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Life's Persistent Questions: After Midlife, We're Driven to Deal with What Our Lives Mean

Betty Booker, Staff Writer, Richmond Times-Dispatch

Big questions take on added sharpness in the last third of life. These are the fundamental questions of life: Who am I? What am I going to do? And with whom am I going to do it? "These questions are really about identity, legacy and intimacy," says Dr. Henry Carl Simmons, author, gerontology bibliographer, educator and aging-center director. Such questions nibble at your heels like the hound of heaven until you find a satisfying answer. Or not: It's an invitation – not a requirement – that people answer life's persistent questions. These questions usually become more intense in your 50s when you sniff retirement on the wind.

Four main issues of growth come to the fore: freedom, purpose, intimacy and loss. "My argument is that these issues become more intense and take a particular shape as one ages," Simmons says. A poster of an old man smiles at Simmons, who sits in his office at the Center on Aging at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education. "The last third of life isn't a time of rose-colored glasses. It's a time of probable loss and possible meaning," he continues. "It is also a time when it is possible to make progress of its own kind, in whatever shape that is for you."

Before retirement, Simmons says, "who am I and what am I going to do?" is defined by work, with pressures from home and family and friends who tend to think and act in a similar way. "When one is basically a slave to the paycheck, there's a limit to what one can say or think, even if you think that isn't so. When one is free of that, one can get in touch with what one really believes, what one values and what one is going to do about it. The human quest to be free, to be oneself, to speak forthrightly with one's own voice, becomes more of an issue in old age. I've met many people, women particularly, who have gotten more outspoken in quite a wonderful way as they discover the voice of the true self," he says.

Retirement, while freeing, has few guideposts, making the transition from career to new pursuits often

a scary experience. "It's a time of transition, with a deliberate sense of starting out on a journey, of moving out of the known world, of creating a new life and of forging a new identity."

Retirement also is one of many losses that characterize later life – purpose, self-definition, physical health, familiar home, illnesses and deaths of parents, friends, relatives and spouse. Purpose and meaning can be found in new projects, though: "Who you are going to be is partly defined by what your legacy will be to younger generations," he notes.

"Many people succeed in making new meaning. Their lives make sense to them. They're able to wake up in the morning with a sense of giftedness. They find inner and outer tasks and projects, commitments and ties that make sense of their days. Questions about the meaning of life change over time because one simply ceases to trust the illusions about what we've been told to believe and what we've believed. We've been told some things that we come to know are not true, and we become unwilling to live with the lies. At some point – ready or not, like it or not – you're going to turn your

back on everything you've spent your whole lifetime collecting, every material thing, every honor, every relationship – and turn toward the transcendent. And it's that awareness that's worth thinking ahead about. If you can get to that point before the end, through thinking about these questions, so much the better."

One of the challenges, however, "is to be able to maintain a sense of self and self-direction through all of the changes in the last third of life. "It gets tougher as you get older. If one knows that it's coming, you can get ready, not only financially and physically, but also spiritually."

Spirituality, Simmons says, is a neglected, essential component of aging. "People tend to hear that word and think it's some kind of 'woo-woo' experience. But it involves the intensity of the whole person, what is best in the human – a focused freedom and integrity. The lack of it is a weighted-down, scattered, uncen-

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tered quality, what [psychoanalyst] Erik Erikson called, despair.”

Elders often use newfound freedom to delve into new or neglected interests. They may question, broaden and change their views of themselves and the world. Intimacy with friends and self may deepen, but intimacy – “a fleshy, rooted, face-to-face word” – is a challenge when mate and friends die.

As disability and illness increase, “you have to give from increasingly diminished resources. But in some chosen few, the human spirit really does show through. It matters to matter. And you can still make choices, like the woman who decided her job at her nursing home was to be nice to everyone.”

“We need the questions to guide us because we need to be thinking more clearly. The human needs to be drawn toward things of beauty, value and truth, not to illusions. It’s never too late to think about these things, right to the death bed.”

Retirement Stage

Questions for a period that’s typically a stable continuation of midlife:

- How will I leave my career and use new freedom?
- What purpose and meaning will I create that nourish me and others?
- What kinds of intimacy can I find? What about friends apart from work? Old and new friends? With myself? Through prayer?
- How will I deal with losses and “deaths” of former roles, contacts, purposes? With intimations of frailty? With possible losses of finances, family and dreams?

Ready or Not

Losses eventually increase, but no one knows at what age that will begin.

- In old age, how will I maintain a sense of self and of self-direction?
- Can I find new purposes? Or will life feel meaningless?
- Will I keep present intimacy or will I lose it through spousal death and illness?
- How can I deal with loss through illness, moving and deaths as my world changes? Will I be able to cope with the jarring sense of moving through this stage toward the final ones of frailty and death?

Like It or Not

Frailty and dependency increase in this stage:

- Will I recognize my inability to get along in my ordinary world? Will I resist dependence and accepting help? Or can I make a free choice to accept care from others?
- How can I fashion purpose and meaning that honor my gifts? Will I recognize that frailty

is a potentially rich and engaged time of life?

- Can I see that accepting care with dignity can be an intimate exchange between caregivers and me?
- Am I prepared spiritually for death?

Dying

As the end nears, you no longer say “if” I die, but “when”.

- Am I ready to let go of everything I’ve collected and strived for?
- Will I recognize that my death has meaning to me, to my loved ones, to the community of humankind? Do I think death is culmination of life, as it has been thought of throughout history?
- Will dying bring “a deepening love affair with God?”
- Is my death my final sacred act, of handing back the gift of my life to all creation?

Resources

1. *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as If It Were Your Last* and *Meetings at the Edge: Dialogues with the Grieving and the Dying, the Healing and the Healed* by Stephen Levine
2. *Thriving After 55: Your Guide to Fully Living the Rest of Your Life* by Henry Simmons and Craig MacBean
3. *Prime Time: How the Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America* by Marc Freedman
4. *On Death and Dying* by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross
5. *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* by Margaret J. Wheatley
6. *The Healing Journey Through Retirement* by Phil Rich, Dorothy M. Sampson and Dale Fetherling
7. *The Reality of Retirement: The Inner Experience of Be coming a Retired Person* by Jules Z. Willing (out of print, but worth finding)
8. Area Agencies on Aging: Nationwide resource for people 60 and older. In metro Richmond, call 804-343-3000. For agencies statewide, contact the Virginia Department for the Aging (<http://www.aging.state.va.us>) 800-552-3402 or 804-662-9333.
9. Civic Ventures: To contact this national organization that helps aging America create individual and social renewal, visit <http://www.civicventures.org>. ■

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