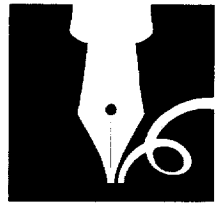


Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

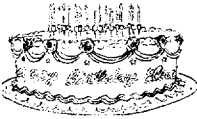
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BY BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Birthdays—times for growing

A birthday that I dread is coming next month. I'll reach the traditional retirement age—Social Security age—and the closer that birthday gets, the more ominous it seems. It feels like being put on the down escalator when I still want to be going up.



I'm sharing my feelings because they make me rethink what God wants from me, and I hope reading them will help you reconsider what God wants from you. If we see how to be more faithful individually, the church will become more faithful.

A reluctant senior citizen

For several years I've disliked being offered senior-citizen rates. The farther I get past the fifty-five or fifty that qualifies, the more aware I am of being old. I'm discouraged, too, by doctors saying



now, whenever I describe a complaint that I want cured, "Well, you know, as we get older ..." That means "Face it! You're falling apart and there's no remedy for it."

Another unnerving development of the past few years is that younger friends (even fiftyish ones!) often call me "Mrs. Wendland" now, instead of "Barbara." Having them say "Yes, ma'am" to me is even worse. Our age difference evidently is now so obvious that they think I require special deference. I'm sure their intentions are good, but it feels bad.

Women of age, wisdom, and power

Despite the increasing evidence of aging, I've been heartened by rereading Barbara Walker's *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power* (Harper & Row, 1985). Walker tells that in many early societies older women were seen as founts of wisdom, law, healing skills, and moral leadership. "Their wrinkles," Walker says, "would have been badges of honor, not of shame."



Fully ourselves as God wants

"Perfectionism is one of the scariest words I know," says Kathleen Norris in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead/Penguin Putnam Books, 1998).

Norris says perfectionism is characteristic of today's American culture. It's scary, she feels, because it makes people too timid to take necessary risks. Perfectionism, Norris observes, makes people "suffer when, although they've done the best they can, their efforts fall short of some imaginary, and usually unobtainable, standard." Norris finds that perfectionism works as an internal near-sightedness—"a preoccupation with self-image that can stunt emotional growth."

Be perfect, ... as
your heavenly
Father is perfect.
—Matthew 5:48



Norris sees good news, however, in the way the word "perfect" is used in the New Testament. It's not a scary word, she finds, so much as a scary translation. "The word that has been translated as 'perfect,'" she points out, "does not mean to set forth an impossible goal, or the perfectionism that would have me strive for it at any cost." Instead, it comes from a Latin word meaning "complete, entire, full-grown." To its original hearers, Norris assures us, the word would have meant "mature."

Mature enough to share with others

"To 'be perfect' in the sense that Jesus means it," Kathleen Norris finds, "is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity, to ripeness." Most important is that maturity for one person is different from maturity for another. Because of Christ, she reminds us, "It is incarnate, therefore specific, particular."

This kind of perfection, in Norris's view, means becoming mature enough to give ourselves to others. It is realizing that what we have, no matter how little it may be, is enough. Thus we can share it with others.



The good news about this kind of perfection, Norris reminds us, is that it doesn't demand that we reach an impossible standard. It asks instead "that we become fully ourselves as God would have us: mature, ripe, full, ready for what befalls us, for whatever is to come." When we have that kind of perfection, we're ready even for death—for what Kathleen Norris calls "a perfect death, fully acknowledged and fully realized, offered for others."

In much early mythology, Walker finds, women's lives were seen as having three stages—the virgin, the mother, and the crone. All were considered positive. They were even seen as aspects of divinity.



Crones—the caretakers of the soul



Over the centuries people have come to think of crones as mean, ugly, old women, like the witches we now see pictured at Halloween. The original meaning, however, was largely positive.

In pre-Christian Europe, Walker observes, older women were in charge of religious rites and official sacrifices. In the Middle East and Egypt, they were doctors, midwives, surgeons, and advisors on health care, child rearing, and sexuality. They also took care of the soul, conducting ceremonies for every event from birth to death. They were the record-keepers, too. They wrote histories, kept vital records, transcribed and edited scriptures, and administered libraries. "Elder women," writes Barbara Walker, "were the religious and secular teachers, universal educators of the young."

In many pre-patriarchal societies, then, getting older wasn't negative for women. They were the healers, arbiters of moral law, owners of the sacred lore, and mediators between the realms of flesh and spirit. Because they were seen as having wisdom, they had power. That view is rare now, but it's one we crones could benefit from reclaiming. It may even be one God is calling us to reclaim.



Fifty seems young now

While I'm worrying about reaching sixty-five, however, the news is full of articles about how sad it is to reach fifty, because that's where the Baby Boomers now are. They're the largest demographic group in the U.S and they're currently in the most influential positions in business, government, and other institutions, so their concerns are dominating the news.



Because Baby Boomers are seeing the physical effects of getting older, we're all being deluged with

ads for hair dyes and wrinkle-concealing creams, and articles about face lifts and tummy tucks. Baby Boomers are approaching retirement, so we're surfeited with articles about financial planning and about whether Social Security will survive.



Reading all these articles and ads about getting old—fifty—gives me a jolt. To me, fifty now seems marvelously young!

Jubilee time

... you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you. You shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. ... You shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. ... you shall eat only what the field itself produces. ... You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God ...
—Leviticus 25:9-17

Fifty seemed old to me when I was there. Fifty was the first birthday that made me feel old—over the hill—and that was miserable. Then a friend reminded me of the year of Jubilee described in the Bible. Fifty didn't have to be such a bad time after all, I realized. I began looking at the Bible's description of Jubilee as I would look at a dream or a work of art, expressed in symbolic language.

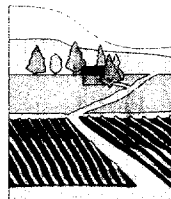
(Some Christians see the description of Jubilee as a command to cancel monetary debts and land ownership, but to me this

doesn't seem to be its point. A Christian friend of mine says it's amazing that we've realized that the Bible can't be a science textbook and yet we haven't realized that it can't be an economics textbook. I suspect he's right.)



Reclaiming lost parts of myself

When I looked at "the land" as a way of picturing a person's whole self, as it might be in a dream, I saw the fiftieth year as a time for recovering parts of myself that I had in effect allowed to be taken away from me or to be enslaved, either by other people's unreasonable demands and expectations or by my own. Fifty,





I realized, was a time for reclaiming skills, talents, and interests that I had abandoned years earlier in order to follow the pattern that I had mistakenly thought God wanted all women to follow forever.

I saw fifty as a time to stop worrying about some of the "fields" that I'd been feeling responsible for. It was time to stop worrying about "unpruned vineyards"—things I maybe should have done but had not done.



I realized that I had sown a lot of good seeds, tended a lot of vines, and reaped good harvests. I saw that I needed to appreciate those accomplishments but not to continue all of them forever. I also saw that some of them had never been required.



Through the Jubilee scripture I felt God was saying to me, "Don't cheat or mistreat any parts of yourself. I love and accept them all. Dedicate this time of your life to letting the best and truest parts of yourself bear fruit."

Discoveries, new directions, and shocks

Fifty became an eye-opening time for me. I set out in some previously unthinkable new directions that turned out to be life-changing, in response to what I later recognized as God's call.



In the years around fifty I was discovering new and valuable things about myself and other people. I discovered the influence of personality types, and the importance of dreams as a medium through which God speaks. I realized for the first time that women are continually and unjustly relegated to second-class status by language and other customs, even in the church. At fifty I started attending seminary and the Academy for Spiritual Formation.

I started writing, too—as a way of reflecting and praying at first, but then daring to hope that others might want to read some of what I wanted to write. Eventually I started writing *Connections*.

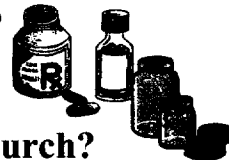


This issue starts its sixth year. I don't know where it may go from here, but for now I expect to continue it.

Scary and painful changes have also come in my years since fifty. I've had surgery for cancer. Recently I've been shocked to learn that I have high blood pressure. To treat it I have to take umpteen pills and walk on a treadmill daily, which I greatly dislike but apparently need to continue for life.



These experiences have reminded me that I can never take good health for granted, but also that a serious physical ailment isn't necessarily a death sentence.



Where's our place in the church?

For Christians to whom the church is important, getting older can be a difficult time. Even if we feel we still have something to give, finding ways of giving it can be hard.



In a study of six Protestant denominations (*Effective Christian Education*, by Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Elkin; Search Institute, 1990), men and women age seventy and older were found to have greater maturity in faith than any other segment of the congregations studied. However, churches were making little use of this group to help other members mature in faith.

I wonder why. I suspect it's for several reasons. Some older members, of course, no longer want active roles in the church. Some (like some younger ones) oppose all changes that don't fit their personal preferences or what they're used to, so leaders understandably don't want them in significant decision-making roles.



Another reason may be that some older members travel a lot. They visit children and grandchildren, and they make sightseeing trips they couldn't make earlier in life. As a result, they aren't consistently available for the many church jobs that must be done on a regular schedule.

Also, cultural changes have lessened many older people's ability to communicate effectively with younger ones. Older people's tools are likely to be lectures and printed materials instead of the videos, computers, contemporary music, and multi-media that are more likely to reach younger people. Besides, older members didn't have to cope with so

much drug use, sexual promiscuity, and violence in their youth or child-raising years, so their experience may not seem useful to younger churchgoers.

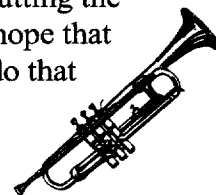
Another reason may be one encountered by lay Christians of all ages whose gifts happen to be in areas such as theology, spiritual guidance, or evaluating and planning. Because many clergy apparently consider this their exclusive turf, these lay members—whatever their age—don't get to make the contributions that God calls them to make and gives them the gifts for making.



Time to reevaluate again

Can older Christians find significant ways to use their experience, talents, skills, and spiritual gifts in their churches? What changes would that require? As my birthday approaches I'm reevaluating this. Even as a crone I'd like to keep sounding the trumpet of celebration. I'd like to keep putting the land that is myself to fruitful use. I hope that reading my thoughts will help you do that for yourself, and thus help some churches benefit from gifts they're missing.

Barbara



We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery ... But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ...

—Ephesians 4:14-15



O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me ...

—Psalm 71:17-18

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