

FAITH IN FOCUS

Good Counsel

Six lessons for the younger set

BY FRANCIS X. HEZEL

Life gets simpler as you get older," I said to a friend who has celebrated almost as many birthdays as I. He chuckled and then launched into a litany of ailments: arthritic joints, inability to climb stairs without getting winded, embarrassing memory loss, putdowns from younger colleagues at work and, worst of all, a general *tedium vitae*. When I tried out the same remark with another friend, it evoked an even longer list of woes.

At 72, I have experienced many of the symptoms my friends described. Transit card discounts and seats for the disabled are reminders of age. I've become a "senior citizen," entitled to the sympathy and respect of the younger, more active set. But there is much more to old age than this. We seniors have something to share with the youngsters who relinquish their bus and subway seats for us. Here are six life lessons.

1. *Relax and let instinct take over.* When the young struggle aloud to "figure out" their lives, we seniors can smile sympathetically. Long ago we shared their concern as we, too, tried to decide a college major and a career path. But how do you tell earnest seekers that the most important things in life not only emerge, but they take control of you in a way you would never have thought possible when you were young?

We seniors recognize that we have never been in charge of our lives as we once thought we were. Most life-alter-



ing "decisions" are hardly decisions at all. They are not the product of our own choices. Take my decision to enter the Jesuits. It wouldn't have happened if my uncle had not insisted that I enroll in a Jesuit high school rather than the Christian Brothers' school I so badly wanted to attend. And the decision to volunteer for work in Micronesia, where I have spent almost all of my adult life, was impulsive rather than cool-headed. Perhaps "impulse" and "instinct" disguise something more mysterious at work.

"We old-timers have learned to run on instincts," I used to tell the young Jesuit Volunteers in Micronesia who sought counsel. If they asked what I

meant, I would explain that as one ages, one learns to put the purely rational and prescriptive in its proper place. We are constantly being handed formulas—prescriptions for finding happiness, losing weight, managing an office and raising a family. Formulas for belief are presented as church teachings. These formulas may help beginners (sheet music for the untrained), but why turn to the sheet music when we all have the melody playing in our heads? Young people may need formulas for a time, but with age one begins to trust intuition. Each year, one hopes, that intuition will be better honed.

2. *The big choices are simple.* If life becomes simpler with age, so do life choices. Some people my age would like to believe that unifying principles simplify existence. They are like scientists forever on the lookout for the unifying principles of energy, motion and matter itself. My experience with Pacific Islanders, Asians of every stripe, Americans and Europeans suggests that all of us, whether believers or not, are called to make one fundamental life choice: does a spiritual presence accompany or guide us, or do we walk alone? (This choice doesn't necessarily determine theists and atheists because some may not name that spiritual presence "God.")

In other words, all of us, equipped with wider horizons and greater hopes for ourselves and the world, must decide whether these horizons and hopes are deceptive or legitimate. Each must decide whether to

reach beyond the narrow confines of limited self-interest to something richer that guides us to self-surrender. Perhaps that is what Karl Rahner meant by his assertion that all are called to, and ultimately judged on, a readiness to say yes to the divine invitation from within. What could be

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simpler, or more universal, than that?

3. *We see better with our hearts.* As we age, our vision blurs. We see men as trees, as the Gospel has it, Indians as Iraqis and Europeans as Africans. Or perhaps our vision is improving. The hues of ethnicity and the tones of language seem less important than they were. They become almost incidental. As our mental and physical powers decline, our hearts enlarge enough to embrace the whole world, it seems. "*Cor ad cor loquitur*" can mean more than the conversation between God and myself; it includes the strange bonds that develop between myself and any other human being, even the frauds and cheats of the world.

Sympathy also comes more easily with age. Why shouldn't it when we've developed calluses on our rumps from landing on them so often? We, who have prodded others into battle, have acquired the scars to remind us of what we've been asking of them. No wonder we old-timers change tack and find ourselves whispering encouraging words much more often than shouting challenges. Halfway measures may be incomplete, but they can also be understood as honest attempts to do the right thing. Good intentions do not just pave the road to hell; they are the substrata of the path to heaven. Old age is wonderful, as we become more forgiving, more understanding, more tolerant. Why didn't we learn all this earlier?

One could argue that as our minds become feeble, our judgments are necessarily less demanding. Still, the aged perspective gets better the farther down the road one moves. As we age, we begin to see the world from a greater distance, as if the camera moves back farther and farther until we can see the entire globe. Our view of the world and our life should become fuller as we age.

4. *As life lengthens, the ego shrinks.* The long perspective also shrinks the ego. The sense of self-importance we had in youth diminishes in old age. We

seem to have less concern for ourselves, our reputation and others' approval of what we say and do. Sometimes this comes across as crankiness or inflexibility—a hardening of the aged brain. Yet it might be the beginning of a freedom we have long prized. We may begin to experience a lightness of spirit we have long sought. We see our life and all we have done as a gift of the Lord rather than as a list of accomplishments. We learn that the loss of ego is a blessing. Good riddance.

"Now I live—not I, but Christ who lives in me," St. Paul wrote (Gal 2:20). For years I thought of this as pious drivel (though I would never have admitted that to my novice master). Age and experience have brought a change of heart. The question of who I am and what I am capable of becoming seems unimportant because the process is nearly complete and the end product is clear for all to see. The spiritual writers we once dismissed as inhabiting an alien universe may have been right after all. Once the fascination with ourselves drops off, we discover that we can become absorbed in Christ in a new way (not reserved for the saints). Evidently, this happens to the not-so-old as well, to lay people and to religious. (What else could explain the three searching conversations on prayer and self-surrender I've recently had in a single week with fellow seekers?)

5. *Prayer is a warm-up for life.* For years I had thought of prayer as an exercise, like push-ups or sit-ups or laps around the track. It was training, a test of endurance that would sometimes end in a warm but short-lived feeling called consolation. Whether or not one felt a surge of spiritual energy, one was developing spiritual muscle and strengthening the fiber of the soul. I could never imagine how to live "a life of prayer" as the saints did. Wouldn't this be like living in the gym doing push-ups and sit-ups from morning to evening without respite?

Age brings insight: we old-timers

now know that what we once called prayer is just a warm-up, not the real game. I have come to regard as prayer not just the 45 minutes in the morning when I twist myself into the semi-lotus position on my bed, but the whole day. I now see my whole life as one long prayer to the Lord. The most poignant moments often come not when I am engaged in the conditioning exercises called formal prayer, but as I walk to the subway, take a shower or wait for the elevator.

6. *Our hearts expand as expectations contract.* What about those great deeds we meant to do? Like many Jesuits, I once shared a fondness for knights on horses: the teams of Canisius High School in Buffalo, N.Y., were the Crusaders; McQuaid High School in Rochester had the Knights. All Jesuits aspire to do great things, I suppose: win over kingdoms and do battle with evil, like our founder Ignatius did. But as our hearts expand, our expectations contract. And the demons we fight can take strange shapes. What are we to do when we find the demons within us? These battles are not jousting contests, easily decided when one of the combatants is unseated, but long and painful campaigns in which it is not easy to tell whether one is winning or losing.

Old-timers may be battle-weary, but we are still swinging our swords. To put it another way, we have the same shortcomings, the same rough edges and pettiness as ever, but this just does not seem as important to us as it used to. While regretting that we are not better, we can integrate all we are into our offering to the Lord. As the years go by, my prayer increasingly is simply, "Lord, kindly accept the little I have to offer." No dragons slain, no heads of enemies dangling from the belt, but we are still in for the whole campaign, however long it takes.

What could be simpler than that? So, maybe we elders have something to say to younger people, after all. I wish I could remember what it is. **A**