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**WISDOM OF THE SAGES**  
A sermon given by the Rev. Rosemary Lloyd  
Sunday, February 24, 2008  
at the First Church in Boston

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We each carry an image—an archetype—of old age in our consciousness. No matter what age we may be right now, if we stop to imagine it, we can see what old looks like in our mind's eye. We may have had this image since we were very young. Perhaps it has modified as we have crept closer to the edge of what—for us—is old age...

There is the Bard's depiction of the 7<sup>th</sup> age of man in his play, *As You Like It*:

*"..a second childishness and mere oblivion/  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."*

Or this free translation of Ecclesiastes:<sup>1</sup>

*Then come the creaking days. Years ... in which one feels like saying, 'I have no taste for them.' For the sunlight darkens in the eyes; dimmed is the light of the moon and stars, and the vision is patchy like a cloudy sky after the rain. The hands and arms, the guards of the house, begin to tremble. And the legs, like battle-tired soldiers, are unsure in their step. The grinding mills, the teeth, are fewer, and the windows of the mind fog up... before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, ... and the dust returns to the earth as it was, .... Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher; all is vanity.*

No wonder the poet of the psalms cries out:

*"Take pity on me, Yahweh,  
I am in trouble now.  
Grief wastes away my eye,  
my throat, my inmost parts.*

*For my life is worn out with sorrow,  
my years with sighs;  
my strength yields under misery,  
my bones are wasting away.*

...

*I am contemptible,  
Loathsome to my neighbors,  
to my friends a thing of fear.*

*Those who see me in the street  
hurry past me;  
I am forgotten, as good as dead in their hearts,  
something discarded."<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from a translation of Ecclesiastes 12 by Rabbi Z. Schachter-Shalomi.

There are many ways to arrive at old age. Unfortunately, our dominant cultural picture is often one of loneliness, physical and financial diminishment, complaint and regret. It is my hope that we can do something to change that picture.

A massive demographic age wave--a tsunami really--called the Baby Boomers has begun to crest. Just this past October, the first Baby Boomer filed for Social Security. They--we--are coming fast (and in some cases just plain furious), to the realization that despite botox and any amount of money in the bank, time waits for no one, and the land of Old is the next port. Whether we will become elders or just older, that is the spiritual question and quest ahead for all who are blessed to have arrived this far.

I've been observing age more or less my whole life. I grew up in relationship with four grandparents. They all came to live in my parents' house before they died, and I was able to witness variations on aging and dying from a comfortable but loving distance. One suffered long and died fairly young with colon cancer; one suffered long with Parkinson's Disease and died in her 80s. One lived long and then suddenly became demented and had to be confined to a nursing home despite every loving effort. My paternal grandfather lived longest—to the age of 92—working happily in the gardens he loved, laughing with his grandsons as he taught them to transplant a fig tree, and dying in his own bed with his sons gathered 'round.

More recently, I have been able to watch aging from a nearer vantage point--even though I need trifocals to do it. I have developed a fascination for the grey infringement on my head, and facial lines being etched around my eyes and mouth.

For all the physical changes that are mildly alarming, I choose to think (if not actually romanticize) that my future in the land of old will be more like my paternal grandfather who lived robustly to 92 than my maternal grandmother who dwindled with chronic illness. Though there is little to support the justification of this hope, it is the one I cling to: that I will have a fairly fit body and few complaints; a good appetite and a sense of humor at the ready; family nearby and a peaceful death in my own bed.

There is, of course, no predicting that my old age will be anything like that, or that I'll even have an old age. Too many of us know how rosy, hope-filled projections can change suddenly at 72, 53, (or, sadly, far younger), with a single phone call carrying a voice of concern: "We'd like to do more tests," or "There has been an accident."

But spared the tragedy of premature death, there is a future of an older age awaiting us. So we may wonder: is there anything good about growing old?

One woman who is remarkable to me for her positive outlook about almost everything once said: "I'll tell you what's good about aging: nothing!"

I was so startled! She is a woman who has friends and family who love her, who is an active volunteer in her community. She is interested in life and ideas. She travels and she is sought out for wise counsel...

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from Psalm 31:9-19, New Jerusalem Bible translation.

It's not just that I caught her on a bad day. Her frank assessment of life as a senior American is not unique. Like many, she is sorry she retired as early as she did. Even though retirement freed up time to be with her family and to travel more easily, it caused a particular kind of suffering. The suffering stems from a material cultural standard that places a high value on "doing" and "having" far above the spiritual value of "being." Without an income-producing job, many Americans are deprived of a sense of usefulness. This sense of *use-less-ness* can spark a crisis of identity, loss of meaning, despair and hopelessness. These are deeply spiritual concerns.

Some Baby Boomers were once part of a counter-culture: a movement that resisted societal norms and subverted the status quo. We went in search of meaning, often looking beyond our cultural boundaries for new ways of thinking, for expanded consciousness, for models of simplicity, skillful means, and paths to inner peace.

If you are old enough to remember the bumper sticker that read "Don't trust anyone over 30,"--or if you know anyone over 30--you may want to become part of a new a counter-cultural movement. And I think that here at church is a good place to start.

There is an old Taoist parable about a carpenter and his apprentice that considers the distinction between what we do (have or achieve) and who or what we are:

*The carpenter said to his apprentice: "Do you know why this tree is so big and so old?"*

*"No," answered the apprentice. "Why?"*

*"Because it is useless," the carpenter answered. "If it were useful it would have been cut down, sawed up and used for beds and tables and chairs. But, because it is useless, it has been allowed to grow. That is why it is now so great that you can rest in its shadow."<sup>3</sup>*

"Because it is useless, it has been allowed to grow." An intriguing paradox...

Not all older people choose to retire from the work that has helped define and affirm them through their lives. My own father at 86 still goes to his law office every day that he is not in Florida playing golf with my mother.

But in the absence of work-with-pay to help define us—with less "doing" in our lives—we can cultivate a great spiritual opportunity: an opportunity to engage with our "being." An opportunity to become so "useless" that we can allow ourselves to grow in new and deep and even mysterious ways.

This is the hope and teaching of Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi, the author of a breakthrough book called *Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*. In it, Reb Zalman—now in his late 80s—champions a practice of inquiry and development that will support people to become spiritual elders—and not just older. He sees older age as "a time of unparalleled inner growth having evolutionary significance...[a] pioneering journey into our unmapped potential."

Employing tools and techniques drawn from across religion and psychology, Reb Zalman encourages balancing the physical diminishment of old age with the radical expansion of "intuitive capacities of mind associated with inner knowledge, wisdom, and expanded perception." Growing and expanding our interior lives will allow us to become

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<sup>3</sup> As recounted by Henri Nouwen in *Ageing: The Fulfillment of Life*, (New York: Doubleday, 1974) 71.

bearers of wisdom for the benefit of the next generation and the planet. What he has written is, in practice, a blueprint for becoming a sage.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Lao Tzu wrote:

*The sage is like water.  
Water is good, nourishes all things,  
and does not compete with them.*

...

*In her dwelling, the sage loves the earth.  
In her mind, she loves what is profound.  
In her associations, she is kind and gentle.  
In her speech, she is sincere.  
In her ruling, she is just.  
In business, she is proficient.  
In action, she is timely.  
Because she does not compete,  
she does not find fault in others.<sup>4</sup>*

As we age and some of our capacities dim, we can develop a sense of anxiety and perhaps even fear about the future. One way to meet this anxiety is to cultivate the means of facing the now, and coming to terms of acceptance with our diminishments and the illusion of immortality. Easier said than done. And I do not have a simple answer for how to do this is 5 easy steps....

But I do suggest that we can develop another sense: a sense of urgency to discover the value of “being” versus “doing.” Within “being”--in our interior life—there is light for the path that grows brighter with age. A light that can illuminate the world. A light that shines with a special kind of power, fueled by the growth that can emerge from the quietude of so-called “uselessness.” It is the wisdom of the sages.

Now if you are 50, perhaps you have been listening with a particular kind of attention. But if you are not yet 50 or even 15, let me suggest that these words are for you, too.

While it is never too late to begin the spiritual work of becoming an elder, it is also never too early. If there is no student, how can one be a teacher? If we do not seek out elders for guidance, how will we benefit from their wisdom? And if we do not acknowledge and support the formation of elders, from whence will our wise ones arise?

There is an old Balinese legend:

*It is said that once upon a time, the people of a remote mountain village used to sacrifice...their old men. A day came when there was not a single old man left, and the traditions were lost. The people wanted to build a great house for the meetings of the assembly, but when they came to look at the tree trunks that had been cut for that purpose, no one could tell the top from the bottom. If the timbers were placed the wrong way up, it would set off a series of disasters.*

*A young man came forward and spoke. “If you promise never to sacrifice the old men any more, I will find the solution for how to place the timbers.”*

*So the people promised.*

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<sup>4</sup> Lao Tzu (604-517 BC), *Tao Te Ching*, VIII.

*Then the young man brought out his grandfather whom he had hidden,  
and the old man taught the community how to tell top from bottom.*<sup>5</sup>

Our church community is the perfect garden for cultivating elders and sages! There is an innate wisdom to the church that puts a very high value on the interior quest for meaning, and the importance of “being.” We mutually support and encourage being: being spiritual, being compassion, being service and justice and love. Affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all, we should be among the first to recognize and cherish the gifts of our elders.

Here in our church community, we come together to work and worship for the benefit of others as much as for ourselves. Our spiritual tradition encourages attending to intuition and experience. And the idea of expanding consciousness? We are all about it—all the way out to the interdependent web of all existence...

Sitting in your seats, you are nourishing the strength and courage to be human. Going out into the world, you are extending yourself as a role model, contributing, practicing being a non-anxious presence in a very anxious world. It may not have been until now an explicit curriculum, but I believe we are, already, a training ground for sages!

For those who are feeling they are moving steadily toward that shore we call old age and sense an urgency about becoming elders instead of just older, I will be leading a 6-week workshop this spring on Age-ing to Sage-ing. There will be information about it in the new Learning Community brochure and future newsletters. Registration is limited and required, so if you are interested, email me to let me know.

Whether you attend the workshop or simply keep up the good work you are already doing as a sage-in-training, imagine a world blessed with elders--with sages who want most of all to be like old forests and water: to nourish and do no harm.

Imagine an elder corps traveling to areas of strife to meet with elders from other countries... Women and men who are tired of fighting wars and want to watch their grandchildren play safely in fields they worked and streets they built...

Imagine a parliament of sages welcome to attend policy planning sessions at the highest levels of government, business and education—living reminders that mutual, global prosperity and peace arises through capacity building and just, sustainable practices...

Imagine wise ones modeling a new maturity—their lives a harvest of experience transformed into possibility for the next generation... Accepting of their mortality, living with less fear, more peace, less regret, more love.

Imagine sages “[f]lourishing in the courts of the Divine, still bearing fruit in old age, ...proclaim[ing] ...righteousness.”<sup>6</sup> And saying “Yes!” to life with every breath.

Imagine.

And may it be so.

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<sup>5</sup> Cited by Henri Nouwen from Laura Huxley, *This Timeless Moment* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968) 28.

<sup>6</sup> Excerpted from Psalm 92:13-15.