *The Road Less Traveled* articulates the inevitable aging process of loss over time. Within American culture, many deny the aging process. Some, in contrast, try to fully embrace it, but with unrealistic expectations. Either way, aging is difficult. The way forward requires one to be willing to face hard realities in order to find enlightenment and freedom. As Peck continues “... [but] we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult.”<sup>4</sup> Not everyone ages well. But everyone faces difficulties, in life and aging. Agreeing with Peck’s assertion of accepting difficulties in life, the question is not whether we will age, but whether we will develop the resiliency and ability to age well.

### *Impact of Aging*

Dorothy, a young 70-year-old, loves working with the elderly. She believes that “elderly” means “infirm,” and that the elderly live in senior homes and assisted care facilities. However, the California Department of Aging defines “elderly” as those sixty and older, based on a simple chronological index of reporting.<sup>5</sup> In a culture filled with an

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<sup>3</sup> M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1988), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> California Aging Reporting System (CARS), “NAPIS State Program Report (SPR) Reporting Requirements of the Older Americans Act,” May 31, 2013, accessed June 13, 2016, [https://www.aging.ca.gov/ProgramsProviders/AAA/Data/Docs/2013/SPR\\_Draft\\_form\\_2013\\_draft.pdf](https://www.aging.ca.gov/ProgramsProviders/AAA/Data/Docs/2013/SPR_Draft_form_2013_draft.pdf).

active and healthy Baby Boomer population (born between 1946-1974),<sup>6</sup> the term “elderly” requires another definition and new terminology to explain a large population that spurns being considered old. Public opinion and popular culture reframe the chronological sense with such assertions as, “sixty-is-now-the-new-forty.”<sup>7</sup> Some of the changes that are common include longer life spans, sustainable health and well-being, and significant accomplishments pass the age of fifty. These reflect greater opportunities for people in their later years. Contemporary life differs greatly from previous generations. Baby Boomers and the following generations will require new definitions for what constitutes “old” in America’s aging population.

In addition to an altered definition, aging in America continues to change the composition of society, by the sheer numbers of older people. At the height of their influence in 1999, Baby Boomers accounted for 78.8 million people in the US.<sup>8</sup> While decreasing as a population because of mortality rate, they still compare in numbers with the Millennials (1982-2004),<sup>9</sup> two generations behind. According to the Administration on Aging, the Boomer population will represent 20 percent of the total U.S. population

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Bump, “Here is When Each Generation Begins and Ends, According to Facts,” *The Atlantic*, March 25, 2014, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/03/here-is-when-each-generation-begins-and-ends-according-to-facts/359589/>.

<sup>7</sup> Rachael Bogert, “Is 60 the New 40?” *Chicago Tribune*, January 7, 2010, accessed November 27, 2015, [www.chicagotribune.com/sns-health-60-new-40-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/sns-health-60-new-40-story.html).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Fry, “This Year Millennials Will Overtake Baby Boomers,” *Factank: News in the Numbers Blog*, Pew Research Center, January 16, 2015, accessed May 30, 2016, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/16/this-year-millennials-will-overtake-baby-boomers](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/01/16/this-year-millennials-will-overtake-baby-boomers).

<sup>9</sup> Bump, “Here is When Each Generation Begins and Ends, According to Facts.”

by 2030.<sup>10</sup> Aging in definition and number necessitates significant research and attention to aging practices.

### ***Theories on Aging***

With increased awareness over the last generation, a greater discourse has developed around the theories of aging. Born after World War II, the present population of older adults requires attention to medical and health concerns, economic and community development, psychological and sociological impact among other dynamics. Since 1961, with the first White House Conference on Aging,<sup>11</sup> more and more researchers, politicians, social commentators, and the general population recognize the need to study aging within the discipline of gerontology. According to Holly Nelson-Becker, who specializes in aging and wisdom, people “want to explore how older adults continue to create meaning and life resiliently in a time of increasing frailty, loss, and loneliness.”<sup>12</sup> Researchers in theories of aging have an opportunity to explore the benefits, peculiarities, and frustrations of getting older. Together these aspects of aging can create meaning.

Because the study of gerontology is relatively new, most researchers bring a particular bias from another discipline (i.e. psychology, anthropology, or medicine).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ortman, Velkoff, and Hogan, 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> 2015 White House Conference on Aging, archive, accessed June 21, 2016, <http://archive.whitehouseconferenceonaging.gov>.

<sup>12</sup> Holly Nelson-Becker, “Research in Spirituality, Religion, and Aging: An Emerging Area,” *British Society of Gerontology* (July 2011): 1, accessed June 20, 2016, <http://www.britishgerontology.org/DB/gr-editions-2/generations-review/research-in-spirituality-religion-and-aging-an-eme.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Edmund Sherman, *Contemplative Aging: A Way of Being in Later Life* (New York, NY: Gordian Knot, 2010), 1.



Differing viewpoints abound. The advantage of influence from various disciplines provides an interdisciplinary integration.<sup>14</sup> In that integration, the study of aging considers health sciences, psychological, sociological, and life-span developmental approaches. In addition, disciplines in anthropology, philosophy, and the arts speak to aging. Distinguished yet related, these disciplines show causal relationships that offer a holistic understanding of aging. For example, an individual's physical state impacts their emotional capability and economic conditions. Studying these pieces as part of a whole improves the understanding of, and services offered to, those in the second half of life.<sup>15</sup>

### **Spirituality**

Within gerontology, the academic study of spirituality is increasingly relevant, especially as it connects to an array of fields that address aging in medical, psychological, and social disciplines.<sup>16</sup> As such, spirituality lacks a definitive definition. With its permeation into various fields, spirituality lacks consensus for a single standard definition. For instance, a medical definition from University of Maryland asserts that spirituality is “a belief in a power operating in the universe greater than oneself, a sense of interconnectedness with all living creatures, and an awareness of the purpose and

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<sup>14</sup> Jake Harwood, “Perspectives in Aging,” *Understanding Community and Aging*, April 7, 2007, 11, accessed May 30, 2016, [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/15090\\_Chapter1.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/15090_Chapter1.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Terrie Wetle and Harold Alan Pincus, “Developing Interdisciplinary Research Centers for Improving Geriatric Health Care: Lessons from a John A. Hartford Foundation Initiative,” *The Need for Interdisciplinary Research* (2009): 5, accessed June 26, 2016, [http://www.jhartfound.org/images/uploads/resources/John\\_A\\_Hartford\\_Foundation\\_RAND\\_Interdisciplinary\\_Research\\_Centers\\_Program.pdf](http://www.jhartfound.org/images/uploads/resources/John_A_Hartford_Foundation_RAND_Interdisciplinary_Research_Centers_Program.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Melvin A. Kimble and Susan H. McFadden, eds., *Aging, Spirituality, and Religion: A Handbook*, vol 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 1.

meaning of life and the development of personal values.”<sup>17</sup> Others, such as distinguished gerontologist Robert C. Atchley, distance their work from anything that might sound like religion. His definition of spirituality is that which “sensitizes us to a region of human experience”<sup>18</sup> by looking at human identity of “doing and being” in life.<sup>19</sup>

### ***In Toto***

Notwithstanding the lack of a single defining focus, disciplines do agree that spirituality involves the person *in toto*.<sup>20</sup> To address one’s own spirituality requires observing the whole person rather than one segment of being. With a religious perspective or not, *in toto* requires the recognition that what a person believes about the divine and/or human experience connects all the parts of who they are.

Spirituality offers an agency to address the sacred matters of heart and soul. Spirituality integrates meaning and purpose. In pursuit of hope and faith, one finds spirituality in relationships and self-awareness. Erik Erickson describes Ego Integration as this work. The power of spirituality emerges out of a natural desire for meaning.<sup>21</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> Steven D. Ehrlich, “Spirituality,” *University of Maryland Medical Center*, November 6, 2015, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/treatment/spirituality>.

<sup>18</sup> Robert C. Atchley, *Spirituality and Aging* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Peter C. Hill, and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>21</sup> Harriet Mowat, “Ageing, Spirituality and Health,” *Scottish Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy* 8, no. 1 (2005): 5.

“human craving for meaning...appears to have the force of instinct.”<sup>22</sup> Humanity exists in the search for meaning. Spirituality provides a place for that meaning to thrive.

### *Academic Discipline of Spirituality*

During the second half of life, a person seeks meaning in two arenas: lived experience and transcendence.<sup>23</sup> Sandra Schneiders, known as an advocate for the academic discipline of spirituality, addresses these components. A lived experience accounts for the ordinary encounters in life that shape present and future experiences of an individual.<sup>24</sup> Daily living influences meaning through the ordinary and the mundane. Likewise, transcendence occurs through participating in religious practices and/or forming a “relationship to nature, music, the arts, a set of philosophical beliefs...and friends and family.”<sup>25</sup> In this way, one overcomes solipsism to acknowledge and receive something beyond oneself in the process of aging. Spirituality, both the ordinary and transcendent, becomes known through one’s connections, purposes, and patterns in life. From there, spirituality offers a way of discernment in getting older. Exploring the meaning in life, one finds well-being that withstands difficult circumstances and loss.

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<sup>22</sup> Neil Krause, “Deriving a Sense of Meaning in Late Life: An Overlooked Forum for the Development of Interdisciplinary Theory,” in *Handbook of Theories of Aging*, ed. Vern Bengtson, et al. (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2009), 101.

<sup>23</sup> Sandra Schneiders, “Spirituality and the God Question,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* (Fall 2010): 245.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> A. Astrow, C. Pulchalski, and D. Sulmasy, “Religion, Spirituality, and Health Care: Social, Ethical, and Practical Considerations,” *American Journal of Medicine* 110 (2001): 283.

## Christian Community Response

As a community exploring the ultimate meaning in life, the church provides a forum for conversation around aging and purpose in the second half of life. Using a theological anthropology, theologian James Houston and researcher-practitioner Michael Parker explain the experience of aging adults in how they relate to God. The Christian community exists in relationship with God, thus impacting how we interact together.<sup>26</sup> A community loves God by honoring all who have been made in God's image, even in the aging process.

However, the contemporary church imitates culture by avoiding the hard discussions that aging requires.<sup>27</sup> Houston and Parker suggest the church is *the* place to hold these valuable conversations. The aging population provides character, hope, and wisdom, crucial to the expressions of church.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, the church lacks the priority and focus to address both the reality and the hope in the process of aging.<sup>29</sup> Making these conversations part of the church's culture, a greater understanding of God benefits the entire church, young and old.

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<sup>26</sup> James M. Houston and Michael Parker, *A Vision for the Aging Church: Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 107.

<sup>27</sup> Michael McKenzie, "Care for the Elderly," *Christian Research Institute*, April 20, 2009, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.equip.org/article/care-for-the-elderly/>.

<sup>28</sup> Houston and Parker, 66.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Mattson, "Have Churches Abandoned the Elderly?" *Sojourners* October 23, 2013, accessed June 30, 2016, <https://sojo.net/articles/have-churches-abandoned-elderly>.

### ***Population Size***

As Baby Boomers grow older, the aging population within churches increases. In some churches, the composite of the older population consists of 60 percent or more.<sup>30</sup> Increased life expectancy and numbers alone do not explain this population's impact on the church. While the older population loyally attends church, the younger generations have dropped in attendance, according to the Barna Group.<sup>31</sup> As a result, many of the resources of the church—financial support, time, and wisdom—are provided by the older population. The church needs to acknowledge and address the aging population's contribution, influence, and need.

The stereotype of the aged reinforces the myth of declining desire to contribute. Lack of capacity and ability perpetuates the myth. Culture influences the church's attitude. Unfortunately, the older generations are set adrift to find how to busy themselves through music programs, quilting circles, and folding bulletins. The church acquiesces to American's focus on youth and the newest fads, rather than capitalizing on an ideal place for community and sharing of resources of an older population.

### ***Spiritual Not Religious***

More Americans are identifying themselves as “spiritual,” but not religious. Expressing a sense of spiritual peace and well-being along with wonder about the universe, those affiliated with churches and those without, indicate an increase in that

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<sup>30</sup> “Aging in the United States – The Church's Response UMC: The People of the United Methodist Church,” *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church – 2012*, accessed July 13, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/aging-in-the-united-states-the-churchs-response>.

<sup>31</sup> “Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church,” *Barna*, September 27, 2011, accessed June 16, 2016, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church#.V2Q5fFcrllw>.

experience.<sup>32</sup> Still, the church's response has been to prioritize programs and information-based teaching that neglects the value of a deep longing for something more.

Responsiveness to the older population requires a new approach. Cultivating a place for questions about aging and spirituality begins the process. Ongoing ways to shape one's spiritual life builds the foundation.<sup>33</sup> The church has an opportunity to address the reality of aging amidst people's fear and avoidance. The influence of the Baby Boomers may well lead the way forward. As stated in research by the AARP, "Baby Boomers Envision Their Retirement:"

Their mass alone has had an enormous impact on the national psyche, political arena and social fabric. From the youth culture they created in the 1960s and 1970s to the dual-income households of the 1980s and 1990s, this generation has reinterpreted each successive stage of life.<sup>34</sup>

Their sheer size provides a community of practice to usher in the next set of generations.

The older generation offers needed wisdom in the life of the church.

### **The Contemplative Life**

Aristotle defines a contemplative person as one who "engage[s] in the orderly inspection of truths which [one] already possesses; [one's] task consists in bringing

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<sup>32</sup> David Masci and Michael Lipka, "Americans May Be Getting Less Religious, But Feelings of Spirituality Are on the Rise," *Factank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, January 21, 2016, accessed June 16, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/21/americans-spirituality/>.

<sup>33</sup> Becka A. Alper, "Millennials are Less Religious than Older Americans, but Just as Spiritual," *Factank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, accessed June 17, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/23/millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans-but-just-as-spiritual/>.

<sup>34</sup> Mitakuye Oyasin, "The 'New Old' ...How Did We Get Here?" *Faith Formation and Spirituality of Aging*, accessed June 16, 2016, [http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/2\\_faith\\_formation\\_spirituality\\_of\\_aging.pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/2_faith_formation_spirituality_of_aging.pdf).

forward from the recesses of [one's] mind, and arranging them fittingly in the full light of consciousness."<sup>35</sup> Acquired knowledge becomes part of a daily living through truth, understanding, and discernment. For the Christian, the contemplative person seeks an ultimate truth in relationship with God that is deepened by prayer and experiences in various spiritual practices. Not unlike Aristotle's assertion, a contemplative life requires reflection and action with wisdom as a desired outcome. A contemplative person emanates wholeness.

Desiring to age gracefully, Christians find two obstacles that thwart contemplation. Either there is a mistrust in the practice itself, or there is an inability to recognize its importance because of culture's fast-paced consumerism. The critic rejects dialogue about the value of contemplation in fear of heretical influence. The unaware person lacks the capacity to slow down and practice attentiveness. A brief acknowledgment of these two obstacles shows how contemplation lacks support.

### *Critics*

In some American Christian circles, the definition of the word "contemplative" is problematic. Either concerned with perceived mindlessness in New Age philosophy and the repetitiveness of Buddhist mantras, some Christians believe contemplative prayer detracts from a biblical understanding of God.<sup>36</sup> The argument centers on the potential for deception by becoming involved in a practice that is either faddish, or a perversion of

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<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1976), xxxvi.

<sup>36</sup> Ray Yungen, "Contemplative Prayer," *Lighthouse Trails Research Project*, accessed July 10, 2016, <http://www.lighthouse Trailsresearch.com/cp.htm>.

historical biblical principles. Unfortunately, little to no conversation around the historical significance and value of contemplation for a Christian occurs.

### ***Culture***

Depending on efficiency and productivity, culture refuses to slow long enough to pause and notice. Those in the first half of life prioritize acquisition and personal success. To consider a life of reflection seems out of the realm of possibility. Joseph Pieper states that “the greatest menace to our capacity for contemplation is the incessant fabrication of tawdry empty stimuli which kill the receptivity of the soul.”<sup>37</sup> With so much demanding attention through technological bombardment and inordinate tasks, choices become overwhelming. Adding contemplation seems to add duty in an already full life. With the distractions and overwhelming choices, the spiritual life diminishes. As G.K. Chesterton describes, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”<sup>38</sup> Few people consider the journey of contemplation, that is, until they run out of options. What usually compels one to contemplation is what occurs in the second half of life: an evaluation of the quality and legacy of one’s contribution to the world.

### **From Problem to Possibilities**

The problems in these categories—aging, spirituality, and Christian community—beg the question of how to age gracefully. The combination of these problems creativity

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<sup>37</sup> Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books Inc., 1958), 102.

<sup>38</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (n.p.: Feather Trail Press, 2009), 18.



lays the groundwork for the argument in this dissertation. The value of contemplation in the second half of life is that it offers a way to age gracefully for those who follow Jesus Christ. It provides an integration for living well. These very problems lead to possibilities.

However, other solutions and theories offer ways to address these three problems centered on aging, spirituality, and Christian community. The next section addresses these other considerations. First, it analyzes various theories and practices from researchers and practitioners affiliated with gerontology. They look to emotional and sociological theories that provide methods for aging.

Next, considerations of the Christian community reflect suspicion or irrelevancy with contemplation. As well, the church neglects to provide meaningful engagement for the aging community. Finally, looking at gender and global differences offer a broader perspective. All of these considerations give context to aging and spirituality, but do not in and of themselves support the value of contemplative practices that shape one for wisdom and resiliency in the second half of life.

## **SECTION TWO: OTHER SOLUTIONS**

### **Aging Influences**

This section addresses the broad influences around aging that affect the Evangelical American community. To begin, psychological and sociological research and theories provide an overview for understanding human development. The study of aging—gerontology—highlights the value of addressing the whole person, rather than compartmentalizing it into different disciplines. From there, a brief foray into neuroplasticity of the brain acknowledges the present work being done on the aging brain. While these theories help understand aging, they fail to integrate the various aspects of aging that lead to living well towards the end of life.

In addition to the theories explored, this section describes obstacles fostered by perspectives and values in American culture and the Evangelical church that prevent aging populations from contributing to, or strengthening deeper spiritual formation. Because of the Protestant work ethic based on productivity and success, the evangelical church, often unintentionally, perpetuates the myth that aging adults lack the capacity to benefit the church and society. In addition, the fear and lack of practice for a contemplative life can lead to a stagnant spiritual life, rather than one of generativity in purpose and meaning. The far-reaching effects of aging include issues that require evaluation.

The final focus in this section addresses two significant and current issues around differences: male and female spirituality, and global contexts. These differences highlight the relationship between aging and spirituality of contemplation in gender spirituality and

different cultures. While not explored in depth in this paper, these issues need further research to fully explore the reality of aging and spirituality around the world. For now, the comments here expose and acknowledge these differences.

### **Aging Theories**

Researchers in *Science Daily* report, “The process of aging begins even before we are born.”<sup>1</sup> While acknowledging that aging starts at birth, the focus on aging becomes more apparent in the second half of life. The entire Baby Boomer generation now lives in the second half of life, with the next generation, Generation X, quickly moving toward their 50s. Through sheer numbers alone, the Baby Boomers have shifted the conversation from the priorities of the first half of life to the second half of life’s priority. From how to establish oneself through acquiring material goods and accomplishing goals to retirement and end of life issues, the transition begins. Aging, by necessity, becomes an inevitable focus. Socio-economic, philosophical, cultural, and religious perspectives each consider different approaches to aging. For some, the question of aging resides in physical and health issues. For others, the topic is simply avoided, resulting in a denial that ultimately weakens the capacity to age well. Some believe aging must be fully embraced while others flaunt it with purple hats and red dresses, or botox injections. No matter the approach, the desired outcome remains the same: the hope to age well. To approach aging well, a new equilibrium must exist between life’s losses and new discoveries.

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<sup>1</sup> “Old Before Your Time: Study Suggests that Aging Begins in the Womb,” *Science Daily*, March 2, 2016, accessed September 2, 2016, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/03/160302083555.htm>.

An increasing amount of information reflects the interest in the study of aging. In 1996, one researcher calculated 23 theories of aging.<sup>2</sup> Today with more research and focus, the systematic understanding of aging includes numerous disciplines, creating the need for integration of these theories.

To provide some integration of aging and spirituality, three fields inform aging specifically: Psychology, Sociology, and Gerontology. Lifespan Development Theory outlines a linear process of aging with a focus on individual motivation and ego. Within this field, two researchers stand out: George Vaillant with his longitudinal lifespan study and Lars Tornstam who coined *gerotranscendence*, a spiritual term for aging in the final stage of life. Three psycho-social theories address function within normal aging, named by different perspectives: Activity, Disengagement, and Continuity. For the two fields of sociology and gerontology, two distinctive individuals, Laura Carstensen and James Birren, offer unique perspectives through prodigious research that speak to the quality of people's lives in aging.

### ***Perspectives from Psychology and Sociology***

#### *Psychological Theories of Aging*

The ancient philosopher Cicero (44BC) speaks to both the “weariness of life... [and the]... wonderful fruits”<sup>3</sup> of old age that address positive and negative emotional changes. Affirmed by contributing to society, the aging person must seek to

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<sup>2</sup> James Birren, “Theories of Aging,” in *Handbook of Theories of Aging*, ed. Vern L. Bengtson, et al. (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 1999), 467.

<sup>3</sup> Cicero (44BC), “On Old Age,” *The Basic Works of Cicero*, ed. M. Hadas (New York, NY: Random House, 1951): 152.

“achieve...virtue and good deeds.”<sup>4</sup> The psychological and political understanding assumes that aging requires action to achieve a state of healthy well-being. In the early 1900s, Freud proffered a more pessimistic view of aging by indicating that people past a certain age can no longer learn because of the brain’s loss of activity.<sup>5</sup> This early understanding of aging lacked a developed theory from empirical data on the emotional, behavioral and brain capacity impact of aging as well. For instance, social scientists and the medical world failed to connect psychosocial loss with physical health until the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1960s with the onset of personal pursuits to find meaning in life, maturing adults began the search for a “framework of values [and] a philosophy of love”<sup>7</sup> as shown by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Self-actualization describes the final stage of his model. The desire for meaningful life includes an environment where choices can lead to better relationships, healthier life styles, and deeper understanding of self. As research and subjective analysis reflects, self-transcendence reveals that a focus beyond one’s self can lead to greater happiness.<sup>8</sup> With increased psychological understanding, the assumptions are disproven about ageism and its stereotyping of decreased contribution and vitality. These assumptions fail to represent the current aging population. For

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Agronin, “From Cicero to Cohen: Developmental Theories of Aging,” *The Journals of Gerontology*, May 20, 2013, <http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/05/09/geront.gnt032.full>.

<sup>6</sup> Birren, “Theories of Aging,” in Bengtson, 462.

<sup>7</sup> Krause, “Deriving a Sense of Meaning in Late Life,” in Bengtson, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 103.

example, information gathered by Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles reveals that, while the “common assumption [is that] cognitive decline is an outcome of aging, [in fact, many elderly] go on to achieve selective gains in later life.”<sup>9</sup>

The psychology of aging addresses the awareness of one’s personality as it impacts interaction in society over time. Public health researcher, Neil Krause, articulates four factors that reflect ego integration in a meaningful life, particularly as one ages:<sup>10</sup>

1. Having a clear set of values: this helps in making choices;
2. A sense of purpose: recognizing that one's actions have a place in the order of things, and that they fit into a greater whole, connected to values with an affective and evaluative component;
3. Goals: a person’s ability to continue with expectations and focus, moving toward the future with hope;
4. The ability to reconcile things that have happened in the past.

These factors help a person move beyond ego, selfishness, and self-absorption over time and awareness. Krause concludes that an aging person can find greater satisfaction in life.

### *Developmental Theories of Aging*

Psychology-specific theories of life-stage development focus on psychosocial transitions and stages for adults. Leading the way, Erik and Joan Erickson’s framework

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<sup>9</sup> Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles (1999). Quoted in Neil Krause, “Deriving a Sense of Meaning in Late Life: An Overlooked Forum for the Development of Interdisciplinary Theory,” in *Handbook of Theories of Aging*, ed. Vern Bengtson, et al. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2009), 110.

<sup>10</sup> Krause, 7-8.

bases the progression on specific crises in seasons of life. These crises can lead to virtues. From the infancy stage, the individual emerges out of trust to interdependence and relatedness, and so the process begins. In the final and eighth stage, the crisis of ego integrity vs. despair, one develops wisdom. This virtue comes for those nearing the end of life. It is in this place that Erickson says, “You’ve got to learn to accept the law of life, and face the fact that we disintegrate slowly.”<sup>11</sup> Generativity, a quality that Joan Erickson suggests helps one to pass on a legacy to others.<sup>12</sup> Wisdom comes out of the crisis in the generativity stage. The theory divides generativity into two categories: *caritas*, in caring for others, and *agape*, in loving others.<sup>13</sup> Lifespan development culminates with movement towards wholeness and well-being that comes from the hard work of attending to the crises in life.

Others researchers, Daniel Levinson and George Vaillant, build on and reinforce the original lifespan model that values aging. Levinson provides a linear sequence of seven seasons of life, using empirical research marking transitions around psychological and role-oriented changes.<sup>14</sup> In the last two seasons, “Middle Adulthood [and] Late Adulthood,” he demonstrates the need to address *satisfactoriness*.<sup>15</sup> How does one engage in a life that brings the end that he/she wants?

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Goleman, “Erickson, in His Own Old Age, Expands His View of Life,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1988, accessed August 29, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/22/specials/erikson-old.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Agronin, “From Cicero to Cohen: Developmental Theories of Aging.”

<sup>14</sup> Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life: The Groundbreaking 10-Year Study That was the Basis for Passages!*, Reissue ed. (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1986), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 83.

In addition to Levinson's research, George Valliant's famous longitudinal study articulates the need for specific tasks to take place, to move along the lifespan of a healthy adult. He does not look to specific ages necessarily, but rather to tasks that indicate values and beliefs for someone aging well. There are six specific tasks that result in a virtue that help someone to age well:<sup>16</sup>

1. Differentiated identity – independence;
2. Intimacy with another – selfless character;
3. Career consolidation – contribute to society;
4. Generativity – care for society;
5. Keeper of meaning – justice;
6. Integrity – wisdom.

In *Aging Well*, Valliant's research measures how "well" someone lives into their 80s. In his three studies, Valliant cites various characteristics that reflect greater well-being. As one example, the ability to create out of *being* rather than *doing* constitutes generativity. This type of contribution attributes greater joy in those who express empathy and compassion for others.<sup>17</sup> The research from specific populations represents only a small portion in American culture. However, the studies do suggest that lifespan theories accurately reflect developmental growth over time.

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<sup>16</sup> James L. Holly, MD, "The Six Adult Life Tasks," *Southeast Texas Medical Associates*, accessed January 3, 2017, <http://www.setma.com/Your-Life-Your-Health/pdfs/the-six-adult-life-tasks.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Agonin.



Researcher Lars Tornstam built upon the stages and tasks of development to originate a term, *gerotranscendence*, for the spiritual aspect to aging.<sup>18</sup> By definition, this perspective happens when an older person shifts “from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction.”<sup>19</sup> Through reflection, the aging adult begins to see life from a decidedly positive angle. That perspective acknowledges previous negative experiences, but with an appreciation for lessons learned. During this time, an acceptance of death accompanies a review of life.<sup>20</sup>

Coming to my spiritual direction office, Marilyn longs to know God in a deeper way. She acknowledges heartache and tragedy after seventy-years of broken relationships, health problems, and unfulfilled dreams. Yet her words speak with hope and wholeness because of a sense of joy in the midst of her historical reality. She values the experiences, while not diminishing their pain. Using her imagination, she practices an exercise whereby she invites her “severe teachers” to dinner. Illustrated in *Ageing to Sageing*, this exercise involves addressing those people who have caused pain, intentionally or not, that you now want to say, “this is what I learned from that pain.”<sup>21</sup> Marilyn lives Tornstam’s definition of *gerotranscendence* through her act of forgiveness.

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<sup>18</sup> Lars Tornstam, *Gerotranscendence: A Developmental Theory of Positive Aging* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Co., 2005), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen S. Hall, “The Older-and-wiser Hypothesis,” *NY Times*, May 5, 2006, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/magazine/06Wisdom-t.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Constance McCloy, “Gerotranscendence Offer Reflection Acceptance for Elders,” *All Things Aging*, June 5, 2009, accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.all-things-aging.com/2009/06/gerotranscendence-offers-reflection.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older* (New York, NY: Time Warner Books, 1997), 118.

*Psycho-Social Theories of Aging*

Historically, an explanation for active aging falls under three theories: Disengagement, Activity, and Continuity. Initially, social scientists assumed that individuals would decrease over time in ability and interaction.<sup>22</sup> The Disengagement Theory assumes that an older person needs to slowly withdraw from society to minimize social disruption.<sup>23</sup> To refute this inevitable decline, the activity and continuity theories articulate a more hopeful gerontology that indicates how “activity in later life yields life satisfaction.”<sup>24</sup> In fact, the term *successful aging* leads the way as the model with three components: avoiding disease and disability, high cognitive and physical function, and engagement with life.<sup>25</sup> The Activity Theory suggests that successful aging comes in maintaining the same activities, beliefs, and community as one held when young.<sup>26</sup> The third theory, Continuity Theory, builds on the Activity Theory. Finding ways to adapt, an aging person connects the past with strategies that recognize the reality of the present.<sup>27</sup> For instance, when Marilyn started to see her own contribution to the pain of those

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<sup>22</sup> Kimberly J. Johnson and Jane E. Mutchler, “The Emergence of a Positive Gerontology: From Disengagement to Social Involvement,” *The Gerontologist* 54, no. 1 (September 5, 2013), accessed July 10, 2016, <http://gerontologist.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/09/04/geront.gnt099.full>.

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Cumming and William Earl Henry, *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1961), 14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn, “Successful Aging,” *The Gerontologist* 37, no. 4 (1997): 433-434.

<sup>26</sup> R. J. Havighurst, “Successful Aging,” in *Process of Aging: Social and Psychological Perspectives*, vol. 1, eds. Richard H. Williams, Clark Tibbits, and Wilma Donohue (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 1963), 309.

<sup>27</sup> G.L. Maddox, “Persistence in Life Style Among the Elderly: A Longitudinal Study of Patterns of Social Activity in Relation to Satisfaction,” in *Middle Age and Aging: A Reader in Social Psychology*, ed. B.L. Neugarten (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1968), 181-83.

“severe teachers,” she found new ways to engage the significant people in her life, whether she liked them or not. The emphasis of the Continuity Theory normalizes aging by acknowledging the changes, but not necessarily succumbing to them.<sup>28</sup> Andrew Achenbaum, a specialist in aging and social welfare, argues for holding the opposite theories together. Greater understanding comes by living the tension of Disengagement and Activity Theories whereby “organiz[ing] reality in theoretical terms”<sup>29</sup> becomes an everyday decision. When does one step down from positions of authority? When does one continue on? When does running everyday acquiesce to walking for tired bones? Decline occurs in aging, but ongoing interaction in society provides a *successful aging* process.

### *Sociological Theories of Aging*

On the frontlines of aging, Stanford psychologist Laura Carstensen offers research as well as leadership through the Stanford Center on Longevity. Her mission is to “redesign long life.”<sup>30</sup> In a “beeper study” about emotional responses, participants received beeps at different times in the day to remind them to document their experiences. Carstensen’s research showed that older people display a greater emotional balance around life issues than younger people do. She names this observation the Socioemotional Selectivity Theory.<sup>31</sup> When time horizon is long, knowledge acquisition

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<sup>28</sup> R.C. Atchley, “A Continuity Theory of Normal Aging,” *The Gerontologist* 29, no. 2 (1989): 183.

<sup>29</sup> W. Andrew Achenbaum, “A Metahistorical Perspective on Theories of Aging,” in *Handbook of Theories of Aging*, ed. Vern Bengtson, et al. (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2009), 28.

<sup>30</sup> “Redesigning Long Life,” *Stanford Center on Longevity*, accessed December 2, 2015, <http://longevity3.stanford.edu>.

<sup>31</sup> Laura Carstensen, Derek Isaacowitz, and Susan T. Charles, “Taking Time Seriously: A Theory of Socioemotional Selectivity,” *American Psychologist* 54, no. 3 (March 1999): 165.

is the goal. When time perspective shortens, as it does at the end of life, focus shifts to emotionally meaningful goals.<sup>32</sup> Whether giving a TED talk<sup>33</sup> or speaking as a panelist on the White House Conference on Aging,<sup>34</sup> Carstensen continues to reflect on and communicate the vitality that can happen in aging.

### **Gerontology**

Under the aegis of gerontology, various academic disciplines connect wisdom and resiliency to aging gracefully for individuals and community. Gerontology seeks to understand how and why individuals and communities respond to getting old in a particular manner. A relatively new academic discipline, gerontology borrows and bridges other disciplines to create a multi-disciplinary understanding of aging. One of the early researchers of gerontology, Dr. James Birren, proposes the use of psychology, sociology, and biology to understand the subject of aging.<sup>35</sup> He validates the exploration of aging well by showing how various theories can support one another.

Gene D. Cohen, a founding father of geriatric psychiatry, theorizes that “[t]o appreciate the tension between one’s own perspective and that of other people or systems...helps us to contemplate more than one answer to a problem, to consider

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<sup>32</sup> Hall, “The Older-and-wiser Hypothesis.”

<sup>33</sup> Laura Carstensen, “Older People Are Happier” (video of lecture, TEDxWomen 2011), accessed December 14, 2015, [http://www.ted.com/talks/laura\\_carstensen\\_older\\_people\\_are\\_happier?language=en#t-108388](http://www.ted.com/talks/laura_carstensen_older_people_are_happier?language=en#t-108388).

<sup>34</sup> “White House Conference on Aging, Seattle,” accessed December 2, 2015, <http://whitehouseconferenceonaging.gov/blog/forum/page/white-house-conference-on-aging-seattle-wa-regional-forum.aspx>.

<sup>35</sup> Gretchen E. Alkema and Dawn Alley, “Gerontology's Future: An Integrative Model for Disciplinary Advancement,” *Gerontologist* 46, no. 5 (2006): 574.

contradictory solutions to life's challenges, ...and to make decisions based on a tighter integration of how we think and feel."<sup>36</sup> As a result of all these theories, gerontology emerges as the incubator for ideas and practices, recognizing that values and beliefs influence actions and behaviors. The study of aging is "data rich and theory poor, a vast collection of un-integrated pieces of information."<sup>37</sup> However, attempts by Birren and others bode well for future practice of integrated theories in aging.

<b>Theories for Aging</b>	<b>Researchers</b>	<b>Key Words</b>
Lifespan Development Theory – Psychosocial Theory of Personality	Erik Erickson	wisdom integrity vs. despair generativity
Stage-Crisis View	Daniel Levinson	Middle and Late Adulthood, satisfactoriness
“The Grant Study” – <i>Aging Well</i>	George Vaillant	longitudinal study Tasks vs. Stages
Gerotranscendence	Lars Tornstam	perspective through life review: greater satisfaction in aging
Disengagement, Continuity, Activity Psycho-Social Theories	Andrew Achenbaum	active aging and function in society
Socioemotional Selectivity Theory	Laura Carstensen	beeper study, value of shortened time span
Counterpart Theory	James Birren	growth and senescence, builds on Janus model (see Section Three)

Table 1.1: Theories for Aging in Psychology, Sociology, and Gerontology

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<sup>36</sup> Agronin, “From Cicero to Cohen: Developmental Theories of Aging.”

<sup>37</sup> Johannes J.F. Schroots, “On the Dynamics of Active Aging,” *Current Gerontology and Geriatrics* (May 31, 2012): 1, accessed December 4, 2015, <http://www.hindawi.com/journals/cggr/2012/818564/>.

## Neuroplasticity

One of the most exciting fields of recent study centers on the use of the brain, especially as it relates to aging. Current research in neuroplasticity shows how neuron pathways can be reorganized to create adaptation to former limitations. Research, in this field, includes the value of contemplation practices such as gratitude<sup>38</sup> and awe<sup>39</sup> that positively influence aspects of aging. Through thankfulness and living with wonder, compelling and significant evidence provides a sense of expansion for the brain and aging. Richard J. Davidson explores how the brain changes through experiences in life.<sup>40</sup> Through the act of mindfulness, the brain changes, allowing for one to face difficulties rather than avoid them.

Approaching transformation from a scientific perspective, brain researcher Daniel Siegel spells out mindful techniques comparable to spiritual contemplative practices:<sup>41</sup>

1. Focus on breath – lowers reactions to stress and increases empathy;
2. Wheel of Awareness - connecting with five senses for integration of consciousness, technique created by Dr. Siegel;
3. Stay with that – the practice of noticing without judgment;

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<sup>38</sup> Christian Jarrett, “How Expressing Gratitude Might Change Your Brain,” *Science of Us*, January 7, 2016, accessed October 19, 2016, <http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2016/01/how-expressing-gratitude-change-your-brain.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Anna Mikulak, “All About Awe,” *Observer: Association for Psychological Science* 28, no. 4, (April 2015), accessed August 13, 2016, <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/all-about-awe#.WHUcDLGZP-Y>.

<sup>40</sup> Richard J. Davidson, “Well-being and Affective Style: Neural Substrates and Biobehavioural Correlates,” *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society Publishing* 359 (September 29, 2004): 1395.

<sup>41</sup> Scott Crabtree, “Review of *Mindsight* by Daniel Siegel,” accessed June 26, 2016, <https://www.happybrainscience.com/book-review-mindsight-by-daniel-siegel/>.

4. SIFT – stay with sensations, images, feelings and thoughts;
5. Body-Scan – listening to the body;
6. Walking Meditation – taking time in the day to be aware of and notice one’s surroundings.

These practices provide physiological and spiritual ways for everyone, regardless of stage in life. Increased emotional and social intelligence help in the ability to cope with stresses in life. As disciplines of psychology, sociology, gerontology, and neuroplasticity weave research together to explain aging, a greater understanding of growing old gracefully begins to emerge.

## **American Evangelical Culture**

### ***Cultural Expression***

Perceptions of aging remain incaltrant in culture’s view, whether American or Evangelical. Even with new theories and research, the myths of what aging looks like continue to obscure possibilities for valuing the second half of life. An advertisement states, “Aging Gracefully,” for the services of plastic surgery. An accompanying picture displays a beautiful, thirty-year-old female model, whose waist appears abnormally thin. Its enticement appeals to the desire of anyone who wants to look better. The advertisement implies that modifying one’s physical appearance is the best way to age gracefully. Nothing suggests the value of an interior life.

In American culture, the message, as one approaches the second half of life, comes in various forms: stay young as long as possible whether through artificial (i.e. plastic surgery, hair dye, etc.) or natural (i.e. dieting, exercise, etc.) measures; seize

opportunities in life that were not available earlier (i.e. the second home, long-extended vacations, retirement); or finally, accept the person one is, usually in a belligerent manner, like the lyrics in the iconic Frank Sinatra song “My Way:”

To say the things he truly feels;  
 And not the words of one who kneels.  
 The record shows I took the blows -  
 And did it my way!<sup>42</sup>

These means respond to justifiable longings. But the acquisition without thought or reflection leads to shriveling the soul, rather than expanding its capacity. By following what society says in quips like, “now, the time is for me,” or “everyone else is getting a facelift,” or “I deserve this,” one is diverted from recognizing what is most important. Rather than resisting the process of aging, here is an opportunity to embrace it. The embrace does not imply denial of its misfortunes, but in choosing what it teaches one’s soul about aging and living well.

### ***Church and Culture***

In American culture, such an emphasis on staying young segregates the value of generational interaction. The church mantra sings the same idealism of youth. As a result, the church loses an opportunity to communicate a way to age gracefully. Instead in her discrimination, perhaps unintentionally, the church surfaces ageism that limits the benefits of perspective from experience. To segregate the “Older Women’s Bible Study” from the younger moms limits the sage wisdom that comes through intergenerational groups.

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Anka, *My Way* (Berlin, Germany: BMG Rights Management, 1969).



As well, the church traditionally speaks of building on the foundation of young families and youth. For the Evangelical Church, the budgeted focus on youth programs supersedes the time and energy placed on the aging populations. While these choices are not necessarily negative, the sustained emphasis on youth warps the value of what the older population brings. Finding a way to integrate all ages, the budget no longer fights for one age group over another. Within that context, culture's doctrine of youthful bias impacts the church's decision to neglect the opportunity offered by an inter-generational community.

### ***Church and Ageism***

The implicit and explicit expressions of ageism reflect prejudice and discrimination based on someone's age, in both culture and church. For aging, the myth of the holy grail permeates culture to perfect youthfulness. The church, even in its mission to provide spiritual formation for everyone, fails to acknowledge this subliminal message. Ageism is antithetical to a Christian message of hope, wisdom, and purpose of life. Denial of aging, or lack of addressing it, neglects the gift that aging can bring. Ignoring conversation around how to age well implies that it remains secondary to more "spiritual" topics. Topics for spiritual formation, if addressed at all, become sub-topics of evangelism, missions, and further bible study. These approaches encourage service and intellectual exercises of doing and thinking, while the heart is neglected.

## Differences in Gender and Culture

### *Male and Female Spirituality*

One question of differences is whether the contemplative life is more female than male. Females have been more comfortable with issues of emotion and living from the heart. In learning to listen to and honor their heart, men find the contemplative life quite satisfying. Most research indicates that women more easily access spirituality through gender orientation.<sup>43</sup> But findings through Biola University indicate a different perspective. Asking five questions, the researchers addressed the notion of gender orientation when it comes to spirituality:

First, do sex or gender orientation differences in religious participation exist among those who classify themselves as religious or spiritual? Second, is a relational component of spirituality related to masculinity and femininity? Third, are people with feminine, masculine, or androgynous orientations more relationally connected to God? Fourth, are women more relationally connected to God than men? Finally, what empirical evidence is available to support the notion of divergent paths to spiritual development?<sup>44</sup>

From the limited sample of participants, the results suggest that men and women both have a desire to be relational in their spirituality, rather than one gender having a greater access. To that end, the hope is to provide a “deeper spiritual formation for everyone”<sup>45</sup> that is not based on gender orientation.

On a practical level, Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar, believes that while men and women both have a spirituality that is meaningful, men approach it differently. In his

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<sup>43</sup> D.B. Simpson, J.L. Newman, D.S. Cloud, and Dr. Fuqua, “Sex and Gender Differences in Religiousness and Spirituality,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology: Biola University* 36 (Spring 2008): 42.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

book, *On the Threshold of Transformation*, he argues that many mystics were male. However, in American culture, the demonstration of emotion from the heart requires some intentional work that is unfamiliar to men. An image he offers provides a classic stereotypical division for male and female. Women have a daily “devotional” time, while men need to have a “confrontational time.”<sup>46</sup> For his work, he has taken on providing safe places for men to explore their spirituality. Through retreats that employ rites of passage, Rohr helps men become more able to “transform their pain rather than transmit it.”<sup>47</sup>

### ***Global Understanding***

This paper grapples with aging in an American Evangelical context. Looking at other cultures, a broader approach emerges to address aging. Pew Research studies reflects that about 26 percent of the US population consider aging to be a problem, compared to Japan’s 87 percent of the population’s anxiety about aging.<sup>48</sup> The US appears to have fewer concerns about aging. However, looking at the cultural values of Japan, compared to the US, perspectives differ. Japanese value the latter part of life, finding personal growth important with aging.<sup>49</sup> A trend in America leans toward financial and physical prosperity as one ages; whereas the Japanese term *ikigai* indicates

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2010), x.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Rohr, “Transforming Our Pain,” *Center for Action and Contemplation*, February 26, 2016, accessed December 30, 2016, <https://cac.org/transforming-our-pain-2016-02-26/>.

<sup>48</sup> “Attitude about Aging: A Global Perspective,” *Pew Global*, January 30, 2014, accessed August 23, 2016, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/01/30/attitudes-about-aging-a-global-perspective/>.

<sup>49</sup> Mayumi Karasawa, et al., “Cultural Perspectives on Aging and Well-Being: A Comparison of Japan and the U.S.,” *International Journal of Aging in Human Development* 73, no. 1, (2011): 73.

a desire for purpose not based on what one does but on the person he/she has become.<sup>50</sup>  
 For Americans, this hope for purpose is relatively new on the horizon.

### *Age-ing to Sage-ing*

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi provides a hopeful picture of aging for any culture. In the early 1990s, he embarked on a journey to address his own fears about aging. His subsequent book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older*, speaks to the value of purpose in the aging process, especially around the idea of being a sage, something he calls “spiritual eldering.”<sup>51</sup> Through mentoring others and “harvesting one’s life,”<sup>52</sup> a spiritual elder has the capacity to offer wisdom, awareness, and harmony by living out of those values, and sharing them with others.<sup>53</sup> By founding the movement of Sage-ing International, Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi provides a forum whereby people begin to see the second half of life as an adventure rather than a closing chapter. Beginning in the United States, his work now influences and honors cultures around the world for the value of elders in their respective communities.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Dawn Carr, “Embracing the Japanese Approach to Aging,” *NextAvenue*, May 22, 2013, accessed September 4, 2016, <http://www.nextavenue.org/why-we-need-embrace-japanese-approach-aging/>.

<sup>51</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>54</sup> “Principles and Practices of Sage-ing,” *Sage-ing International: Wisdom and Spirit in Action*, accessed June 15, 2016, <http://sage-ing.org/about-us-2/principles/>.

### ***Perceptions***

One interesting study addresses perceptions about aging across twenty-six cultures.<sup>55</sup> Taken from findings by college students, their demographic group speaks to how culture plays a part in perceptions of older people. For instance, more socioeconomically developed cultures tend to perceive aging more negatively. The views reinforce stereotypes of aging in social status and economic viability. While differences occur in culture around perceptions, similar cross-cultural patterns emerge when focusing on physical and cognitive characteristics. From a geographer's perspective, Jared Diamond speaks about primitive cultures whose need for the elderly increases. The older people are the ones who provide the history and ethos of their culture.<sup>56</sup> When a culture can rely on the internet, the need for elders decrease because of the available information. These findings encourage the need for more global focus on how an older population affects all demographics within a society.

### **Conclusion**

The academic disciplines provided above offer an understanding of aging. Culture and the church reflect how aging exists more as a problem than as a hopeful inevitability. Spirituality, gender and global differences demonstrate the permeation aging has into all aspects of life and societies. All these disciplines offer greater understanding of whether one ages well. However, something more is needed to provide a way to age gracefully.

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<sup>55</sup> Corinna E. Lockenhoff, et al, "Perceptions of Aging across 26 Cultures and their Culture-Level Associates," *Psychology of Aging* 24, no. 4 (December 2009): 941-54.

<sup>56</sup> Jared Diamond, *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Cultures* (New York, NY: Penguin Groups, 2012), 219.

Looking at aging through a theological lens of spirituality sets the stage for practical implications of contemplative living for a follower of Jesus Christ. The notion of being intentional in all areas—body, mind, heart, and soul—connects to the value of contemplative living. Taking time to pause, notice, listen, and respond is rare in the American culture. Even in Evangelical Christian culture, values focus on doing and acquiring, behavior and knowledge. Gerontology, neuroplasticity, and medical/health research reinforce the value of contemplation in the life of an aging person. The next section will address theology and spirituality as it relates to contemplation in the reality of aging.

## SECTION THREE: AGING GRACEFULLY – THE HYPOTHESIS

### Introduction

Aging serves as a crucible for the soul. In the losses and gains of the second half of life, a new perspective potentially emerges. Difficult circumstances force new approaches, laying aside non-functional and former solutions. New situations require more than theories about getting older. The aging population needs to find ways to age well. This dissertation looks to the Christian tradition of contemplation as it shapes the soul for aging gracefully.

The definition of aging gracefully eludes most. There are many questions about how to age well. Only through markers can one begin to see the results of contemplation. Markers of deeper wisdom and more accessible resiliency reflect soul formation.<sup>1</sup> Principles for aging well more fully develop with an understanding of God. Spiritual theology serves as the basis for the soul's development in the crucible.

Three components of aging gracefully – *successful aging*, contemplation, and spiritual theology - construct the fabric of this section. *Successful aging* is the theoretical framework. The framework requires the addition of spirituality to the theory of *successful aging* that includes: minimizing risk of disease and disability, continuing engagement with life, and maintaining physical and cognitive function.<sup>2</sup> Gerontology is a relatively

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Braudy Harris and John Keady, "Editorial: Wisdom, Resilience and Successful Aging: Changing Public Discourses on Living with Dementia," *Dementia* 7, no. 1: 5, accessed November 1, 2017, <http://dem.sagepub.com/content/7/1/5>.

<sup>2</sup> Martha Crowther, et al., "Rowe and Kahn's Model of Successful Aging Revisited: Positive Spirituality – The Forgotten Factor," *The Gerontologist* 42, no. 5 (2002): 613.

new field; spirituality of aging is even newer. Putting these fields together affords a conversation that addresses both the negative and positive components of aging.

Contemplative living is the methodology for aging gracefully. Attuning to God through spiritual practices fosters a life leading to freedom in the second half of life. The theological foundation is spiritual theology as the *raison d'être* for intentionality in aging well. Geriatric psychiatrist, Helen Lavretsky, indicates that she is not alone when she recognizes the value of research on spirituality and aging. Statistically, the research has increased by 600 percent over the years from 1993-2002.<sup>3</sup> These three – spiritual theology, contemplation, and *successful aging* with spirituality – serve as the theological, methodological, and theoretical basis for aging gracefully.

To build the hypothesis that aging gracefully occurs through elegant kenosis, the foundation starts with the value of spiritual theology. The methodology of contemplation articulates the uniqueness and purpose of reflection and praxis. Spirituality theology with contemplation provide the compelling and practical ways within a theoretical model of successful aging with spirituality.

## **Theological Foundation**

### ***Theology***

Theology requires more than head knowledge of God. It invites an encounter with God. Even more so, spiritual theology addresses a necessary heart understanding that affirms the transformation of the whole person - heart, mind, and soul. Transformation

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<sup>3</sup> Helen Lavretsky, "Spirituality and Aging," *Aging Health* 6, no. 6 (December 2010): 754, accessed August 22, 2016, <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/740654>.



does not come merely from studying God. It comes by engagement with God in quotidian practices and experiences.

For this paper, spiritual theology is the foundation for aging well. Integrating spirituality with aging, spiritual theology recognizes the relationship between God and the person who is aging. Spirituality is more than a set of values and principles by which to live life. It begins with accepting of life as a gift from God. The spiritual person recognizes the wonder of life. The interior world of the soul combines with outward expression in relationship, practice, and purpose. The loving embrace of the Triune God deepens the relationship.

Spiritual theology is the interaction between God's initiative and humanity's receptivity, through imagination, invitation, and transformation in life. These interactions help us to live out the questions and answers about God and the world. Too often, theology is a means to an end: a search to find the right answer to a logical question. But in fact, theology is about relationship, first with God, and then with each other. If done in humility, theological exploration of God becomes a place to understand God as well as self and others.

Theologian David Ford asks, "Who will do theology?" God does the main work. "God will take the initiative in opening up minds and imaginations beyond anything previously experienced, inviting people into deep and far-reaching affirmations, ... transformation through wisdom and love."<sup>4</sup> By God's initiative, a relationship begins. By human's willingness to receive that gift, a relationship deepens. In "doing" theology, all

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<sup>4</sup> David F. Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 175.

that is required to start is a “longing to understand more about God’s nature and ways—and the transforming impact this can have on people’s lives.”<sup>5</sup>

All theology reflects the theologian’s worldview. Leading contextual theology, Stephen Bevans states: “All theology is done from a particular point of view and particular social or cultural location, rendering all theology contextual in some way.”<sup>6</sup> More than one approach to understand God is needed when addressing nuances of culture. Remaining true to scripture, historical and traditional context, and the public arena, a theological framework can encompass history, culture, personal, and public contexts. As one’s theology is lived out, the context of life influences an understanding God. For those in the second half of life, while their foundation of theology can remain the same, the new season provides a fuller and deeper grasp of relationship with God.

Stanley Grenz distills theological reflection into three foci: “embody the heart of the biblical message, express the faith of one’s church, and acknowledge the deep, heartfelt longings of the contemporary society.”<sup>7</sup> The aim of theology is to receive the embrace of God’s love in every aspect of life: the ordinary, the suffering, the extraordinary, and the joy-filled. Theological reflection provides compassion as well as correction. It permeates despair by offering hope. And it works towards freedom in the transforming encounter with Jesus Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basics* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), viii.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Garner, “Contextual and Public Theology – Passing Fads or Theological Imperatives,” Inaugural Address at Laidlaw College, Auckland, NZ, February 2, 2015, accessed June 30, 2016, <http://knoxcentre.ac/nz/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/2015-KCML-Lecture-Garner.pdf>, Garner quotes Stephen Bevans in address.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology: An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 117-118.

Finding places of commonality rather than division, David Ford offers a set of inter-faith maxims that include, “Seek to go deeper, seek wisdom, cultivate virtues and practices, create signs of hope, and do all this for the sake of the highest good.”<sup>8</sup> In these places of agreement, a lived-out theology allows for the work of God’s commandments to be carried out regardless of theological differences. As indicated in *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* by Michael Bebbington, the church has an opportunity to allow for the ongoing transformation of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Evangelicals can live in a place of imagination, “...those [evangelicals] who practice theology must become less preoccupied with the world that produced Scripture and learn how to live in the world Scripture produces. This will be a matter of imagination, and perhaps of leaping.”<sup>10</sup> As one lives out theology, a place of transformation can be cultivated through the embrace of God’s unending love. With imagination given to humanity, God works in and through doctrinal differences and approaches. Requiring mind and heart to explore how God interacts in the world, humanity seeks the highest good not necessarily in what they decide is doctrinal truth, but in how they live it out through love and truth.

### ***Transformation***

Transformation occurs within an expansive theology shaped by praxis, intentional reflection, and subsequent action. Living out one’s theology involves relating on a

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<sup>8</sup> Ford, 119-120.

<sup>9</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980* (London, UK: Routledge, 1989), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, “Imaging the World Scripture Imagines,” in *Theology and Scriptural Imagination*, eds. L. Gregory Johns and James J. Buckley (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1998), 3.

personal and community level. Understanding oneself, God, and others becomes part of the process. Factors for change build on certain methods, perspectives, and the capacity to persevere, exploring the most important and meaningful aspects of life.

Values distill a distinct theology. They motivate purpose in approach, understanding, and perseverance towards transformation. As well, they inform one's definition of spiritual formation. "Christian spiritual formation is the process through which the embodied/reflective will takes on the character of Christ's will."<sup>11</sup> Through the unfolding "way of Jesus," spiritual formation sustains the transformational factors for Christ-likeness to emerge. The goal of theology and spiritual formation acknowledges that this process is not so much to describe God and know God intellectually as it is to "attain the habit of knowing we're always in God's presence."<sup>12</sup> Theology and spiritual formation create meaning beyond a description and formula to lay a foundation for transformation in individuals and communities around the world.

### ***Spirituality***

Spirituality is difficult to define, especially in today's culture that welcomes spirituality without a specified religion. Taken originally from an ecclesiastical setting, spirituality now refers to more than what happens in an institutional church. More recently, emphasis on empirical evidence shows the distinction between religion and spirituality. Religion serves as a formal structure of doctrine and practices while spirituality is "positive relationships with various measures of life satisfaction,

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<sup>11</sup> Dallas Willard, "Living a Transformed Life Adequate to Our Calling," *Dallas Willard Blog*, 2005, accessed November 20, 2014, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=58>.

<sup>12</sup> Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 15.

psychosocial wellbeing, both physical and mental health, and is helpful in the quest for meaning and purpose in life.”<sup>13</sup> For many, the distinction serves as a mechanism to allow one to be spiritual without having to be religious, while others see them as the same. Zinnbauer, whose main work includes looking at the differences and similarities between spirituality and religion, proposes that what connects them is the consideration of what is sacred.<sup>14</sup> The spirituality of a person allows for recognition of a higher power, a transcendent reality, without having to adhere to the negative associations attached to religions.

For spirituality, no consensus exists within the academic world that offers different definitions. Within the Christian theological discipline, Alister McGrath offers this: “Spirituality thus refers to a lived experience of God, and the life of prayer and action which results from this; however, at the same time it cannot be conceived apart from the theological beliefs which undergird that life.”<sup>15</sup> A common definition of Christian spirituality recognizes the frailty of human life while acknowledging humanity’s ability to participate in God’s work on earth that extends to life hereafter. Christian spirituality, thus, requires faith beyond oneself, a belief in transcendent power, and a hope that leans into a good God who created humans in his image (Genesis 1:26). Spirituality holds the tension of life’s paradoxes: the mystery and immanence of God, the evidence of evil and loss in the world with the transformational power of love, the hope

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<sup>13</sup> Helen Lavretsky, “Resilience and Aging: From Conceptual Understandings to Opportunities for Enhancement,” *The Gerontologist* 55, no. 4 (2015): 749.

<sup>14</sup> Brian J. Zinnbauer, Kenneth I. Pargament, and Allie B. Scott, “Emerging Meanings of Religiosity and Spirituality: Problems and Prospects,” *Journal of Personality* 67, no.6 (December 1999): 903-904.

<sup>15</sup> McGrath, 110.

of meaning while living with despair in suffering, and the beauty of sacred and profane. A Christian's spiritual life reflects the incarnational model of Jesus Christ, weaving the fabric of prayer and action, worship and service, reflection and movement. While difficult to nail down in one phrase, spirituality for the Christian means living life aware of one's own self in an ongoing relationship with a personal and powerful God, as demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ.

### ***Practical Theology Influence***

Practical theology addresses understanding God through the context of daily life. Neil Darragh offers this definition of practical theology: "the process ... to make connections between the world of human action and the Christian tradition that results in transformative practice."<sup>16</sup> Whether in everyday vocation, leisure, or other spiritual practices, one's life demonstrates the beliefs held in relationship to one's understanding of God. As Darragh offers, practical theology can help in all aspects of life by enlisting a process of naming key issues that ask pivotal questions. For instance, before a person illustrates from the bible, a question about the purpose of scripture employs a metacognition, a reflection on its value. Then a circular process occurs, a rereading of scripture alongside tradition. Together they inform the key issue and question which then require more rereading and interaction. Ultimately, the response to the question requires making a choice about the key issue.<sup>17</sup> For the one who believes the bible serves as a narrative guide, the illustration from the bible gives a different perspective than the one

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<sup>16</sup> Neil Darragh, "The Practice of Practical Theology: Key Decisions and Abiding Hazards in Doing Practical Theology," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 9 (March 2007), accessed August 3, 2016, [http://aejt.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/395736/AEJT\\_9.9\\_Darragh\\_Practice.pdf](http://aejt.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/395736/AEJT_9.9_Darragh_Practice.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

who takes scripture literally. Practical theology provides an ongoing dynamic and meaningful engagement with God and the world.

For the everyday follower of Jesus Christ, practical theology offers a map for seeing God in ordinary aspects of life. In relationships, ethical decisions, or choices for leisure or career, regular interaction with God deepens relationship in knowing God. Practical theology becomes a discernment process that allows for transformation to take place. John Calvin affirmed that knowing oneself starts with knowing God: “Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists in two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>18</sup> Knowing oneself affords the opportunity to take steps toward participating in the work that God is doing, personally, communally, and in the world. Practical theology allows for the promise of knowing oneself and others in the context of knowing God.

### ***Defining Spiritual Theology***

Spiritual Theology, by name, can be considered other-worldly, only concerned with what happens in spiritual realms. However, its practices are closely related to practical theology. Entwining doctrine, practice and the God’s presence, spiritual theology cultivates an *askesis*, a living, humble practice, to enter into “engagement with the questioning at the heart of faith.”<sup>19</sup> Former Archbishop Rowan Williams insists that theology:

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<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, 1.1, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes/>.

<sup>19</sup> Kim Fabricius, “Ten Propositions on Spirituality,” *Faith and Theology*, July 4, 2007, accessed September 3, 2016, <http://www.faith-theology.com/2007/07/ten-propositions-on-spirituality.html>. Fabricius quotes Rowan Williams in her article.

[M]ust ... touch every area of human experience, the public and the social, the painful, negative, even pathological byways of the mind, the moral and relational world. And the goal of a Christian life becomes not enlightenment but wholeness – an acceptance of this complicated and muddled bundle of experiences as a possible theatre for God’s creative work.<sup>20</sup>

It is in the working out of faith that spiritual theology builds on the practical theology of understanding God.

Spiritual theology acts as the foundation to consider contemplation. The reality of God working, here and now, invites participation in the ongoing work of transformation. Starting from a “faith-seeking-understanding” posture, “Theology is seeking to understand with the intellect what the heart – a person’s central core of character – already believes and to which it is committed.”<sup>21</sup> Spiritual theology combines understanding of God with responsive spiritual practices within whatever context one encounters. Contemporary theologian and pastor, Eugene Peterson, believes that “Spiritual theology is the attention we give to the details of living life.”<sup>22</sup> He, along with Grenz, Darragh, Williams, and others see spiritual theology as seeking the way of Jesus Christ into wholeness of life.

Spiritual theology fosters a foundation for kenosis, a self-emptying given by Jesus Christ’s example in Philippians 2:5-8. When he empties himself of one identity, Jesus Christ models a way forward in God’s economy. Losing one’s life allows finding it. Humanity no longer needs to hold so tightly to what is perceived as essential. Releasing control becomes the maxim. In whatever circumstance, the art of kenosis—with *art*

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Grenz and Olson, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 1.



meaning by trial and error and gift—becomes, in the process of aging, a willful letting go. Kenosis works within discernment that can lead one from a life of fear in aging into freedom that discovers joy in aging.<sup>23</sup> Through the art of kenosis, spiritual theology lays the foundation of spiritual formation for contemplation in aging.

## **Methodology**

### ***Contemplation***

With spiritual theology as foundation, contemplation is the method: the “way” to understand God. The way centers on relationship with God, both personally and communally. Relationship rests in God’s grace, alongside the responsiveness to the invitation by God. As David Ford states: “Our true freedom lies in being responsive to God's initiative - that gives us immense scope, but always in relationship with God as the one to whom we are freely grateful for our freedom.”<sup>24</sup> The freedom that comes through God’s grace serves as hope to engage further understanding. For David Benner, “Spirituality is our way of being in relation to the transcendent, and theology is our way of understanding that relationship.”<sup>25</sup> The means to connect with God begins with the openness to who God is in everyday life.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Carlson, “A Theology of Aging and a Vision for the Church,” *Faith Formation and Spirituality of Aging: Episcopal Church*, ESMA, April 1998, 61-62, accessed March 2, 2016, [http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/2\\_faith\\_formation\\_\\_spirituality\\_of\\_aging.pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/2_faith_formation__spirituality_of_aging.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Ford, 56.

<sup>25</sup> David Benner, “Moving Beyond Outgrown Spirituality,” *David Benner Blog*, November 21, 2014, accessed February 3, 2016, <http://www.drdauidbenner.ca/moving-beyond-outgrown-spiritualities/>.

The value of contemplation lies in pausing, noticing, listening, and responding with integrity. Taking time to pause—recognizing that something is afoot—allows one to notice God. God does not operate in loud voices,<sup>26</sup> but rather, through nurturing the attention of one’s heart and mind. From the posture of pause, listening allows reflection, rather than reaction. Action is not absent from contemplation, instead it is a result of pausing, noticing, and listening through responding.

The uniqueness of contemplation finds practices that, as Dallas Willard defines, are spiritual disciplines: “Any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort.”<sup>27</sup> To take the time to pause, notice, and listen does not come easily in a world filled with distraction, noise, and mindless chatter. The very act of slowing down is difficult enough. As an extreme example, road rage has increased by 7 percent each year since 1990. Suggestions to address road rage include contemplative practices that need to be decided upon beforehand: listening to music, letting go of expectations, etc.<sup>28</sup> These notions do not develop a contemplative society, but perhaps drivers would feel more safe. To be even more intentional, one could choose practices such as driving in the slow lane. Over time and practice, a decrease occurs in road rage driving. As well, the soul discovers that slowing influences other parts of life. An ordinary, everyday practice serves society while quieting the soul through awareness and attention.

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<sup>26</sup> See 1 Kings 19:12 – God’s whisper and Isaiah.

<sup>27</sup> Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1988), 353.

<sup>28</sup> Paige Bierma, “Road Rage: When Stress Hits the Highway,” *HealthDay*, January 20, 2016, accessed February 15, 2016, <https://consumer.healthday.com/encyclopedia/emotional-health-17/emotional-disorder-news-228/road-rage-when-stress-hits-the-highway-646042.html>.

### *Practices*

Practices yield space for noticing how one responds to situations. To become mindful, not trying for behavior modification alone, sets the stage for transformation to occur. As Henri Nouwen says, “Discipline is the other side of discipleship. . . . Discipline in the spiritual life is the concentrated effort to create the space and time where God can become our master and where we can respond freely to God’s guidance.”<sup>29</sup> Where the Evangelical church has placed much emphasis on discipleship, the need for disciplines balances the interaction between the two for a healthier engagement with God and one another.

Spiritual practices come in many forms. Ruth Haley Barton divides them into eight categories: Longing, Solitude, Scripture, Prayer, Honoring the Body, Self-Examination, Discernment, Sabbath, and Rule of Life.<sup>30</sup> She notes that spiritual disciplines need to fit the season and purpose of practicing them. A classic book for Christians, *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster, describes these spiritual practices: Inward Disciplines (such as prayer and fasting), along with Outward Disciplines (such as solitude and service), along with Corporate Disciplines (such as confession, worship and celebration).<sup>31</sup> In his ongoing work, Foster describes the traditions from which various practices begin. As an example, in *Streams of Living Water*, the Incarnational Tradition emphasizes the sacramental life of “making present and

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<sup>29</sup> Henri Nouwen, “Creating Space for God,” *Henri Nouwen Society*, February 27, 2016, accessed July 30, 2016, <http://henrinouwen.org/meditation/creating-space-god/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publisher, 1988), v.

visible the realm of the invisible spirit,”<sup>32</sup> particularly through the Eucharist, the meeting Christ in communion.<sup>33</sup> The disciplines are a form of meeting Jesus as a “passionate pursuit of the Real.”<sup>34</sup>

While the disciplines are a way to meet God, they are not a place whereby one controls situations. Henri Nouwen articulates the need for boundaries that are not fences but rather spaces “to set apart a time and a place where God’s gracious presence can be acknowledged and responded to.”<sup>35</sup> The posture acknowledges God’s presence through a mind-full-ness of God, whereby God can work in our lives based on our responsiveness.

### ***Mindfulness***

For the Christian, mindfulness is not mindlessness. It is not emptying the thoughts of one’s mind for the sake of emptying. Rather, the act of mindfulness resembles the use of Psalms in repetition or simple choruses in worship songs that allow the mind to be still long enough for the heart and soul to respond. Douglas Christie in *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind* describes the contemplative tradition of mindfulness as “a fierce commitment to paying attention, an encompassing, transformative work oriented toward remaking the self and community, a healing work.”<sup>36</sup> Paying attention builds on centuries-old Christian practices.

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1994), 237.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>34</sup> Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 275.

<sup>35</sup> Nouwen, “Creating Space for God.”

<sup>36</sup> Christie, x.

### *Historical Perspective*

While the practice of mindfulness has been more recently associated with Eastern practices, the early Church had long used contemplative practices, such as prayer and meditation. Evagrius, St. Anthony, and other desert fathers and mothers set the foundation for much of what is practiced today. In the 6th century, Gregory the Great maintained that the interior life starts by “resting in God.”<sup>37</sup> In that posture, one combines the practice of reflection, particularly on God’s Word, with recognizing the gift of grace from God.<sup>38</sup> This discipline, expressed as mystical by some, requires an ascetic practice of reconciling the heart and mind whereby interior transformation takes place.<sup>39</sup> From there, the actions based on reflection become congruent with God’s intentions.

Through the middle ages and into present day, church fathers and mothers such as Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, St. Theresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross carry the message forward. They emphasize the elements of prayer as an expression for faith of the heart in its simplicity, simple regard, quietness, and memory.<sup>40</sup> In addition to prayer, these traditional practices include the study of God’s Word. *Lectio Divina*, a sacred reading of scripture cultivates a deeper understanding of God. For exterior practices, worship and service explore the ways to engage God in community. Some practices remove obstacles in God’s presence through the disciplines of silence and solitude. The

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<sup>37</sup> “The Christian Contemplative Tradition,” accessed April 20, 2016, <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/christian-contemplative-tradition>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Kevin Knight, “Contemplation,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2012, accessed December 7, 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04324b.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> “The Christian Contemplative Tradition.”

others mentioned are practices that engage the participant to add elements to his/her spiritual practices.<sup>41</sup>

A Rule of Life works to provide an intentional spiritual life through practices. A Rule of Life offers a “rhythm of grace,” a cadence of practices that sustain a life in God, (Matthew 13, TM). One makes choices based on ordinary life, to create space for God’s presence. Jane Foulcher suggests that the natural monastery of aging provides a place where intentionality in a contemplative life resides.<sup>42</sup> To this end, “Life is lived towards its ultimate end, towards God, . . .the goal is ascent, the movement towards God.”<sup>43</sup> Through intentionality, there is movement, participation, and cooperation with God.

### ***Other Contemplative Traditions***

Douglas Christie, theology professor at Loyola Marymount, writes about the value of spiritual disciplines when it comes to restoring the earth, what he calls a “contemplative ecology.”<sup>44</sup> His use of ecology is a different lens from aging, but his principles compare to a contemplative life in aging. By definition, he describes contemplative tradition as a “fierce commitment to paying attention, an encompassing, transformative work oriented toward remaking the self and community, a healing work inclusive of everything and everyone.”<sup>45</sup> He describes unique, yet not unknown, practices

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<sup>41</sup> Carl McColman, *Answering the Contemplative Call: First Steps on the Mystical Path* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2013), 132.

<sup>42</sup> Jane Foulcher, “Ageing, Humility, and the Monastery,” *Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Aging* 26, no. 2-3, (April 17, 2014): 148.

<sup>43</sup> Foulcher, 156.

<sup>44</sup> Christie, xi.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

such as *penthos*, the gift of tears, as a gift and source of healing.<sup>46</sup> As well, he offers *prosoche*, the art of attention, and *kenosis*, the act of emptying, as ways to connect to God through intentional actions that require both the mind and heart.<sup>47</sup>

### ***Catholic Church – Benedictine and Ignatian Focus***

Forging dynamic relationships with God, two orders within the Catholic Church are known for contemplation to counter worldly influences. Each of them developed specific practices to cultivate an ongoing dialogue with God. Following the command of “loving God, others, and self,” the Jesuits (followers of St. Ignatius) and the Benedictines (followers of St. Benedict) dynamically engage in ordinary life through “rules” that govern their behavior to transform heart and soul.

#### *Benedictines*

On the door to the community of St. Placid,<sup>48</sup> the nuns’ message greets all with St. Benedict’s axiom: “All who arrive as guests are to be welcomed like Christ,” (Rule of Saint Benedict 53:1).<sup>49</sup> The Rule of Life, for anyone who participates in a Benedictine community, requires them to receive the stranger. It is how they live. Hospitality serves as a practice. Even more so, it cultivates an understanding of God and their community, both inside and out. The nuns of St. Placid assent to something beyond their own

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., iii.

<sup>48</sup> St. Placid Priory, Lacey, Washington.

<sup>49</sup> “Hospitality,” *The Benedictine Monks*, accessed June 3, 2016, <http://www.benedictinemonks.co.uk/hospitality/>.

personal desires. Their rule creates a welcoming community, beyond what an individual can offer.

These Rule-of-Life practices are not the vehicle to God, but rather, they open up space to meet God in dynamic and revitalizing ways. Benedictines recognize that one of the most effective ways to meet God is through the lives of others, in both difficulties and celebrations. By offering hospitality, they intentionally commit to a contemplative life that reflects God's word to others. Through scripture and tradition, they follow a practice demonstrating their reflection.

The legacy of St. Benedict, founder of the Benedictines, is the lasting tradition of cloistered living that prioritizes *ora et labor*—prayer and work. They focus on monastic promises which encompass stability, obedience (understood as active and ongoing discernment), and conversion of life, an openness to God's transformative work.<sup>50</sup> The Benedictines serve God by serving one another with the expectation that their own life will be changed. St. Benedict eschewed secularism of the Christianized Roman culture. He believed that by removing himself he would hear God's voice more effectively. However, differently than desert fathers and mothers who left society to listen and pray, Benedict sought a way, a bridge, to continue engaging those who might not otherwise chose a cloistered life. In the Benedictine Rule, each member commits to the way of Jesus by serving one another. These practices are available not only to those within the monastery, but those outside as well.

Sister Laura, my spiritual director for the last eight years, speaks of her personal experience. As one of the younger nuns at St. Placid at the age of 61, she describes the

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<sup>50</sup> Sister Laura Swan, interview with author, Lacey, WA, March 31, 2016.



value of community living. Referencing the dying process of one cantankerous nun, Sister Laura remarks that only in community did the dying nun have the opportunity for a change of heart, at the age of 95. No one necessarily enjoyed spending time with the dying nun, but one nun chose to bestow grace and lightheartedness with daily visits. The hospitable nun's visits and the disagreeable nun's final forgiveness of her mother resulted in her peaceful passing. The practice of hospitality extends to those who are enjoyable, maybe even more so to those who are not. It requires practice. It doesn't come naturally or easily, even for a nun. Yet the power of the gift of hospitality changes a heart.

With hope to intentionally address aging, a Rule of Life serves its purpose. The "rules" are not imposed laws, but rather, they are choices based on knowing oneself and the environment/context of life. For instance, a person uses willpower to choose to eat only healthy food after a lifetime of junk food. But that willpower seldom lasts over time. Given that same person, taking a quiet moment of reflection before a bite of food, healthy or otherwise, eventually influences the choices of food. The Rule of Life provides habits, not accomplishment of goals.

Deliberate choices also affect attitudes of the heart. Few people choose cloistered living like Sister Laura and her community; however, the heart of hospitality can still be a part of everyday life. How can one take in the stranger, releasing fear of those in personal spaces? The first step begins small, not necessarily housing the homeless initially, but rather choosing as a Rule of Life to simply "get on the moving sidewalk," as my friend Barb says. Stepping on the sidewalk might first lead to serving at a breakfast for the homeless once a month. Initial steps are small, yet in the end, practices allow an

expansion of hospitality. A cantankerous old woman might become a friend. A spare room may well be offered to a homeless person.

### *Ignatian/ Jesuits*

The ways of St. Ignatius, Jesuit founder, provide Spiritual Exercises that he established in the sixteenth-century. Jesuits and anyone interested can practice. The contemplative discernment process begins with stating desire, indicated by the First Principle and Foundation: “I want and I choose what better leads to the deepening of God’s life in me.”<sup>51</sup> After a life of war and worldly accomplishment, St. Ignatius’ legacy emerged out of a transformational process like that of Augustine’s “Take and Read” experience<sup>52</sup> and St. Paul’s blinding conversion. Ignatius’ life radically changed by simply meeting God. As a result, the Jesuit order seeks to provide justice while ensuring a discernment process.

The Jesuits’ unique contribution to the Catholic church is their ability to be contemplatives-in-action. Alongside traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the Jesuits vow additional obedience to the Pope, specific to their active mission in the world.<sup>53</sup> They willingly go to any global society with a call based on listening to God. No matter what is going on in the life of a Jesuit, filled with activity or not, he first takes time to listen.

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<sup>51</sup> St. Ignatius, “Selected Prayers: The First Principle and Foundation,” as paraphrased by David J. Fleming SJ, *St. Ignatius* 2016, accessed November 7, 2016, [http://www.bc.edu/bc\\_org/prs/stign/index.html](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/prs/stign/index.html).

<sup>52</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 159.

<sup>53</sup> “I Want to Learn More About: The Society of Jesus,” *Immaculate Conception: Jesuit Church*, accessed October 6, 2016, <http://jesuitchurch.net/learn/the-society-of-jesus>.

Following St. Ignatius' example, the Jesuit order must first participate in the Spiritual Exercises inculcate the practice of listening to God for the work already being done in the world and life of the practitioner. Through the 30-day Spiritual Exercises, the goal is vocational discernment, particularly for one considering priesthood. To accomplish this, Ignatian practices include the Examen of Consciousness: taking time to review the day through awareness of God's presence. This practice alongside other practices develop a keen discernment of God's movement. For those seeking priesthood or not, the Spiritual Exercises aid in listening to the active call of God in both significant and ordinary work for the Kingdom of God.

### *Examen*

The Examen of Consciousness originates from the thirty-day spiritual exercises that St. Ignatius required of all his followers to discern their call. During the vocational discernment, many practices are offered: hours of the day, scripture reading, meeting with a spiritual director, as well as the Examen. Of all the practices, only one thing is required daily – the Examen. Daily reflection becomes the echo of understanding for the future discernment of God's work.

As a practice, Examen includes taking time during noon-day and evening to reflect. During this time, a participant processes the day, playing back the last twenty-four hours. Asking God for guidance and responding with gratitude begins the daily prayer. From there, discovering life-giving places where God freely works is followed by looking at the life-draining places where God is blocked. In response to limiting or obstructing God's power, confession may be needed, but not mandatory. Instead of trying to fix the problem, the awareness of the life-draining becomes an act of noticing. The

pausing and noticing starts the healing. To close the time, prayer turns to trusting God for the next twenty-four hours. The entire time takes between eight to ten minutes.

A power-shift happens in the Examen, from human effort to God's grace. Ignatius offers a mindfulness practice of simply noticing and becoming aware. His discovery remains after almost 500 years, without any initial scientific evidence: people change not with behavior management alone, but by awareness. Offering space for the Holy Spirit to work starts with a humble desire to seek God. Being present to God's work, through attentive gratitude, honesty, confession, and trust brings transformation.

This practice becomes even more important as one ages. After years of experience, reality reveals the impossibility to change oneself by sheer will power alone. When disappointment, divorce, physical limitations, or other losses take their toll, survival tools of former years weaken, and even collapse. In fact, those once strong survival tools now seek to destroy. For instance, the person once able to do life on their own now experiences loneliness because of the inability to ask for help. From his younger years of abuse, Harold learned to accomplish tasks without the assistance of anyone else. His employment validated Harold's ability through yearly awards of excellence. Up until he retired, everyone assumed Harold would continue to flourish, including his third wife. But when he broke both legs skiing, he realized that he no longer could survive without the help of others. He didn't know how to rely on others. Through his reflection in the prayer of the Examen, he found a non-judgmental opportunity to face these changes in his life.

Reflection leads to wisdom. By facing issues that easily entangle during the aging process, the second half of life person can see the inadequacy of the survival tools from

the first half of life. The shadow side that hooks and pulls them off track can move from blindness to acknowledged emotional responses. Simply noticing patterns in life gives impetus to address the negative. A ripening occurs, not through the lie of control but through letting go and trusting God.

### **Evangelical Contemplative Focus**

Historically, the Evangelical church has been slow to regard the contemplative life as theologically valuable. In his 1978 book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Foster appealed to the Evangelical church, in a growing mega-church focus, to find how to “live a deep life.”<sup>54</sup> The choice, Foster pointed out, is living beyond the surface to the depths of spirituality. He offered an assortment of disciplines and introducing both inward and outward expressions of those practices. Dallas Willard, a USC philosophy professor, divides the disciplines into ways to combat sins of commission and omission.<sup>55</sup> The disciplines of abstinence cultivate the capacity to let go of what entangles. Practices include silence, solitude, fasting, and chastity. Willard states, “The disciplines of abstinence must be counter-balanced and supplemented by disciplines of engagement.”<sup>56</sup> Engagement focuses on worship, celebration, and fellowship that add a dimension in life committed to God’s presence.

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<sup>54</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Willard, 176.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

While Foster and Willard illustrate spiritual practices, many organizations within the Evangelical tradition turn to a missional approach in the Christian life. Seeking to live authentic and integrated Christian lives, missional spirituality lives as “an integrative spirituality...with no separation of being and act.”<sup>57</sup> The integration of the two – missional and spiritual practices - serves as the design to live out of one’s beliefs and values. The contemplative life requires discernment; missional living requires action. This missional spirituality bridges the act of doing with the essence of person and his/her world. Seeing through the lens of humility, the spiritual life sets out to prioritize disciplines, “but the main difference is that spiritual areas are no longer polarized.”<sup>58</sup>

For the aging adult, exploring historical and contemporary spiritual practices paves the way for an ongoing letting go. The second half of life person discovers a life of being a contemplative-in-action, or to fit the profile, an elegant kenosis-in-aging. For Harold or the cantankerous nun, signs of aging gracefully emerge. Those indicators reveal wisdom and resiliency as components to elegant kenosis.

### **The Markers**

To live a contemplative life focuses on the inner life, which requires a place of stillness and solitude. The inner work guides the outward expression of one’s life. However, visible or tangible markers of this process are difficult to name. Thus, when

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<sup>57</sup> Leonard E. Hjalmanson, “A Trinitarian Spirituality of Mission,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 93.

<sup>58</sup> Shawn B. Redford, *Missiological Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation for the Global Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 130.

someone is asked, “Are you aging gracefully?” the response is often, “I don’t know” or “I don’t think so.” So how does one know? What indicators acknowledge contemplation as a forum for transformation of heart, soul, and mind? While various researchers endorse a variety of indicators, two specific markers are wisdom<sup>59</sup> and resiliency<sup>60</sup> as they relate to aging priorities. For this paper, these two markers are the focus of how a contemplative life reflects the changes taking place in one’s heart, mind, and soul.

### *Wisdom*

To acquire wisdom requires experience combined with reflection and practice. While one can develop wisdom early in life, usually it is a result of insight from difficult and/or suffering circumstances. Wisdom mostly emerges in the second half of life, after a multitude of positive and negative experiences. Usually attributed to the aged, true wisdom results from a willingness to reflect. This reflective learning deepens the ability to turn knowledge into wisdom. The practice of risk embeds wisdom with the successes and failures of life to provide lifelong learning. Wisdom becomes not just what one says and does, but what one becomes and is. In scripture, true wisdom comes from God. God’s revelation invites humanity into a place of understanding.

Wisdom presupposes a passion for meaning, knowledge, and understanding. It embraces such elements as discernment in complex matters, doing justice in various dimensions of reality, and coping well with contingencies and difficulties. Traditionally, wisdom requires ethical responsibility, good judgment, combining theory and practice,

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<sup>59</sup> Copthorne Macdonald, “Monika Ardel’s Model of Wisdom,” *The Wisdom Page*, accessed June 5, 2016, <http://www.wisdompage.com/Ardelt01.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Lavretsky, 703.

and far-sighted decision making. These descriptions point to God, a wise God, and invites people into seeking wisdom and living wisely.<sup>61</sup>

Stuart Weeks defines wisdom as “the knowledge of how to stay on the path which leads to life, because it is approved by God.”<sup>62</sup> By knowing God, we gain wisdom. Proverbs and other Wisdom books of the Bible show how God extends wisdom to all those who seek it. In the New Testament, James offers that wisdom is to “Live well, live wisely, and live humbly” (James 3:13b). He goes on to say that it is more about the way one lives, rather than what one acquires. “Real wisdom, God’s wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others” (James 3:17).

Measuring wisdom reflects in its pursuit, not attainment. A person does not acquire wisdom by a standard method. Rather as Shakespeare said, “The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.”<sup>63</sup> The act of calling oneself wise is ironic. Better termed, a person who seeks wisdom becomes the “wise fool” in the practice of humility. The recognition that there is more to learn, rather than already known, reflects true wisdom.

In *Preaching Character: Reclaiming Wisdom’s Paradigmatic Imagination for Transformation*, the authors describe wisdom as a journey that requires practice:

A person is not born with wisdom; it is a learned quality. It is not a spur of the moment decision to *try* to be a wise person. It is a process of *training*. An individual might pick up a violin and *try* to play it but won’t get very far. Even a gifted musician is limited to mediocrity without practice. An individual has to *train* to play it through instruction, regular and disciplined practice, listening to

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<sup>61</sup> Ford, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Stuart Weeks, *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 26.

<sup>63</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1998), 68.



experienced violinists, going to concerts, and living within a music culture. There is a big difference between *trying* to play the violin and *training* to play it.<sup>64</sup>

For the person in the second half of life, wisdom will not suddenly arrive. It requires intentionality. Wisdom comes through practice, rather than accomplishment.

As well, wisdom requires openness, holding one's hand open to acknowledge the mystery of God and the paradoxes of life. To describe wisdom is not unlike describing spirituality: it is integration, not disintegration; it acknowledges humanity in its goodness and evil; it requires the praxis of reflection and action; it lives within the daily experiences of both the ordinary and the extraordinary; it holds both transcendence and immanence; it exists because of the grace of God; it is a journey (or "way") of living in the abiding presence of God; and it responds to the movement of the Holy Spirit by relinquishing control in order to live into the freedom of Christ. Ultimately, this posture in wisdom reflects a contemplative stance of "staying openhanded, treasuring but not grasping."<sup>65</sup>

### ***Resiliency***

As the act of getting back up after some form of collapse, resiliency renders a valuable marker for someone in the aging scenario. Because of the very nature of aging, losses can be devastating: spouse, friends, finances, physical, all contribute to disequilibrium in life. However, when someone returns from suffering to being a contributing member of society, that act of returning—resiliency—indicates whether one

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<sup>64</sup> David Fleer and Dave Bland, *Preaching Character: Reclaiming Wisdom's Paradigmatic Imagination for Transformation* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2010), 17.

<sup>65</sup> Simone Campbell, *A Nun on the Bus: How All of Us Can Create Hope, Change and Community* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publisher, 2014), xiii.

will age well. Speaking globally, specifically in war or poverty, to see an aging person overcome these barriers and obstacles reflects the ability to age gracefully through any circumstances.

Resiliency does not imply that one gets things right all the time. In fact, the spirituality of imperfection is at play here, allowing oneself to make mistakes or recognize the shadow nature of personality. Resiliency implies failing and falling down. Psychologists Lepore and Revenson use the analogy of a tree in the wind to demonstrate three ways that resiliency can occur: elasticity, returning to its original state; resistance, finding strength and balance in the storm; and reconfiguration, the capacity to ultimately change shape.<sup>66</sup> Through these various forms, a resilient person's goal seeks a way through the circumstance and situation, rather than perfection.

Empirical evidence articulates specific qualities of resilient people. Susan McFadden's work along with Rosemary Blieszner and Janet Ramsey show that hope, especially expressed in furthering one's legacy and living in community, indicate potential for resiliency.<sup>67</sup> In fact, resiliency grows with introspection and transcendence as shown through the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale.<sup>68</sup> When that resiliency strengthens, so does the community. McFadden and McFadden, in *Aging Together:*

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<sup>66</sup> Janet L. Ramsey and Rosemary Blieszner, *Spiritual Resiliency and Aging: Hope, Rationality, and the Creative Self* (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Co, 2012), 11-12.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> Helen Lavretsky and Michael R. Irwin, "Resiliency and Aging," *Aging Health* 3, no. 3 (June 2007): 309.

*Dementia, Friendship, and Flourishing Communities*, report that “practices of love and friendship can sustain hope, even in the midst of suffering and loss.”<sup>69</sup>

Two of the practices in resiliency that involve the community are gratitude and forgiveness. As Henri Amiel states, “Thankfulness is the beginning of gratitude. Gratitude is the completion of thankfulness. Thankfulness may consist merely of words. Gratitude is shown in acts.”<sup>70</sup> To be thankful in a community benefits the giver and recipients of gratitude. In addition to gratitude, research indicates that forgiveness leads to greater resiliency. For an aging adult, there is a relationship between being able to forgive and overall physical and emotional health. One study finds that a forgiving personality not only influences the level of stress, but also how to age successfully through “autonomy, environmental mastery, positive mastery, positive relationships with others, purpose in life, personal growth, and self-acceptance.”<sup>71</sup> To deepen one’s capacity to address, withstand, and live into aging as a resilient person requires a community where hope, gratitude, and forgiveness are regularly practiced.

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<sup>69</sup> Susan H. McFadden and John T. McFadden, *Aging Together: Dementia, Friendship, and Flourishing Communities* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 121.

<sup>70</sup> Carol A. Dingle, *Memorable Quotations: Henri Frederic Amiel* (Amazon Digital Services, February 4, 2013), Kindle.

<sup>71</sup> Everett L. Worthington, Jr, et al., “Forgiveness, Health, and Well-Being: A Review of Evidence for Emotional Versus Decisional Forgiveness, Dispositional Forgiveness, and Reduced Unforgiveness,” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 30, no. 4 (August 2007): 293.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Combinatory Play*

Albert Einstein coined a term, *Combinatory Play*, to explain how new ideas come into existence.<sup>72</sup> In Ecclesiastes the author notes that there is “nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Likewise, there are no “new” ideas. But ideas, no matter how old or well-used, can be associated with other ideas, previously isolated from one another, that, in combination, bring about a new way of understanding. That is combinatory play. Neither the idea of aging gracefully, nor contemplation, is new. However, by combining them together, a fresh concept for approaching this season of life emerges. To indulge in combinatory play with aging gracefully, a theoretical framework needs to provide some structure.

### *Successful Aging*

In 1998, Rowe and Kahn developed a three-factor model for successful aging that included maximizing physical and mental abilities, minimizing risk and disabilities, and engaging in an active life.<sup>73</sup> While these factors are valuable to aging well, an additional component, that pertains to the work in this paper, has been addressed in a newer study: Positive Spirituality.<sup>74</sup> The ability to acknowledge and understand the person’s soul in aging enhances successful aging. While Crowther, Koenig and others explain “positive

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<sup>72</sup> Maria Popova, “How Einstein Thought: Why ‘Combinatory Play’ Is the Secret of Genius,” *Brain Pickings*, accessed August 8, 2016, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/08/14/how-einstein-thought-combinatorial-creativity/>.

<sup>73</sup> John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn, “Successful Aging,” *Gerontologist* 37, no. 4 (1997): 433.

<sup>74</sup> Crowther, et al., 613.

spirituality,”<sup>75</sup> the purpose of this paper is to undergird the need for spirituality as a component to aging.

Paradoxically, people are living longer while being called old earlier.<sup>76</sup> Jan Baars, in *Aging and the Art of Living*, writes, “the wish to live longer presupposes that a longer life is by definition a better life. [This] amounts to wanting not to die.”<sup>77</sup> In all the messages about how to age well, confusion abounds. Does it mean not telling someone your age? Where is the line where the efforts of healthy living become an obsession to try to reverse the reality of aging? Does plastic surgery necessarily promise an improved sense of well-being?<sup>78</sup> Older men in the California technology industry are using Botox at an increasingly high rate to prevent ageism as an effort to keep their jobs.<sup>79</sup> Does this help? What is the purpose of living longer while looking better?

Baars addresses the deeper question by looking at these efforts to control (or resist) the aging process. Denial of the inevitability of aging produces “illusions and tend[s] to draw the attention away from the uniqueness of this life.”<sup>80</sup> From childhood to adulthood, maturity requires being able to manage one’s environment and emotions. However, as one ages, the physical, mental, and emotional changes require the ability to

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 613.

<sup>76</sup> Jan Baars, *Aging & the Art of Living* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 57.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>78</sup> Melissa Dittman, “Plastic Surgery: Beauty or Beast?,” *Monitor on Psychology* 36, no. 8 (September 2005): 30, accessed December 11, 2015, <http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep05/surgery.aspx>.

<sup>79</sup> Noam Scheiber, “The Brutal Ageism of Tech,” *New Republic*, March 23, 2014, 1, accessed December 4, 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/117088/silicons-valleys-brutal-ageism>.

<sup>80</sup> Baars, 83.

face a new reality. Baars proposes that another approach is to “celebrat[e] aging as a vital part of life...[with] the acknowledgment of the potentials and limitations, the pleasures and sufferings, the continuing vitality, competence, and vulnerability of aging.”<sup>81</sup>

Through a willingness to address aging, freedom emerges. The freedom comes in letting go of the compulsions and reactions that limit the capacity to enjoy this season of life.

### ***Gerontology and Development***

Addressing old age as it relates to development, Dr. James Birren, founder of the USC Davis School of Gerontology, introduced his own theory about aging called *Counterpart*. To explain the gains and losses of aging, Birren metaphorically uses an equal-arm beam scale to depict a two-fold process. Balancing positive and negative experiences allows one to find a place of “acceptance, experience, reflectiveness, flexibility, and good humor.”<sup>82</sup> Development happens alongside aging where emotions and previous experiences influence present circumstances. The nuance of this theory respects two complementary forces at work: growth and senescence.<sup>83</sup>

Along with Birren, colleague Johannes J.F. Schroots offers an active aging concept in the form of a “Butterfly.”<sup>84</sup> In early life, one is usually not as aware of the aging process. Instead, indicators for living well focus on development through mastering

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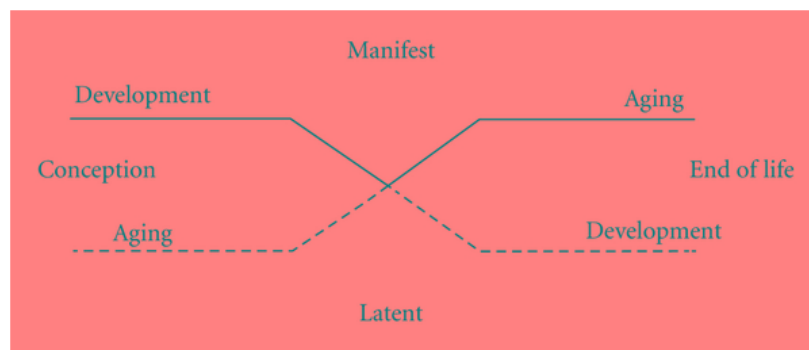
<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>82</sup> Riitta-Liisa Heikkinen, “Experienced Aging as Elucidated by Narratives,” *Aging and Biography: Explorations in Adult Development*, eds. James E. Birren, Gary Kenyon, Jan-Erik Ruth, Johannes J.F. Schroots, and Torbjorn Svensson (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Co, 1996), 203.

<sup>83</sup> Schroots, “On the Dynamic of Active Aging.”

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

certain goals: schooling, marriage, vocation, possessions. As one moves into the second half of life, the focus on aging process and development intersect. An inverse relationship occurs whereby aging becomes the prominent determinant for living well. The tasks and goals in development take a low-profile position. However, that does not mean that development declines. The aging and development processes are separate, yet dynamically related. Intentionality in active aging earlier in life benefits the development that occurs later in life.



**Figure 1:** “Butterfly” diagram illustrating the relationship of the processes of development and aging over the course of life.

The “Butterfly” image of development and aging reinforces the need for *Successful Aging* to address spirituality. Theoretically, aging well stands as a hopeful concept. As development continues, an older person has opportunities to explore what it means to maximize physical and mental abilities, minimize risk and disabilities, and engage in an active life. Development for aging gracefully requires a form of intentionality. The crucible of aging becomes the place to practice and explore that intersection of development and aging.

## Spirituality Theory of Aging

“To know how to grow old is the masterwork of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living (Henri Amiel, 1821-1881).”<sup>85</sup> Spirituality provides the foundation for the art of living, including successful and active aging. For the purposes of this dissertation, spirituality is reflection and action that emerges from the core of one’s life in aging. When a soul finds meaning and purpose, spirituality invites conversation around the flourishing of the human spirit. One can seek to discover a fuller understanding of growing old gracefully.

Spirituality encompasses what the individual regards as meaningful about themselves, their world and the interaction of all aspects of their life. Despite a variety of definitions of spirituality, one significant commonality focuses on the desire to make meaning out of life. For Murray and Zentner, coming from a holistic approach to healthcare, the definition includes the connection to a person’s soul in everyday life.<sup>86</sup> With that connection, practitioners argue that theories of spirituality need to address the question: how is one’s soul?

To describe a soul within the context of spirituality proves to be difficult, for just as there are many definitions of spirituality, there are many definitions of soul. For this dissertation, the understanding of soul comes from the concept that the soul is the entire being as God sees the person. When Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, responds to God

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<sup>85</sup> Jeanne Wei and Sue Levkoff, *Aging Well: The Complete Guide to Physical and Emotional Health* (Toronto, ON: Wiley, 2001), 7.

<sup>86</sup> Ruth B. Murray and Judith P. Zentner, *Nursing Concepts for Health Promotion* (Harlow, UK: Prentice Hall, 1989), 259.



through praise, she offers her soul, her entire being, including her truest self. While uncertain as to what the future holds, with the pronouncement of her pregnancy, she speaks out of simplicity in giving herself, her soul, to God. This understanding of soul and spirituality plays out in how a person lives his/her life.

Because spirituality is multi-faceted and ambiguous, one approach for an individual to articulate his/her understanding of spirituality comes through pictures or analogies.<sup>87</sup> McSherry looks at individuals' lives through descriptive images of spirituality that occur through pictures and moments in time rather than on a linear sequential pathway. The essence of the soul emerges through the values and meaning in life. For the older person, the pictures more easily describe his/her spirituality from the stories and experiences of life, especially when it is difficult to explain in words. Whether acknowledged or not, the primal drive is a "human craving for meaning...[which] appears to have the force of instinct."<sup>88</sup> Even if there is not an intellectual understanding, there is a knowing that resides in a person's soul.

### ***Gerotranscendence***

Another focus of spirituality is the search for transcendence. Individuals look for transcendence by making investments in religious practices, "[a] relationship to nature, music, the arts, a set of philosophical beliefs...[or] and friends and family."<sup>89</sup> They search for ways to pursue something beyond self. Living within the reality of a world beyond

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<sup>87</sup> Wilf McSherry, *Making Sense of Spirituality in Nursing and Health Care Practice: An Interactive Approach* (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publisher, 2006), 51.

<sup>88</sup> Krause, in Bengtson, 101.

<sup>89</sup> Astrow, Pulchalski, and Sulmasy, 283.

self helps to put life into perspective. The desire to understand connections, purposes, and patterns in life serves as a plumb line for making decisions and choosing ways of living. This existential search for something beyond self has the capacity to lead to fullness and well-being that supersede circumstances and difficulties.

For the aging person, transcendence deepens significance. The second half in life provides a “gerotranscendence” which Lars Tornstam describes as a change of perspective that subscribes more meaning as one ages.<sup>90</sup> The desire to offer oneself beyond an individual pursuit allows for creativity in seeking the welfare of others and the community. The aging process becomes a time of relinquishment. Releasing control of what used to be becomes an opportunity for engagement in healthy and meaningful relationships. Through experiences and capabilities, the contributing aging adult finds reasons for enjoying life beyond the limitations that might be occurring.

### **Elegant Kenosis**

God created humanity to be in communion with him. Irenaeus says, “The glory of God is a living man (sic); and the life of man consists in beholding God.”<sup>91</sup> The relationship of God and humanity has a goal; not for greater accomplishments, better looks, increased fame, or even a godly legacy to beat out all other legacies. The goal is the relationship. Thus, the means and the end of relationship become one in the dynamic of understanding God, others, and self. Along the way, a context and posture needs to

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<sup>90</sup> Tornstam, “The Theory of Gerotranscendence.”

<sup>91</sup> “Saint Irenaeus of Lyons,” *Taize*, February 19, 2008, accessed August 23, 2016, [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article6431.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article6431.html).

develop to cultivate that relationship. A parent strengthens a relationship with a child through time, energy, intention, and purpose. Their relationship grows. Likewise, for the one who desires to age gracefully, the spiritual practices within the Christian contemplative tradition provide a sacred space to deepen that relationship. The shaping of one's life comes through knowing God and self through the transformation of one's heart, mind, and soul (Romans 12:1,2).

It is not easy to grow old, whether moving from 30s to 40s, or 60s to 70s. What can we do now that will impact the aging process? Most research informs our daily choices of physical and medical decisions. More recently, the arena of neuro-plasticity for the brain stirs up intriguing questions. But the question remains, how does aging come with grace? After looking at theories of spirituality and aging, the desire to age well rests in a concept and practice described as kenosis, described further with the idea of “elegance” that includes beauty and simplicity. Through this elegant kenosis, the hope to age gracefully rests in the participation with the Holy Spirit to allow contemplative practices to shape one's life. All these components—contemplation, aging, and spiritual theology—reconstitute the perspective on getting old through a paradigm of wholeness and freedom that comes in relationship with the triune God.

### ***Transformation***

Transformation comes gradually, acknowledged more from a rearview mirror of life. Transformation's goal is not to become another person. Rather, transformation is a process by which a person becomes more of who they are, in the originally created way. The process requires an uncovering and a revealing, rather than adding or supplementing.

Transformation happens through kenosis. The theological word defines the emptying of one's self, imitating the act of Jesus by letting go of his own will to follow God's will. Letting go allows one to live into a new reality.<sup>92</sup> It involves a choice to make oneself "humbled...to the point of death" (Phil 2:8). In the act of aging, by "return[ing] to the ground...for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19) the intention seeks to give the self away. Elegance refers to, not just beauty and grace, but also simplicity. Combining elegance and kenosis illustrates the choice of grace and simplicity as a way to divest of oneself. The way becomes restorative not only for the individual, but also for those around him/her.

But how does one do that after years, even decades, of living a certain way?

Elegant kenosis leads the way into self-emptying that offers freedom. If transformation is to occur, if wisdom and resiliency are to be pursued, aging gracefully chooses the act of releasing and embracing at the same time. A self-emptying occurs in releasing the kind of life that has been, while uncovering the identity of one's soul that continues to develop regardless of age.

Most often, negative circumstances of either one's own doing or outside become one of the primary conduits by which the process of kenosis takes place. In the frailties of aging that include losses and gains, one begins to see the need for something different. Dreams fade. Physical ailments intensify. Yet these arenas of disillusionment and disequilibrium<sup>93</sup> can arouse an awareness that can lead to new thinking, feeling, and

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<sup>92</sup> Carlson, "A Theology of Aging and Vision for the Church."

<sup>93</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), x.

living. By letting go of unrealistic expectations, a new perspective emerges for the meaning of life and aging.

### ***Picture of Transformation***

In *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Eustace, a young boy who turned into a dragon, tells his cousins how Aslan, the lion, peeled away the scaly skin of the dragon he had become. The tearing away hurts deeply, but Eustace can do nothing other than allow it to happen. He tried on his own to get rid of the skin, to no avail. Finally, when the last of Eustace's old thick dark skin falls to the grass, Aslan throws him into the water, much to Eustace's surprise and shock. Eustace ends his story by remarking, "I'd turned into a boy again."<sup>94</sup> This story of transformation reveals the need to let Aslan, representing God, do the peeling away. The changes, when it comes to aging gracefully, do not happen through a person's individual work. The process of letting go requires submitting to the painful, but purifying, process of allowing God to uncover what has been there all along, a soul that longs to find freedom.

Eustace, as a young man, recognizes the need to allow Aslan to unlayer him from the dragon skin. In many ways, the contemplative life mirrors the process of this unlayering. Taking into consideration that Eustace could do nothing other than submit to the tearing claws of Aslan, likewise, there is nothing that one can do to make the process of aging easier. However, just as two dance partners move together across the floor, there is a posture by which aging gracefully can occur more readily. The contemplative life seeks to cultivate that posture.

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<sup>94</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994), 109.

### *Awareness*

People experience God differently. For one, the value of study and scripture enlightens their understanding and experience of God. For another, entering into nature opens up a spiritual place of connection with God. In the experience of God, one is contemplative by becoming aware of one's surroundings, God's spirit, the community of others, or a greater self-understanding. A contemplative approach uniquely touches all the ways one connects to God by becoming aware of and awake to the presence of God. This is done through participation in spiritual practices. Waking to God in the act of pausing, noticing, listening, and responding<sup>95</sup> provides the strength and capacity to let go. With the command of Jesus to love God and love others, as we love ourselves,<sup>96</sup> the aim to live this life requires the transformation of the soul. This does not diminish the identity of being created in God's image, but rather leads to freedom, even in aging.

### **Conclusion**

The success of aging does not come in getting the right answer for how to age gracefully. The process requires honesty about the reality of aging, coupled with the grace of receiving what God provides. Being intentional, there will be set-backs. "Spiritual growth is paradoxical: the more progress you make, the more you realize how far there is to go."<sup>97</sup> Aging serves as an arena for spiritual growth, in fact, it is the

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<sup>95</sup> Selah Center's motto – [www.selahcenter.org](http://www.selahcenter.org).

<sup>96</sup> Luke 10:27.

<sup>97</sup> Peter K. Nelson, "Discipleship Dissonance: Toward a Theology of Imperfection Amidst the Pursuit of Holiness," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 4, no. 1 (2011): 63.

crucible. This journey of aging happens through the losses and the hope, through the joys and the sorrows. “Spiritual growth is largely a growth in seeing; and full seeing seems to take more of our lifetime, with a huge leap in the final years, months, weeks, and days of life.”<sup>98</sup> The contemplative life shapes the growth of one’s soul through the gift of aging.

To conclude, aging gracefully comes through contemplative practices that shape a life of wisdom and resiliency. These expressions of wisdom and resiliency emerge by holding creative tension in paradox and mystery, living with intentionality through legacy and purpose, focusing on hope with perspective and generativity, and valuing community through expressions of forgiveness and gratitude. These expressions are described in the next section that contains the ten-week curriculum, *Aging Gracefully: The Art of Elegant Kenosis*. It offers contemplative practices to develop wisdom and resiliency in the second half of life.

Through contemplation, the soul moves into a movement of reflection and action where there is a mix of spiritual wonder and action. Waking up to and experiencing the mystery of God offers a response to the call of God.<sup>99</sup> In this place to pause, notice, listen, and respond, the person who desires to not only age well, but to live well, finds sacred space to experience the work of God in his/her life. Here the gift of responding to God, in both the beauty and frustration of aging, becomes a way forward. It offers hope and purpose, gratitude and mystery. Rather than living in reaction to the obstacles of aging, a

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<sup>98</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 130.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Merton, “What is Contemplation?” *Contemplative Spirituality*, accessed June 15, 2016, <http://www.contemplativespirituality.org/media/merton.pdf>.

person in the second half of life can live into freedom that begets wisdom, and resiliency, based on the gift of God's grace.

The integration of aging, spirituality, and contemplation opens the door to explore how God works in the lives of those in the second half of life. As God's expression on earth, the church—this dissertation focus, the Evangelical community—has an opportunity to provide holistic understanding on how to age gracefully. With a holistic approach, freedom starts from acknowledging the yearning and desiring for a deeper place with God. Beginning the second half of life, one can find glimpses of wisdom and resiliency.



## SECTION FOUR: THE ARTIFACT

### AGING GRACEFULLY: THE ART OF ELEGANT KENOSIS

The artifact is a ten-week curriculum for a course called *Aging Gracefully: The Art of Elegant Kenosis*. Each session contains materials on aging as it relates to two markers: wisdom and resiliency. The sessions involve a prepared facilitator who creates an environment of participant interaction with material through the Participant Guide. The sessions teach contemplative practices that cultivate sacred space to address all aspects of aging. The sacred space helps participants recognize the presence of God in the pertinent, honest, and relevant questions on how to live a life that not only lives well, but ends well.

*Aging Gracefully: The Art of Elegant Kenosis* helps those in the second half of life to remember to “fix your attention on God” (Romans 12:2) through aging, a reality all of us will encounter in one form or another. In relationship with God, “the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17).

To address word count, the artifact will only include the Facilitator Guide which includes the Participant Guide information. It contains Sessions One, Two, Three, Four, and Nine. While it provides a Resource page, the final version will include an annotated version. The final curriculum will also have a compendium of quotations and scripture on aging and contemplation.

## SECTION FIVE: ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

### Introduction

American culture values staying young. Getting old proves difficult. The lack of modeling compounds the angst with moving into the second half of life. Followers of the Triune God struggle as does anyone else. Even with increased resources for Baby Boomers, a hunger for something more reveals a scarcity of spiritual approaches. The need for practical spiritual responses speaks to a lack of awareness on how to age gracefully with intention, integrity, and hope. How does one age well, living into the second half of life? With aging, particularly in the second half of life, there are no mandatory school courses on how to do it, much less do it well. It's a learn-on-the-job experience. Can there be any intentionality?

Intention happens with practice. Practices come in various forms. To address aging, there are ways to develop the ability to let go, live with purpose, find and give to community. *Aging Gracefully: The Art of Elegant Kenosis* provides that intention as a curriculum that practices how to live with intention. The course offers freedom and hope within the aging process. The practices pertain to anyone, at any age but they more directly speak to the changes that occur with the second half of life.

In this course, participants will focus on two markers: wisdom and resiliency. In each session, spiritual practices develop ways to shape life towards wisdom and resiliency. These two attributes enrich the way of living by building on the foundation of God's gift of grace and invitation to participate with intentionality for aging well.

## Structure

The structure of the course creates a dynamic and engaging experience as it relates to audience, culture, scope of lessons, location, and goals and strategies. Important considerations include the type of audience who seeks to understand aging well that accompanies an openness to contemplative practices. An intentional culture of grace and welcome deepens the experience that rests more in the “how” rather than the “what” of the course. The scope of lessons contains ten sessions, but could easily expand into more. Finally, the goals and strategies are unconventional in that they are hard to measure. How does one gauge his or her spiritual life? Aging well? Evaluation focuses on the outcome of the values expressed in *Aging Gracefully: The Art of Elegant Kenosis*.

### *Audience*

The intent of this course is to deepen one’s relationship with God through the desire to age gracefully. Because aging is typically an avoided conversation, the main audience will be those who want to face changes in life. Baby Boomers (50s to 70s) are the most likely audience seeking to age well. Some younger folks (40s) benefit by making choices now to prepare them for the second half of life. Many older folks (80s+) desire to learn in their ongoing questions about aging well. Who benefits best? David Benner wrote in a personal email, “The answer to this question is not only relevant to people in their sixth, seventh, or eighth decade of life, but is equally relevant to the person in their fourth or fifth. It’s just that people in their thirties or forties seldom ask

this question.”<sup>1</sup> The ideal setting is a cross-generational, where older voices speak from experience and younger voices speak with hope.

The audience comprises those who are followers and/or seekers of the Triune God. Participants benefit from a commitment to or curiosity in the existence of God through the holy mystery of the Trinity. Contemplative practices often attract those who want to attend to spiritual matters, but may not fully embrace traditional Christianity. Consequently, this course provides a safe place to explore being a follower of the Triune God while maintaining an open posture toward questions concerning faith and belief. For some who are accustomed to traditional bible studies or didactic teaching, the course may prove uncomfortable or may not meet the expectation of fact-based knowledge. However, for those who have tired of rational or apologetic approaches to understand God, this course provides a refreshing alternative through contemplative practices.

### ***Culture***

In its pedagogy of heart learning, the course maintains an intentional pace of slowing, quieting, and listening that is unique to a typical classroom setting. The curriculum includes a contemplative practice each time, not always directly related to the aging process, but that is part of the intention to develop wisdom and resiliency. The rhythm of each session allows for silence, writing, engaging one another by contributing from discoveries in the session, and a small portion of teaching.

In addition, the course maintains a specific posture for how individuals interact with one another. Through an adapted model from the *Circle of Trust* approach<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> David G. Benner, personal email, February 21, 2016.

Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)<sup>3</sup>, the  *Holding Sacred Space for Conversation*  document describes the type of communication that cultivates the safest and generative culture for sharing, listening, and learning. The facilitator establishes a hospitable environment with invitation, integrity, and wonder. Maintaining this foundation through gracious and generous listening, the facilitator models this culture for participants to hold themselves and each other accountable in the sacred space.

### ***Scope of the Course***

The course consists of ten sessions of contemplative practices that lead to wisdom and resiliency in the desire to age gracefully. For two-hours, here is the sequence:

- Opening practice to recognize God’s presence
- Community to do a brief check in with everyone
- Offering of material related to aging and a contemplative practice
- Activity related to aging material
- Practice of spiritual disciplines/exercises/practices
- Closing prayer that offers a benediction

Participants are encouraged to let information move from head storage to heart experience, following the Orthodox tradition of prayer as “descending from the head to the heart.”

### ***Location***

The place to meet depends on the audience involved. Usually the best location includes a quieter space that suits the size of the group. Rooms in public spaces (with

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<sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer, “Circle of Trust Touchstones,” *Center for Courage & Renewal*, accessed May 2016, <http://www.couragerenewal.org/touchstones/>.

<sup>3</sup> “2016 LCWR Assembly Deepening Groups,” accessed July 2, 2016, <http://www.lcwrregion9.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Attachment-D-2016-LCWR-Assembly-Deepening-Group-Process-for-Listeners.pdf>.

closed doors) create an ethos that contemplation happens inside and outside of church settings. Arranging symbols and other aesthetics helps in creating a tone for the time together.

### ***Goals and Strategies***

The goal for this course is a new perspective about aging through contemplative practices. Tools and experiences with the use of the curriculum provide the agency for aging gracefully to be practiced. In this spiritual formation experience, ongoing transformation provides hope for a heart change. In the way of Jesus, participants experience letting go through elegant kenosis that highlights the gift of God's presence.

Participants' expressions demonstrate the outcomes for each session through their greater sense of understanding self, God, and community, as it relates to aging. For participants who continue ongoing contemplative practices, they can measure greater freedom in aging as they seek out wisdom and resiliency.

The facilitator has a key role in the course. Because the sessions have little information by way of texts, workbooks, and videos, the facilitator provides context, culture, and sensitivity to what best serves the participants. The facilitator serves as a catalyst for conversation, not the teacher of conversation.

Evaluations of these goals include reflection from the facilitator along with the participants involved. The facilitator invests time after each lesson to answer three questions for him/herself: what went well, what needs work, and how did the lesson personally affect the facilitator. Through evaluations of the course, participants respond to questions concerning perspective on aging and overall sense of transformation in relationship to self and God.

This course is a work-in-progress. After each offering, an evaluation of the materials, experience, and overall effectiveness provides further insight for the next course. The generative value of the course includes on-going changes in materials, the facilitator, and the participants.

### **Artifact Description**

Sketchings and visuals are part of the Facilitator Guide and Participant Guide to create aesthetically appealing material. The images reflect images of aging gracefully, related to theme of the week. The binding will include a way to turn back pages for ease of use. The Guides' covers have the same graphics and logo for *Aging Gracefully*, with distinguishing bold print to indicate the proper use of the material.

### **Standards of Publication**

Westbow Publishing provides a tutorial on how to self-publish materials. Starting January 2017, the publishing company will assist in the development of the best format for the Facilitator and Participant Guides. Teaching the course starting in January, I will use a first draft of a curriculum format. To improve the curriculum in form and function, there will be 3-4 beta tests with facilitators, besides myself, who will do a trial run with the draft copy, starting January 2017. After conversation with those facilitators, the edits and additions will further augment the material so that it can be published within 2017.

## SECTION SIX: POSTSCRIPT

She stretched her long arms to hold onto the car door sill as she sat down in the front seat. Turning towards me with the door held open for her, her withered body slumped into the seat. “Mary, this getting old stuff? It ain’t for sissies.” My friend, Mona, was in her mid-80s. A tall woman for most of her life, she now stood just an inch above me at 5’4. Strong physically, with a solid sense of herself, she always exuded confidence physically, emotionally, and spiritually. But now the cancer was eroding away what she had left. She needed help in various ways, like a ride to church on a Sunday morning and groceries once a week. This getting old stuff, it’s not easy. Watching her through my midlife lens, I wondered, “How can I grow old gracefully, knowing that my body, too, will no longer function as it does now?”

### Summary of Execution

*Aging Gracefully: The Art of Elegant Kenosis* in its written statement and curriculum artifact responds to the question of aging for followers of Jesus Christ. The written statement provides the theological underpinnings to the spirituality of aging. The focus of contemplative practices establishes a way through the aging process that offers freedom to people in their second half of life, particularly Baby Boomers. The curriculum artifact provides practical application for how to carry out those contemplative exercises in the quest for aging gracefully, through markers of wisdom and resiliency.



## Personal Discovery

Initially, I started the doctorate program with an eye toward international partnerships. With a doctorate of ministry in leadership and global perspective, the logical focus appeared to be an international topic that had the greatest influence. However, after the first semester, I reluctantly asked myself a question that typically comes towards the end of a career, rather than at the start: “What will the legacy be of my dissertation, based on what I’ve already done?” At my stage in life, I had little interaction with international partnerships, relevant and interesting though they may be. Considering my natural sphere of influence, I realized my contribution had more to do with asking the kind of questions I was asking: questions about aging. I longed to age well, the same longing I heard voiced around me. Could I perhaps offer something to address that longing?

In my initial inquiry about aging, I saw common themes connecting spirituality and aging: the value of contemplation, the need to let go, the beauty of wisdom, and the amazing quality of resiliency. In further research, the connection between all of them grew stronger and stronger. It was then that I knew I had something to pursue that could be a possible legacy to offer others. Through research, practice, and experience, I developed a curriculum that offers not only information, but an opportunity to explore with others what it means to age gracefully.

The work provided here reflects what God has done, and is doing, in my own life, as I wrestle through the hard places and embrace the good. As Teilhard de Chardin eloquently articulates,

When I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old, ... in all these dark moments, O God, grant that I understand that it is you who are parting the fibers of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear my very being within yourself.<sup>1</sup>

In the “parting the fibers of my being,” I want to reflect God in my aging. I want to help others know that aging has purpose, value, and potential for a deepening relationship with God. The journey of faith is a “long obedience in the same direction,”<sup>2</sup> and aging reminds us that the journey continues into old age. My hope is that this dissertation and its respective curriculum provide one way to stay focused with hope and freedom, knowing that God provides the gift of grace in aging.

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<sup>1</sup> de Chardin, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Books, 2000), 17.

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