

As her health declined, a long and slow descent, my grandmother wondered why she was still here. I know this because she asked me, often. Her initial question— “why am I still here?”—later changed to, “Why hasn’t God taken me yet?” She asked this question past the point of her being able to remember who I was. She asked it until she was mute and could no longer ask me. However, my grandmother, who had lived a very emotionally (and often physically) painful life, appeared—to me anyways—to grow more peaceful as her cognition declined. She seemed to forget the painful memories; she seemed to forget her bitterness too. In the retirement community where I am a social worker, I have witnessed many residents as their cognition declines. I’ve seen many who, as memory and understanding fade, seem to grow more agitated.

I’m grateful that this wasn’t the case for my grandmother, and I have often wondered what makes the difference. Why do some people finally find peace? Even after years of rarely experiencing it? Why do others lose what peace they may have had? I believe that one’s experience of spirituality throughout one’s life plays a role here. I am also learning that one’s culture can impact this progression as well. What a person expects to find on the other side of death informs that person’s experience of aging—with all of its accompanying feelings— as they move closer to death. These expectations come from one’s spirituality and one’s cultural context.

My grandmother’s increasing peacefulness seemed to coincide with her finding and then developing a relationship with God. This more personal, intimate relationship with God came very late in her life, after she had been searching for decades. She didn’t find the answers to all of her questions, but she found enough. Again, I know this because she told me. She described herself as having been reborn. I’m grateful that she finally felt that she had a new start on life even if she was well into her ninth decade. I’m also grateful that I had the opportunity to witness my grandmother’s process and her response to aging because I learned valuable lessons. I learned from watching her and I learned from listening to her. I learned from what she found helpful and from what frustrated her. She left a legacy. This legacy was more than the stories and advice that I heard throughout the years; it also encompassed how my grandmother lived her life as she grew older, weaker, more impaired, and more dependent.

My grandmother’s culture, Orthodox (and then Conservative) Judaism also contributed to her experience of aging. This is a culture that is very good at asking questions. My experience growing up in this culture was to learn to question everything. Even as I read the Old Testament today, I continue to experience my people questioning God—freely, with a sense of faith and familiarity that I appreciate.

Asking questions is an important part of spiritual growth. I think that James Fowler would agree, as evidenced by his writing on the third and fourth stages of faith and the transition from Synthetic-Conventional Faith to Individuative-Reflective Faith. Fowler writes, “It is significant when persons at Stage 3 encounter and respond to situations or contexts that lead to *critical reflection* [emphasis mine] on their tacit value systems. Under such circumstances they begin the transition to Stage 4’s *explicit* system. A new quality of choice

and personal responsibility for their values and for their membership in the communities that bear them becomes possible.”¹

As I, myself, have aged, I have become more comfortable with the questions, less certain of the answers, and less insistent on finding those answers. Perhaps peace is found as one becomes comfortable with the process, with the questions, and with the journey. Richard Morgan writes, “The later years provide a rich opportunity to work on ourselves and be who we are. The first half of life is one-sided, busy with career and family. We have little time to cultivate our inner lives. ...In our later years we can grow as we work on ourselves.”² With the cultivation of our inner lives we can find meaning in a myriad of circumstances, including those that come as part of the aging process.

This course on Spirituality and Aging has prompted study and quite a bit of reflection. It has caused me to examine my own “ageist” tendencies, and challenged me to explore ways of addressing ageism in my professional capacity. What follows here is a summary of my process—one which has led me to conclude that the community where I work can do more to assist our residents. We can do a better job of assisting the “transitional elderly”— those whose “spiritual needs may include some thoughtful reflection on where they are in life, the so-called ‘life review.’”³— to learn to appreciate the changes and challenges that come with age. This appreciation will come with personal reflection and reframing. My intent (my mission) is to impact the culture in our continuing care retirement community so that declining physical and/or cognitive abilities will not only be experienced as contributing to a decrease in one’s inherent value, but will instead bring with them an increase of value in non-physical areas of one’s life. Navigating transitions in one’s functional abilities and in one’s address, as care needs change, will now bring opportunity to contribute to the greater community through sharing with others the wisdom one attains only by experiencing the above-referenced changes.

My journey in this class started with my own reflection upon my grandmother’s response to her aging, and with the two interviews I conducted with Mr. F and Mr. B.

My grandmother died at age 102 when she was in the end stage of Alzheimer’s disease, after suffering from dementia for over a decade. I had wondered more than once why God kept my formerly vibrant and *very* spunky grandmother alive, when all I could see was a “shell” of who she had been. I used this somewhat ageist phrase intentionally because I didn’t want to ignore my own process as I began to explore what aging meant to me and to others.

¹ Fowler, James W. *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, p. 162. Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1981.

² Thibault, J.M. and Morgan, R., *Pilgrimage into the Last Third of Life: 7 gateways to spiritual growth*, p. 57. Upper Room Press: Nashville, 2012.

³ Koepke, Donald, R., MDiv, BBC, Ed., *Ministering to Older Adults*, p. 11. Routledge: New York, 2011.

As I have started to exit middle age⁴, I have begun to ask my own very personal questions regarding personhood as it relates to identity and productivity. I have found myself challenged as I have sought to gain a broader understanding of aging in our society. I set out to learn to better cherish and support whatever still exists even after recognition, speech, and other faculties are diminished. My own faith compels me to explore what it means to be a person created in God's own image (Gen 1:27) *in this present moment*, not defined by who one once was and certainly not defined by what one has lost.

I had the pleasure of interviewing two elderly gentlemen, Mr. F and Mr. B, regarding their experiences of aging and facing death. I took advantage of this opportunity to begin to explore what brings meaning to life when one's body is failing, loved ones have died, and one's immediate world has narrowed. While both interviews were extremely informative, I have only summarized Mr. B's interview and my conclusions for the sake of brevity.

Mr. B is a 97-year-old retired Lutheran pastor, widowed 2 ½ years, with 4 children. He described the physical challenges he started experiencing at age 85. He has macular degeneration and relies on a walker. He stated that the loss of his eyesight and physical strength has severely limited his physical work. He had always done all the house repairs (plumbing, electrical, carpentry) himself, but now he must rely on his son to not only maintain the house, but also assist him with his Independent Activities of Daily Living. Mr. B has also experienced some "mental changes" over the last two to three years. He has "difficulty recalling names and specific incidents." "I think I'm on my way to Alzheimer's, not sure," he told me, and then smiled at me and winked. Mr. B stated that the aches and pains are "peripheral;" they don't distress him. "It won't be very long before I'm translated to a better existence."

The hardest part of aging for Mr. B has not been the physical challenges, but the loss of his wife. He became very emotional when telling me about her and said that he had a lump in his throat. He told me that her health had been declining for three years prior to her death and that he had thought he could be rational about her dying, "visualizing her difficulty [being] over, and her safe in the arms of Jesus." While he was surprised by the depths of his grief, he stated that he "continue(s) to find comfort because of God's covenant" with him, and because of "all the righteousness of Jesus."

Mr. B discussed the positive aspects of aging. He is happy that he has lived long enough to see his four children well established in their own lives. One son, now divorced, lives with Mr. B and assists with his care. Mr. B stated that he knows that all of his children are happy and doing well. "They all love me and I love them." Mr. B stated, "It's pleasant to be looked after." His son takes good care of him, which compensates for his loss of independence.

Mr. B also stated that he does not fear death. "No, I'm ready to welcome death." Mr. B told me that at 97 he has lived longer than most, "long enough for me." "I'm not making much of

⁴ As defined by Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, "Culmination of Middle Adulthood"; referenced in Fowler, J. W. *Becoming Adult: Becoming Christian*, pp. 23-25. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 2000.

a positive contribution to anyone or society the way I am now so I'm ready for death, the sooner the better."

Mr. B's comment about not making a contribution anymore provided me with an opening to discuss whether or not someone still has "value" at that point in one's life. I shared the story of my grandmother and my own struggle with the question. Mr. B smiled and responded that he has counseled many older people throughout the decades of his ministry regarding this same question. He said, "I always said, 'you could still pray.' People exude love for those around them. The practice of love is the greatest thing. It's an extension of the life of God, putting something of God into others. An old disabled person is not useless after all. Although he often feels that way himself, he needs to be reminded that he's not without worth." Mr. B then added, "I guess I needed to remind myself of that." Mr. B's final thoughts, "I am comforted by my faith as I age because I know what's going to happen and where I'm going when I die. So I don't resent my aging as much as I might."

The interviews revealed some commonalities. Both of my interviewees were beyond any semblance of youth, but neither gave any indication that they had tried to hold onto their youth as they aged. As Jane Thibault says, "We choose to realize that we no longer have to maintain the illusion that we are young."⁵

Both gentlemen embraced each new leg of their journey and described a deep sense of peace regarding the next stage. This peace protected them from fear and despair. Both had been far more impacted by the loss of significant relationships (their wives) than by their own physical decline. Both looked forward to death as a passage into the next life and as reunion with those they had lost in this life. Both described themselves as being content and fulfilled in spite of the pain and limitations of aging. Both attributed this feeling of contentment to having lived well, having lived long, having loved well, and being loved by others. They had successfully passed the baton on to succeeding generations, and took pleasure in having lived long enough to see those generations doing well in their own lives.

Some other similarities included a willingness to take life as it comes and accepting aging and death as normal parts of life. Neither expressed any bitterness over increasing aches and pains or physical or cognitive limitations. Both specifically stated that they had neither regrets nor resentment. "Our ultimate goal, after all, is not a good death but a good life to the very end."⁶ They were living self-defined good lives.

For each of these men, his spirituality informed his view, contributing greatly to each one successfully maintaining a sense of his value and purpose, feeling content in spite of current circumstances. This is what I would define as successful aging.

Believing that my interviewees embodied successful aging, drawing attention to their contentment and sense of fulfillment, and to their peace in spite of difficult circumstances, I

⁵ Thibault, J.M. and Morgan, R., Ibid. p. 15

⁶ Gawande, Atul, *Being Mortal*, p. 245. Metropolitan Books: New York, 2014.

now asked the question, “How does one achieve this state of being at the end of life?” Is it necessary to not have regrets or doubts? Does successful aging require maintaining a particular mindset? I think that the nature of humanity—particularly during times of transition—lends itself to questioning, even doubt. As I have stated, questioning—the type that leads to reflection and reframing—can be of great assistance. Being able to ask questions (and seek answers) can enhance one’s sense of security and well-being. It is an essential part of the process of going through a transitional phase, and a necessary component of the later stages of faith as defined by Fowler.⁷

I also examined the role of psychosocial development and cultural influences on the transition to elderhood. I started by exploring two common questions—those I heard from my grandmother, as well as from my residents.

“Why am I still here?”

“Why hasn’t God taken me yet?”

The first question— “Why am I still here?”—standing alone, devoid of spirituality, can be answered in a deceptively simple way. One is still here because one has not yet died. Physical decline, while in progress, is not yet complete. Absent of any spiritual consideration, this nihilistic question often leads to despair. At the end of life, one must face whatever diminishment the ravages of aging have brought, with no vision or hope for the future, save a ceasing of one’s current pain—be it physical, or psychic. However, the second question—“Why hasn’t God taken me yet?”—implies that humans have *purpose*. What is the *reason* that I still exist? This question cannot be asked without spiritual implications. If there is a reason that God still has me here, there must be a reason that I exist in the first place.

Most religions offer an answer to the question of why people exist—to serve at the pleasure of a higher power. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”⁸ Even outside of formal religious practice, many people live life with some sense of belief, purpose, or driving force. James W. Fowler states that, “Questions of faith...aim to help us get in touch with the dynamic, patterned process by which we find life meaningful.”⁹ Fowler continues, “Faith is a person’s or group’s way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person’s way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose.”¹⁰

A person’s ability to explore and hopefully answer the second question will depend greatly on the development and impact of his or her own spirituality. How one has found (or not

⁷ Fowler, James W., *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, p. 162. Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1981.

⁸ Westminster Shorter Catechism, 1647

⁹ Fowler, James W. *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, p. 3. Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1981.

¹⁰ Ibid, page 4.

found) meaning and purpose throughout one's life will continue to impact one's experience of aging and the end of life stage. Let us look at human psychosocial development and how such development contributes to the acquisition of meaning and purpose in life. Then we can continue on to the role of spirituality and its impact on developing, and sustaining, said meaning and purpose.

Erik Erikson's theory of the eight stages of psychosocial development provides one framework for understanding how humans navigate this passage through time that we call life, and details the attendant psychosocial challenges in each stage of life.¹¹ Each developmental stage prepares a person for the next, with the successful passage through stages one to six preparing us for the generativity of stage seven. William H. Thomas, M.D. also discusses the importance of childhood as preparation for "Adulthood," which in Thomas' theory is the equivalent of the generativity stage.¹² Thomas states that in adulthood one's focus is on doing over being. "We all ought to know what *doing* is because, as adults, our lives are devoted to doing... All living things depend on doing for their survival."¹³

Western industrial culture, with its emphasis on productivity could lead one to conclude that the Generativity Stage, or Adulthood, is the apex of one's life. And yet, as Erikson writes, "Only in him who in some way has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointment adherent to being, the originator of other or the generator of products and ideas—only in him may gradually ripen the fruit of these seven stages. I know no better word for it than ego integrity."¹⁴ Erikson's statement makes clear that while successfully traversing the generativity stage—where one creates and cares for others, ideas, and life's produce—is vital to reaching the ego integrity stage, the fruit of this work is ego integrity itself. I would define ego integrity as the point in life when one reviews his or her life—one's accomplishments and failures, good decisions and bad, successful and painful relationships, opportunities seized and lost—and comes to the decision that life has been worth living, that one has done the best that he or she could do, that one can move forward without regrets and embrace the future, whatever it might hold. The apex then, is this final stage where one can reflect on his or her achievements, relationships, and the overall course of one's life and find satisfaction there.

Erikson continues, "It is the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions." "*In such final consolidation, death loses its sting.*" [Emphasis mine.]¹⁵ In this stage beyond generativity one can truly enjoy the fruit of his or her many years and face death, when it comes, without regret.

One of the tasks of stage eight, "Ego Integrity vs. Despair," is for "trust to [develop] into the most mature *faith* that an aging person can muster in his cultural setting and historical

¹¹ Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society, Eight Ages of Man*, pages 247-274. Norton: New York, 1964.

¹² Thomas, William H. *What Are Old People For?: how elders will save the world*. VanderWyk & Burnham: Acton, MA, 2004.

¹³ Ibid, pages 116-117.

¹⁴ Erikson, Erik H. *Childhood and Society*, p. 268.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 268.

period.”¹⁶ This trust will incorporate an acceptance of one’s self—an acceptance that what one has done has had purpose. It also requires a reckoning of life that counts what one has done as enough. And it recognizes that *who* one is continues to have value. It becomes necessary to acknowledge one’s personal value as intrinsic to *who I am*, not what I do. The shift from generativity to ego integrity can be a difficult one in our post-modern culture where many of us define ourselves and measure our lives by what we do or produce, or by our inability to continue to do so.

In the wealthy retirement community where I practice social work, I witness people who are satisfied with their life’s work. Many have made significant and highly visible contributions to their fields, thus establishing a lasting legacy. Yet I also witness many who have difficulty in navigating the transition to the ego integrity stage, or what Dr. Thomas refers to as “Elderhood”.¹⁷ In spite of having achieved much, in spite of possessing the accolades, material resources, and the promise of earthly immortality that comes with a high enough level of name recognition, despair can still settle in. The fruit of one’s generativity does not guarantee a successful transition to the reflective, summative tasks of ego integrity or elderhood. One must learn to relinquish the drive to continue to produce, and one must learn to appreciate the more introspective act of reflection.

Passing the baton to the next generation can be helpful when learning to relinquish the drive to produce. Mr. B, cited living long enough to see his children well established in their own lives as a positive aspect of aging. Having mentored one’s own children or younger colleagues can allow an elder to retain his or her sense of value as he/she moves from the active role of center stage to what some might experience as a more supporting role. Also, as Dr. Thomas points out, “The genius of human aging transforms an inevitable physical decline into something new, a reinvention of the self, a *portal* [emphasis mine] that leads to a new freedom from the burdens of adulthood.”¹⁸ I recall Mr. B’s comment that, “It’s pleasant to be looked after.” Loss of independence coupled with a willingness to relinquish control, and an appreciation of the efforts of those who come after us will open that portal.

Jane Thibault and Richard Morgan offer insight and practical assistance to navigate and embrace “the last third of life” for those already in possession of a more formal spirituality. Jane writes, “We reenvision aging as a pilgrimage... We discover that actions and behaviors once appropriate for our thirties, forties, and fifties no longer serve us well in our sixties, seventies, eighties, and ninety-plus. In fact, what served us usefully earlier may actually impede our growth in later life... We choose to believe that we are not only aging but we are following a call to advance... We choose to interpret all the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual changes as new territory to traverse in our advancement. We choose to see this aging process as our final pilgrimage—the one that will ultimately lead us to our Beloved, our Source.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 272.

¹⁷ Thomas, William H., Ibid.

¹⁸ Thomas, William H., Ibid, p. 61.

¹⁹ Thibault, J.M., and Morgan, R., Ibid, pp. 15-16.

One must learn to appreciate the more introspective act of reflection. Dr. Thomas advocates a radical cultural shift—one that would not only allow for, but actually encourage elders to embrace the transition from generativity to ego integrity (or in his terminology from adulthood to elderhood) as they shift from “Doing-being” to “Being-doing.” Dr. Thomas writes, “Whereas doing is visible and quantifiable and generates useful, real-world results, *being* concerns itself with things that cannot be seen. To *be* is to create and sustain relationships with the invisible and the intangible.” “It is being that guides us to the deepest, richest veins of human experience. We find meaning in being. This meaning can easily become more important than life itself.”²⁰

A greater emphasis on spirituality can expand one’s definition of what brings meaning to life. It can also provide hope at any age, ensuring that any future has new vistas, new possibilities. My hope, professionally, is that my clients will be able and willing to explore these themes. I hope they will be successful in gaining greater insight, and in embracing and engaging the spiritual. If they are successful in such exploration, they will gain coping skills, and not only tolerance for, but also a sense of appreciation for, each new stage of life, as they continue to age.

Reframing one’s perspective on aging can be a powerful psychological (as well as spiritual) tool. Understanding that, “Limitation and vulnerability are doorways to wholeness,”²¹ is an important step towards the “basic virtue” of *wisdom*, which Erikson identifies as “the lasting outcome” of a successful transition to the ego integrity stage.²² Exploring the reality of one’s circumstances while recognizing the inherent benefits of aging, as opposed to only seeing limitations, can be an empowering and freeing process; one which can alter a person’s mental state and redefine the further course of one’s life.

I would like to help those who could benefit from such assistance to ask the questions, and seek the answers, that might prompt reflection and reframing, and thus successfully guide one’s transition to ego integrity with a minimum of despair. This statement of intent functions as my “mission statement” and defines the rationale for my project, **The Legacy Book**, as described below.

The White Sands of La Jolla is a large residential community for the elderly with four levels of care. Our clientele reside in independent living apartments, assisted living apartments, the Atrium (our memory care unit), and the Health Center (our Skilled Nursing floor), where many residents share a room. We serve approximately 250 people across the four levels of care. Our business model is to move people through the levels of care as they age and have need of a higher level of assistance.

Most of our residents move into independent living where they never have to cook, clean, or do household maintenance chores again. They participate as they desire in a host of

²⁰ Thomas, William H., *Ibid*, p. 118

²¹ Koepke, Donald, *Towards a Spirituality of Aging*, lecture notes, 11/14/15.

²² Eriksen, Erik H., *Ibid*, p. 274.

activities and committees—going to concerts and the theater, day trips around the county, chapel services, book clubs, political discussions, and charitable work within the community (raising money for employee assistance programs and for benevolence programs for each other, and donating their time for visitations in assisted living and the Atrium.) Many continue to work part time, continuing to research, write, or otherwise ply the trades that have allowed them to live in such a beautiful place.

The first bump in the road usually comes with some mild cognitive impairment, or the debility that occurs after an acute episode such as a fall or a stroke. Part of my role as their social worker is to assist with these transitions, as residents need to move to higher levels of care. Most make this move burdened by great loss. In addition to physical and/or mental decline, there is now loss of one's familiar apartment, loss of independence, and often—sadly, loss of social status. It is unfortunate that the moves to the higher levels of care often carry with them fear and stigma.

Utilizing a healthier perspective on aging as expressed by Williams and Erikson, we can challenge this ageism, and counter despair, which I will define as unmitigated regret. We all experience loss and have regrets, but when we cannot view our regrets in the light of self-forgiveness, and when we pine for lost opportunity or seasons past, we despair.

Ageism devalues one's experience of the elder stage, and it creates a condition that must be treated. In the assisted living wing of my community, one of my residents is appropriately transitioning to a more reflective stage as he is declining cognitively and physically, and less able to engage in his former level of activity. When I assessed him for depression, I was pleased to hear him discuss his satisfaction with a more reflective, albeit less active, lifestyle. As he comes to terms with new physical limitations, he is embracing a deeper appreciation for this summative phase of life. He talked about his life, his children, his pleasure in their success.

I have had to provide some psychoeducation for other members of our inter-disciplinary team who do not yet understand this perspective, who think that if someone is slowing down, participating less, engaging with others less—depression must be a factor. This gentleman's son though has benefitted from this same psychoeducation. He has been able to not only appreciate, but partner with his father in the life review thereby enriching their relationship, and assisting the son to validate his father's process, and find value for himself where there was previously only the pain of watching his father's decline. When we believe that to cease producing means to lose one's value as a person, the aging process creates despair.

This prioritization of doing and producing can make it difficult to enter a life stage better suited for, and better served by reflection; one that likely will require more dependency on others. As Jane Thibault eloquently states, "What is the origin of the fear? We don't want to lose any control over our bodies, minds, and the plans we have for our lives. Also, we despise the idea of being a burden to other people. Unfortunately, we live in a society where each person is expected to 'carry his or her own weight.' Fierce independence is a secular

virtue. We respond well to immediate and time-limited needs, such as those incurred by flood or tornado victims; but we have little empathy and patience for those who need permanent help over the long haul (including ourselves). The idea of being a burden—of not contributing to others and to society—weighs heavily on us especially as we venture into frail or even ill elderhood.”²³

I hope to challenge this perception of aging at White Sands. My goal is to develop a program that reveres the “wisdom [that] comes from age coupled with reflection.”²⁴ I will limit inclusion in this program to those who have personally experienced physical or cognitive decline resulting in changes that require moving to a higher level of care. By limiting inclusion, I hope to create a sense of exclusivity, one that brings honor and status to those who are invited to contribute to this program.

Administration of the program will be by independent living residents thereby creating another bridge between the levels of care, but a bridge which encourages a different type of interaction between the independent residents and those in the higher levels of care. This interaction focuses on what the assisted living, atrium, and health center residents have to offer others rather than what the independent residents can offer them. My intent is to expand the definition of what one has that is of value to others and society at large.

Many elders pass on this wisdom as part of the process of “passing the baton” to younger generations, usually within a family setting. My interviewees, as previously stated, are good examples of this. But many residents at White Sands either do not have children, or live far from them, robbing these elders of this important rite of aging.

The Legacy Book will be a place for those residents who meet the inclusion criteria to chronicle their wisdom. My intent is to add value and meaning to the experience of aging by providing a forum for these residents to give to the “younger elderly”, to shed light on the path we all will travel, and by showing respect for the experience that can come with age. This project will encourage reflection and introspection through a series of questions intended to mine the depths of the individual and collective wisdom gleaned through time and experience, and reflection upon the two. Every contributor to the Legacy Book will benefit from the attention and validation accorded to those who choose to share their own experience and enrich the community. These contributors will be identified as “elders”.

While I will initiate this program, continuing administration of it will be by the independent residents. I anticipate that they will form a committee to oversee the Legacy Book: purchasing the necessary supplies and interviewing those residents who meet the criteria to be contributors and who wish to do so.

The book will be a scrapbook with an expandable spine, and other supplies will be paper, pens, and scrapbooking materials for those who enjoy such embellishments, or who would

²³ Thibault, J.M., and Morgan, R., *Ibid*, p. 42.

²⁴ Koepke, Donald, *Towards a Spirituality of Aging*, lecture notes, 11/14/2015.

like to include a picture. The budget also includes two copies of What are Old People For?²⁵, which in addition to this paper, will serve as a training manual as described below. The White Sands resident council maintains a healthy bank account to finance its committees, and I will petition this council for the funds to start and maintain this book. I do not anticipate that the cost will be prohibitive.

My first step has been to meet with my executive director, who was very supportive of this idea and has given his approval. I will now meet with the resident council president who can authorize the creation of a new resident committee. Once I have elicited the support of the council president, I will identify a “patron”—a resident who will find this program meaningful and worthy of oversight. The right patron will be able to establish a strong committee thus ensuring continuity through the years.

Selection and training of the right patron(s) is key as it is crucial for this project’s continuing success. I have in mind a “younger” couple who both have professional degrees and experience in the counseling field. Both are active members of the White Sands community and have engaging personalities. They have relocated from the east coast and without local family, may have the time and interest in supporting this type of project. If they are interested in providing project oversight, they are likely to be successful in engaging others’ interest as well. If they are not interested, I will need to explore other options with the resident council president. The immediate past president and his wife—both active, engaging, and with a spiritual foundation of their own, are another option to champion the Legacy Book.

I anticipate that selection and training of the patron(s) will require two meetings with one month in between. At the first meeting, I will explain the Legacy Book, and I will provide a copy of this paper and a copy of What are Old People For? I will then meet with the patron(s) to discuss these materials, answer questions, and plan for the formation of the resident committee. This time frame is flexible as my patron may finish the reading materials quickly, or need more time. Additional meetings may be necessary, and of course will be scheduled as needed.

Once I have trained the patron(s), I will post a notice in the Sandpiper (the White Sands weekly resident newspaper) to advertise for committee members. This committee will include Interviewers (“Scribes”), and Scrapbookers. One of the scrapbookers will be the Chief Scrapbooker. There are several residents who enjoy scrapbooking and I will ask one of them to act as Chief Scrapbooker, maintaining the scrapbooking supplies inventory, and overseeing the compilation of the book itself. The people who create the individual pages of the book will make copies of those pages so that family members or loved ones of the contributing residents may have a copy to keep. White Sands has a high quality Xerox machine that produces color copies and can be used for this purpose.

²⁵ Thomas, William, H., Ibid.

The patron(s) and I will conduct two training sessions (one week apart) for the committee members. The first meeting, for the entire committee, will introduce and explain the purpose of the Legacy Book, and review the basic theoretical underpinning, encouraging committee members to examine their own ageism. I will make this paper and/or What are Old People For? available upon request for the committee members. The second meeting will be for the Scribes so that they can practice interviewing techniques with each other. I will act as a mentor, offering feedback if indicated.

Following are some reflective questions that are merely suggestions for those residents who are less articulate, or who might find the prospect of “sharing their wisdom” intimidating without such prompts.

1. What impact has growing older had on your life?
2. How has growing older benefitted you? Is there something you can do now that you couldn't do at a younger age? Why do you think this is? Do you have more time? Do you have a better understanding of yourself?
3. How have your priorities changed as you've grown older?
4. What has brought you joy in your life? Has the source of joy changed as you've gotten older?
5. Do you have a personal spiritual belief? If so, how has this belief changed as you have aged?
6. How has your life, your community, the world been transformed in your lifetime?
7. What changes would you still like to see in yourself and in the larger community?
8. Are there ways in which you would like to contribute to this change? Do you need someone to assist you to make this change?
9. What message or legacy would you like to leave for others, (especially those who are younger than you)?

I will establish a formal budget with an itemized list of supplies, before meeting with the resident council president, and assign actual dates to my timeline once I have her approval and I am able to approach the residents to create the committee.

The inclusion criteria for contributing to the Legacy Book will be anyone residing long term in the higher levels of care—assisted living, memory care, and skilled nursing. I specify long term because residents occasionally have short-term rehabilitation stays in skilled nursing that do not carry with them the same stigma or adjustment issues which I have identified above. (These are temporary setbacks, not life transitions of the same magnitude.)

Other remaining tasks will be to meet with the library committee chair to request display space in the White Sands library for the Legacy Book to be displayed, and to write a follow up news piece for the Sandpiper, announcing the launch of the Legacy Book, and explaining its purpose and inclusion criteria. I expect to meet with the resident committee on a continuing basis (perhaps quarterly) to track this project and assist with making adjustments as needed.

As I conclude this formal exploration of Spirituality and Aging, I now practice social work, and continue my own life's journey with an enhanced view of aging.

"It is with the passing of years that we come to the realization of the importance of gathering all that we have done and seen; all that we have experienced and how that has shaped us into who and what we have become; of who and what we are. In so doing, we become witnesses to God's presence at work in our lives and in the sum of all we are."²⁶

²⁶ Mattes, Ray, MSG, MPA, *Spiritual Need One: Spiritual Development: The Aging Process: A Journey of Lifelong Spiritual Formation*, in Koepke, Donald, R., MDiv, BBC, Ed., *Ministering to Older Adults*, p. 65. Routledge: New York, 2011.

Course Evaluation:

This course on spirituality and aging has been outstanding! The course has accomplished its purposes—to enlighten and expand my understanding of aging from a physical, psychosocial, cultural, and spiritual perspective, changing how I view the aging process. This benefits my personal and professional selves, and benefits my clients through my enhanced perspective and through the project I have designed, *The Legacy Book*.

I enrolled in this course with the strong encouragement of my employing organization, their financial support, and not a little trepidation on my part. My thoughts were, “I work full time; when will I have the time for this level and quantity of reading?” “Can I still write Master’s level academic papers?” “Do I have anything to contribute?” Well, I am happy to be able to say that the answers were “yes.”

I have learned much from the excellent instruction, the depth of the content (all relevant to my work), and my own parallel process. This parallel process—learning about myself as I learned the content and how I can utilize it to better serve others—has been the most delightful discovery. Thank you!

One piece of constructive criticism:

I think that the initial session, specifically Cordula’s presentation, would benefit from less statistical information (fewer graphs), and a greater focus on what to do with that information. I would have appreciated more suggestion/direction for interacting with the cognitively impaired, and more time for class discussion of the same. I suspect that Cordula was heading in that direction and just ran out of time.

One suggestion:

Maybe add back to the syllabus: Erickson’s *Childhood and Society*, *Eight Ages of Man*, and Fowler’s *Stages of Faith*, or at least sections from them. I saw that both of these books were on the previous course syllabus and I reviewed Erickson and read Fowler before the start of the first class. (Ok, so I’m a bit of an overachiever.) These two works were of great help to me in understanding and integrating the rest of the course content. I know we covered this material in the Fowler chapter in *Becoming Adult: Becoming Christian*, but I don’t think I would have benefitted as much without having read those two books.

Again—this course has been a Godsend for me, blessing me personally and professionally. Every minute of my reading, reflection, and writing has been well worth the effort. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.