

Spirituality, Religion and Aging

An Essay by Bob Chism



This article is adapted from “Spirituality, Religion and Aging,” Certification in Gerontology at McHenry County College in Illinois, *Basic Ministry for the Second Half of Life* (2012) and *Daily Hope* with Rick Warren.

As the number of people in the United States age 65 and older increases, we are faced with challenges and opportunities in every aspect of our society. Policymakers, businesses, health care providers, and families must make new decisions that will meet the needs of our aging population. The aging individual has the opportunity to live a longer and healthier life than ever before. This opportunity can bring adventure and optimism to the later years.

A diverse aging population, alternative methods of health care, nutrition, physical activity, spiritual growth, social activity, lifelong learning, leisure pursuits, second and third careers, and volunteerism are important factors in healthy aging. These factors impact aging Americans and those individuals with whom they interact.

Religion is usually recognized to be the practical expression of spirituality: the organization, rituals, and practice of one's beliefs. It is a personal way of expressing spirituality through affiliations, rites, and rituals based upon creeds and communal practices. Spirituality speaks to individuals of many denominations and beliefs. While religion includes specific beliefs and practices, spirituality is much broader. Spirituality is about our existence, about our relationship with ourselves, with others, and the universe. Spirituality extends beyond the physical, material, and self to a state called transcendence.

The complex connections between religious and spiritual beliefs and practices and an individual's physical and psychological health are beginning to be defined by research. For example, researchers have found that persons who attend religious services regularly (once a week or more) are only about half as likely to be depressed (Koenig, George, & Peterson, 1998). Academic institutions and government agencies are also focusing on spirituality and the influence of religion in the lives of older adults as well as on the mind-body connection.

Spirituality for the older adult can provide the following essential elements:

- Helps during stressful life events, increases the understanding of the meaning of life, and helps in preparing for death
- Promotes acceptance of the past, allowing enjoyment of the present, and provides hope for the future
- Provides support during phases of multiple losses and the grieving process

Organizations can help individuals find meaning in life and enhance their spirituality through many methods, including the following:

- Providing gerontological education to clergy in seminaries and training to existing religious staff
- Creating programs that includes home visits to older adults within the church family
- Developing outreach and visitation programs to homebound elderly
- Providing telephone reassurance programs
- Providing devotional readings
- Televising religious services
- Creating prayer circles

Staying connected spiritually could mean:

- Remaining optimistic about life even if age and illness take their toll
- Joining small prayer groups not associated with any church
- Creating social connections with family and friends
- Searching for personal meaning in life
- Trying personal meditation
- Writing his or her life story

Religion and spirituality are integral dimensions of healthy aging for most seniors and play an important part in their ability to make sense of their lives. The concept of spirituality as an integral part of health and well-being and the impact of spirituality on healing has grown significantly over the past several decades.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS ANALYSIS (ccochurch.com/resources/)

Christ's Church of Oronogo in Missouri offers a free spiritual gifts test. The Spiritual Gifts Inventory is a discovery tool that provides you with a personalized analysis. It is not a test, rather a simple questionnaire consisting of 108 questions which provides a profile of your God given spiritual gifts. Discovering and exercising your God-given spiritual gifts allows you to experience maximum fulfillment with minimum frustration in your Christian life and ministry. When you have completed the questionnaire, you will be able to view a bar graph of your scores for each gift, a description of your dominant gift, and several pages of personal analysis. You will also have the opportunity to print out the results.

BALANCING THE SECOND HALF

Possibly the most critical issue in the second half of life is proper preparation. How are you going to be effective in later life if you do not evaluate and balance what is important, your effort, and your satisfaction from the three? The following exercise provides a simple evaluation and balance method:

Evaluate Importance/ Effort/ Satisfaction of each life area with a 10 for most important and with a 1 for least important (10 may be used more than once).

Evaluating First Half Life Areas

Career/ Work
Charity/ Community
Church/ Religion/ Spiritually
Education/ Growth
Family/ Relatives
Financial/ Money
Friendships/ Relationships
Health/ Fitness
Home/ Relocation
Leisure/ Recreation
Romance/ Spouse

Planning Second Half Life Areas

Is there balance?
What areas may have been neglected?
What do you want to do?
What do you enjoy?
What people or causes do you wish to help?
How do you wish to be remembered?

Do you need to make money?

Activities:

Arts &Crafts

- Act
- Draw
- Paint
- Photography
- Writing

Employment/ Business Venture/ Self-Employment

- Part/Full
- Current Profession/New Field
- Freelance
- Teach
- Consult

Education

- Advanced degree
- Certificate/License
- Online/Campus
- Self-help books/workshops
- Small group

Physical/Sport

- Bicycling
- Fish
- Golf
- Swimming
- Walking/Hiking

Hobbies

- Board games
- Collecting
- Facebook page/Website
- Gardening
- Scrapbooking

Relationship

- Alumni associations
- Charitable organizations
- Extended family/relatives
- Faith-based organizations
- Service groups

Travel

- Family (Grandchildren, Children, Parent) Trips
- Historical Sites
- Learning Vacations
- Missions Trip
- National Parks

Volunteer/Mentor

- American Red Cross (www.redcross.org)

- Environment Alliance for Senior Involvement (www.easi.org)
- Feeding the Hungry (www.feedingamerica.org)
- Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org)
- Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (www.senior.gov)

Spiritual/Faith-Based

- CASA Network (www.gocasa.org)
- Christian Grandparenting Network (www.christiangrandparenting.net)
- Finishers Project (finishers.org)
- New Beginnings (www.gonewbeginnings.org)
- YES! Young Enough to Serve (www.yestoserve.org)

Implementing Second Half Life Areas Plan:

- Select three activities
- Create a schedule
- Share plan for Support, Advice, Companionship and Inspiration

Staying engaged is the best indicator for successful aging in the second half.

God's Will and Your Giftedness

Phil Vischer, the voice of Bob the Tomato and creator of the very charming Veggie Tales, said, "There is no happier place than the intersection of God's will and your giftedness."

Pastor Rick teaches that the way God S.H.A.P.E.s you reveals a significant portion of his will for you, and that brings you to the intersection of his will and your giftedness. S.H.A.P.E. is an acronym Pastor Rick explains in "The Purpose Driven Life":

Spiritual Gifts: God gives you spiritual gifts to use in ministry (1 Corinthians 12, Romans 8, Ephesians 4).

Heart: As Pastor Rick explains, the Bible teaches that your heart determines why you say the things you do, why you feel the way you do, and why you act the way you do (Proverbs 4:23).

Abilities: These are natural talents God gives you so you can accomplish his purposes. In Exodus 31:3, God gives "skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts ..." (NLT).

Personality: Your personality affects the way you use your gifts. For instance, two people may have the gift of evangelism, but if one is introverted and the other is extroverted, that gift will be expressed differently.

Experiences: There are five common experiences that influence your service to others: educational, vocational, spiritual, ministry, and painful experiences.

Ask other Christians who know you to help you determine the things you do best and how you may use your giftedness in ministry. Pray through these questions:

What am I good at that I can offer as a ministry to other people?

What do I know that I can teach to others?

What can I give to someone as a blessing?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIONS

Does your Church have an Encore Group?
(a system to have meaningful contact with those
leaving full-time employment and six months thereafter)

Could this be a second half service passion for you?

What are the obstacles at your church?

How might these obstacles be overcome?

What are you going to do about it?

