

Works on Aging and Spirituality: An Annotated Bibliography
Prepared for NRRO by Sister Marie Michelle Walsh, SSND*

Chittister, Joan (2008). *The gift of years: Growing older gracefully.* New York: Blue Bridge.

In *The Gift of Years*, Sister Joan Chittister describes the task of growing *older* gracefully through the three stages of being “old”: “old” (age 65-74), “old old” (age 75-84), and “oldest old” (age 85 and over). Each of the 40 short chapters (averaging about five pages) starts with a quotation by writers ranging from Seneca to Carl Jung and ends with a brief summation of burdens and blessings of the relevant element in these later years. Some of the 40 topics seem negative, for example Fear, Ageism, Sadness, and Loneliness, but Chittister is able to draw positive results from them. Among the more positive-sounding topics are Joy, Spirituality, Faith, and Legacy. Chittister keeps focusing on the later years as a gift, a time in which to complete what has not yet been done and to leave a legacy to others. Individual chapters provide food for meditation to readers already “old” or preparing to age gracefully.

Kidd, Sue Monk (1990). *When the heart waits: Spiritual direction for life’s sacred questions.* New York: HarperCollins.

Sue Monk Kidd’s memoir *When the Heart Waits* views challenges in the transitional period commonly known as midlife. However, most of her reflections are relevant to any transitional period, including retirement. Central to her narrative is the pervasive symbol of a cocoon in which a chrysalis waits to emerge from darkness into its new life as a butterfly. Kidd’s cocoon watching helps her to emerge from a “dark night of the soul.” As the chrysalis must wait for the right time to let go of its security, so the human heart must wait in trust for its transition to be complete. In describing her transition, Kidd draws from her own contemplative spirituality and her wide reading in psychology, scripture, and literature, weaving together a series of vivid images about three stages of transitional waiting: separation from old ways, interior metamorphosis, and emergence into a new present.

Richmond, Lewis (2012). *Aging as a Spiritual Practice: A Contemplative Guide to Growing Older and Wiser.* New York: Gotham-Penguin.

The seeds of *Aging as a Spiritual Practice* lie in Lewis Richmond’s attempts to connect Buddhist spiritual life with his own personal experience of aging. He describes how all four traditional stages of aging fit within one year of his life from the “lightning strike” onset of cancer in his late thirties, through his “coming to terms” with what was happening to him, his later “adaptation” as he let go of who he had been and accepted who he now was, and the “appreciation” stage in which he remained after his healing and during his ministry as a Buddhist priest. Richmond infuses his personal account with reflections by or about others experiencing the aging process, with passages from Buddhist and Western spirituality, and with theories from modern psychology. Each chapter ends with a relevant 5-9 page “Contemplative Reflection.”

The compilation of these reflections could become *A Contemplative Guide to Growing Older and Wiser*.

Moody, Harry R., and David Carroll (1997). *The five stages of the soul:Charting the spiritual passages that shape our lives*. New York: Anchor Books.

According to Harry Moody's underlying premise in *The Five Stages of the Soul*, not all people advance spiritually at the same pace, but spirituality does normally develop within the second half of life in the same sequence of stages: Call, Search, Struggle, Breakthrough, and Return. Moody exemplifies each stage by its effects on his own life and on the lives of acquaintances and varied public figures, past and future. The Calls that initiate the Search come in a wide variety of forms, for example vague feelings of emptiness, physical disorders, beauties of art or nature, dreams, sudden spiritual insights, or near-death experiences. These Calls nudge their recipients to Search for the Breakthrough, a deeper spiritual life, which, in turn, leads the soul to serve others and to return to the God for whom "our heart is restless until it rests in Him." Moody's text presents careful research, but it also offers many passages that can themselves be "Calls."

O'Nan, Stewart (2011). *Emily, alone*. New York: Penguin Books.

Although Stewart O'Nan does not use the language of gerontologists, he deftly portrays the later stages of the aging process in *Emily, Alone*. The title of the novel highlights one key problem faced by elders like Emily, the feeling of "aloneness." Instead of a traditional plot, O'Nan has created a beautifully developed character study of Emily Maxwell, an 80-year-old widow who has settled into relatively passive old age, accepting dependency on others, bemoaning the infrequency of visits from her children and grandchildren, reliving scenes from her past, and living a routine life in the present. That is, until she finds independence by courageously driving her new car around her Pittsburgh suburb. Later she drives home to visit her parents' graves, the first time in ten years. Here again O'Nan echoes a gerontological description of one stage of aging: the Return, with its internal reconciliation, its service, and its sense of peace.

Rohr, Richard (2011). *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Richard Rohr's paradoxical title *Falling Upward* emphasizes his theme: the necessity of falling out of the status quo of the first stage of life in order to fall upward to God. In developing this theme, Rohr incorporates biblical accounts of human falls that lead to immersion in God's love. Rohr, following Carl Jung, views life as composed of two stages rather than the more traditional four or five. To most people who divide life this way, the first stage focuses on building up successes and avoiding failures while the second is primarily a time of aging and physical decline. Rohr's metaphor of a trampoline, however, paints a joyful image of the soul

rebouncing upward and generating new life for itself and others. It is only those who let go of the fear of falling who can fall upward from their first- stage existence into the “pay-back” sharing that should mark the spirituality of their second stage.

Schacter-Shalomi, Zalman, and Ronald S. Miller. (1995). *From age-ing to sage-ing: A Profound new vision of growing older*. New York: Warner Books.

Against a rich background of history and psychology, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* traces attitudes toward old age in the past and then turns to ways in which modern retirees can find meaning, purpose, and a sense of completion in their later years. The book addresses a mixed audience, primarily elders and middle age adults planning for uncertainties of retirement, but health care professionals, nursing home operators, and family caregivers can also learn from it. Rabbi Zalman asserts that instead of producing depression and isolation aging can be accompanied by positive effects when the aging person accepts the retirement years as a time for contemplatively “harvesting” the past, enjoying the present, and deepening a sense of oneness with the human and natural world. He explores numerous physical, emotional, social, and spiritual tools available to facilitate this kind of aging, which he calls “spiritual eldering.” Elders become sages when they share the wisdom of their elderhood with others.

Snowdon, David (2001). *Aging with grace: What the nun study teaches us about living longer, healthier and more meaningful lives*. New York: Bantam, Doubleday, Dell.

In *Aging with Grace* David Snowdon describes the origin, methodology, and results of the “Nun Study,” a carefully monitored exploration of possible links between Alzheimer’s disease and very human factors, for example, lifestyle, heredity, language use, and emotional attitudes, that might predict or accompany it. The study involved 678 School Sisters of Notre Dame who responded to Snowdon’s 1986 invitation to participate by sharing personal records, reporting for annual mental and physical tests, and donating their brains after death. The scientific details about Alzheimer’s are in themselves compelling, but it is Snowdon’s responses to the sisters which will bring the book alive to retired religious readers as they resonate with excerpts from pre-novitiate autobiographies used to study personalities of the sisters in their youth and with the typical convent scenes into which Snowdon is drawn.

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Marie Michelle Walsh was professed as a School Sister of Notre Dame in 1948 and taught in Maryland high schools until 1965, when she was appointed as Dean of Students and part-time English instructor at College of Notre Dame of Maryland. After six years she was granted a three-year leave of absence to obtain her doctoral degree in English at The Catholic University of America, returning as a full-time faculty member in 1974. In June 2013 after 48 years of service, she retired from Notre Dame of Maryland University as Professor Emerita.