

## AGING GRACEFULLY

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand (sumedhacentre@gmail.com) with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

In this edition I present practices that help us age gracefully.

While I was in a neighbouring country for a Workshop I visited a nearby convent where there were a few nuns I knew. While taking tea the Superior of the community told me, “You must visit the youngest member of our community.” I was taken to an upstairs room where I met Sister Gladys (name changed). She had a beaming smile and her entire face had a glow of joy which lit up the room. She engaged me in pleasant conversation. She was 97 years young! She had been lying in her bed for a few months now. She had to be helped on to a wheelchair, for her to move anywhere. Despite her condition she appeared so happy and fulfilled and had the capacity to make others happy. I said to myself, “That’s what means to age gracefully!” My encounter with Sr. Gladys happened more than 20 years ago. But the image of the beaming, joyful sister who had aged so gracefully remains an inedible and delightful memory. There are countless others like Sister Gladys who have been able live happy, graceful lives and enjoy wellbeing even in old age despite many setbacks and limitations.

Post midlife-years can be difficult for a variety of reasons. The slowing down of metabolism and weakening immune system can lead to disabilities and illness. Loss of hearing, impaired vision, and limited motor agility can be particularly frustrating. There can be lack of feelings of self-efficacy for a variety of reasons. The negative attitudes expressed by family/community members, colleagues, and younger people toward the incompetence, dependence, or old-fashioned ways of older people can lead many of them feel quite discouraged about their self-worth. Despite these challenges it is possible to age gracefully.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research on aging provides many insights as to what is required to age gracefully.

*The MacArthur Foundation Study on Aging* was undertaken by group of 16 scientists drawn from biology, neuroscience, neuropsychology, epidemiology, sociology, genetics, psychology, neurology, physiology, and geriatric medicine. Their conclusion on what leads to successful aging: the ability to maintain three key behaviours or characteristics: a) low risk of disease and

disease-related disability; b) high mental and physical function; and c) active engagement with life.

**Mills Longitudinal Study** compared cohorts of sick and healthy women at ages 41, 51, 61. This study too identified three characteristics of those who age successfully: a) increase in life satisfaction; b) reduced negative affect; c) increase in generative activities. Negative affect refers to emotions as such as anger, guilt, shame and so on. Generative activities refer to actions that express care for and attention to others.

**The Harvard Study of Adult Development** - “arguably the longest study of aging in the world” - consisted of three separate cohorts of 824 individuals—all selected as teenagers for different facets of mental and physical health nearly a century ago and studied for their entire lives. The first is a sample of 268 socially advantaged Harvard graduates born about 1920—“the longest prospective study of physical and mental health in the world.” The Second, is a sample of 456 socially disadvantaged Inner City men born about 1930—“the longest prospective study of ‘blue collar’ adult development in the world.” Third is a sample of 90 middle-class, intellectually gifted women born about 1910—“the longest prospective study of women’s development in the world.”

George Vaillant, a former director of study, writes in *Successful Aging*: “It is not the bad things that happen to us that doom us: it is the good people who happen to us at any age that facilitate enjoyable old age.” Successful aging is also facilitated by a capacity for gratitude, for forgiveness, and loving and being loved by a particular person. Alcohol abuse consistently predicted unsuccessful aging, in part because alcoholism damaged future social supports. Learning to play and create after retirement and learning to gain younger friends as one loses older ones were also significant contributors. Objective good physical health was less important to successful aging than subjective good health. What is meant by this is that “it is all right to be ill as long as one does not feel sick.”

The Harvard Study also identified some significant characteristics of those who age gracefully: They care about others, are open to new ideas, and within the limits of physical health maintain usefulness to society and help others. They show cheerful tolerance of the difficulties of old age. They insist on sensible autonomy (doing for themselves and by themselves what they are able to) while willing to acknowledge their dependency needs and gracefully accept the help offered them. When ill, they are patients for whom a doctor enjoys caring. They are optimistic and look at the bright side of life. They maintain hope in life. They retain a sense of humour and a capacity for play. They are able to spend time in the nostalgic reminiscence of the past, yet they remain curious and continue to learn from the next generation. They try to maintain contact with old friends while making new ones.

**The Nun Study**, directed by David Snowdon and colleagues (originally begun as a study of Alzheimer’s disease) asked “Why do some of the sisters age gracefully, continuing to teach and serve, retaining their mental faculties into their eighties and nineties, even past one hundred? Why do others—who have lived such similar lives—appear to lose themselves, forgetting their

closest friends and relatives and, in the end, becoming almost wholly disconnected from the world around them?” (*Aging Gracefully*, p.2)

The risk of death at any given year after age sixty-five is about 25 percent lower for the School Sisters of Notre Dame the subjects of the Nun Study than it is for the general population of women in the United States. What is it that helped these sisters to live dramatically longer (average age: 89; the youngest was 84; the oldest 106 years), and healthier, lives than their lay counterparts? The study provided the following answers:

1. **Exercise:** All the walking the sisters had done-- at a time when motorized transport was rarely available at the beginning of the last century—had helped them to live long and healthy. Exercise is one of the most reliable ways to preserve cardiovascular health. Exercise improves blood flow, bringing the brain the oxygen and the nutrients it needs to function well. Exercise reduces the stress hormones and increases the chemicals that nourish the brain cells. These changes help ward off depression and some kinds of damage to the brain tissue.
2. **Education:** About 85% of the sisters in the Nun study had bachelor’s degrees and about 45 % had master's degrees—“astounding statistics for any age group, let alone for women born in the early part of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century.” Not only did the less-educated sisters have higher mortality rates, but their mental and physical abilities were much more limited if they did reach old age. These data are in keeping with earlier findings. As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British scientists had discovered a strong link between education and health.
3. **Language:** Language skills also had a significant impact on health and wellbeing in old age. The data from the Nun Study tended to confirm that healthy subjects were more proficient in sophisticated word use. They were apt at using multisyllabic words, such as *particularly*, *privileged*, and *quarantined*. In contrast, the sisters who later developed Alzheimer's more frequently used monosyllabic words, such as *girls*, *boys*, and *sick*.
4. **Nutrition.** What mattered was not just the quality of the food, the social environment of the meal also mattered. Snowdon wrote: “What I now know for sure is that nutrition for healthy aging is not just about eating certain foods or downing a certain milligrams of prescribed number of vitamins each day. It also depends on where we eat, whom we eat with, and whether the meal nourishes our heart, mind, and soul as well as our body,”
5. **Positive Emotions:** A positive outlook, especially early in life, contributed to longevity and wellbeing. In the autobiographies the sisters had written when they were an average age of twenty-two years old, positive emotional content strongly predicted who would live the longest lives. The sisters who scored the lowest number of positive-emotion sentences had twice the risk of death at any age when compared to those who were in the highest group. “This is a most extraordinary finding: A writing sample from early adult life offered a powerful clue as to who would be alive more than six decades later,” Snowdon observed.

Interestingly Snowdon refers to two factors that contributed to longevity and wellbeing which was not tested by the Nun Study design, “and yet after fifteen years of working with the sisters, I believe strongly in their importance” he observed.

6. **Deep Spirituality.** The first is the deep spirituality that these women shared. Profound faith buffers the sorrows and tragedies that all of us experience, Snowdon wrote. Moreover, evidence is now starting to accumulate from other studies that prayer and contemplation have a positive influence on long-term health and wellbeing. A *Stanford Research Institution* study, for example, has concluded “that the inner life, rather than externals, is central” to health and happiness.
7. **Community.** Convincing evidence is accumulating from other research, including those cited earlier in this article, that strong relationships as in marriage, membership in churches, clubs, or other social groups, and regular contact with family and friends all reduce the risk of death from the major killers such as coronary heart disease and stroke and enhance longevity. Community was a significant support system that the sisters shared.

## **A Summary**

Summarising the data from research cited, here is a list of attitudes and behaviours that enable us to age gracefully: Exercise of body and also of mind (through intellectual pursuits, maintaining curiosity and eagerness to learn), nutrition including a positive eating ambience, maintaining positive emotions, balancing independence and dependence, optimism and hope, sense of humour, thankful living, nostalgic reminiscence, helping others through generative activities, caring for and learning from future generation, healing from negative emotions, forgiveness, deep spirituality, and close relationships and community.

## **Introspection**

- What do the research findings on aging gracefully evoke in you?
- Which of the factors that promote graceful aging are you practising? To which do you need to give greater attention?
- What are the implications for you personally, for your family or community?
- You may be aware persons like Sr. Gladys who have been able to age gracefully. What can you learn from such persons?

## **Prayer**

The Bible mentions a number of persons who have aged gracefully, remaining active and generative into ripe old age, such as the patriarchs Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and David, Zechariah and Elizabeth... The Gospel of John (21, 18-19) has a scene in which Jesus describes what will happen to Peter in old age. We could read and stay with this passage or the stories concerning the other figures mentioned above and spend some time talking to God about what is evoked in us through this podcast and our reading and reflections.

Have a blessed and safe weekend.

Thank you for listening.

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