

## Monastic Scribe LLXV: July 1, 2024

### WHILE I BREATHE, I HOPE...

This title is the name of a book by the late Richard Gaillardetz, theology professor at Boston College. Mentor, writer, husband, father of four sons, he unexpectedly was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. A few months later he died. But between these two events, of diagnosis and death, he wrote reflections on facing death. I read the book as I was passing my ninetieth birthday and dealing with various illnesses. It has had a profound effect on me as I openly face death, not soon I hope, but as part of the life cycle.

Americans seem to have an antipathy and perhaps fear of both aging and dying. And the young catch this fear and anxiety early in the stereotypes dominant in our culture. The World Health Organization (WHO) has a chart of stereotyped feelings toward the aged. These are described as “rigid, irritable and frustrating, asexual, easily confused, and needy.” Movies, TV, newspapers all carry these stereotypes. Do you like these flattering names?

As I turned ninety I heard, more than once, such sympathetic expressions as “You are only as old as you feel.” Apart from the reality that I may indeed feel young or old on some days, I think such expressions are more about the speaker and their own fears of aging and death. I certainly do not want to go back to my teen years or young adulthood when I was forever proving myself. All my scars, physical or psychic, have been well earned. I want to be the best I can at this age. I think I can offer some life lessons to the young and middle aged. They may not be ready for some of it but, usually, they come to appreciate it. I like the saying, “Life is not about you; you are about life.” Learning to give, to love, to serve, to sacrifice are all part of growing older and wiser. Being a good person does not keep us from disappointments, heartaches and suffering. This is what life is all about. Faith tells us there is more to it than being happy and content.

The lack of intergenerational contact is a poverty of our culture. Openness, learning, listening to both older and younger generations enhances understanding both of ourselves and of others. I love it when young families bring their infants or little ones to church on Sunday. I would like to have more contact with children, teenagers and all young people. I would love to hear their stories. Together we are God’s people and we are incomplete without each other. The same goes for interacting with black, red, yellow people, foreign people too. We

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are all missing some humanity without the others. But here I am focusing on ageing in this blog.

I recently turned ninety years of age. I have known far fewer ninety-year olds than I do children! Did turning ninety mean anything significant? I am fortunate in being a relatively healthy ninety-year old, and I am happy to have gone through ninety years with its hopes, trials, disappointments, and growth. I am freer in my heart than I have ever been. Why would I ever want to go back to live the stresses and challenges of adolescence, youth and middle adulthood? Through the years of many stages of growing up, I have faced the wider meaning of life which includes death. I sometimes fear death as the great unknown but I also cherish looking forward and being immersed in the vastness of God's love. I can let go of so many false attempts at finding meaning. I know who I am (most of the time!) and am quite happy with it.

Our society easily dismisses the elderly. They are made fun of or simply ignored. So many elderly languish on their own. Every human being is cherished and loved by God and have a place in the greater human story. I am here on earth to learn how to give myself in love. That work never finishes. Sick or healthy, alone or in a community, I am called to be closer to God and love this God as God loves me. In prayer, in silence, as well as in relationships, I have the challenges now of a ninety-year old. Some pity me or dismiss me but I can still love them. Along with children, youngsters and every age in-between, I sin and make mistakes but that all helps me to accept my true self which needs God to guide me in love. Becoming limited physically and otherwise, struggling with illness, helps me to accept my vulnerability, dependence, my being loved by God as well as many others.

Our capitalistic society promises happiness if we acquire more things, acquire more comfortable surroundings. What we value seems to depend on consumer acquisition. Beauty is important and essential for humanity and that is often found in simplicity and not accumulation.

Sorry if I sound like a grumpy old man. I am still trying to let go of what complicates life. I am still pursuing the freedom that comes with old age and really enjoy all the creation, people, world that God has freely loaned to me. Have you yet found this to be true as you get older? I am still alive at [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto:joycet@glastonburyabbey.org)

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“...rejoice, you young, while you are young. Be young, even though it’s hard to understand youth until you’ve lost it. (And you elders: remember what you wasted and grant the youth what you now long for).” James, K.A. Smith, “How to Inhabit Time.”

**Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL**

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.