

Aging Gratefully



Christopher News Notes

*“Teach us to count our days that
we may gain a wise heart.”*

—Psalm 90:12

WE ALL KNOW THE PAINS AND CHALLENGES THAT COME WITH AGE, from physical changes and limitations to health conditions that impact our lives. But it’s not all doom and gloom. An important and sometimes overlooked component to physical and mental well-being in older age is something we can all do: cultivate an attitude of gratitude.

“Gratitude is literally one of the few things that can measurably change peoples’ lives,” writes Dr. Robert Emmons, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, and a leading expert on the science of gratitude. “Gratitude has one of the strongest links to mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality trait—more so than even optimism, hope or compassion.”

Experiencing gratitude does not mean sugarcoating challenges or ignoring loss and tragedy. Rather, thankfulness is an intentional focus on what is going well and recognizing the gifts we’ve been given in life. To put it in religious terms, it’s about counting your blessings.

Grateful for Love of Neighbor

Gean LeVar of Glendale, Arizona, had nothing to be grateful for. Not only had her husband of 58 years just died, the police deemed her house to be in such disrepair that they condemned it, leaving Gean with nowhere to go. That’s when her neighbor, Carmen Silva—who barely knew Gean at the time—stepped in.

As reported by *CBS News*, Carmen and her husband invited Gean to move in with them and their eight children. Though space was tight, the Silvas eagerly made room for one more, treating Gean like an “adopted grandmother.” Carmen explained, “I’ve always taught my kids to take care of their elders.”

In another expression of neighborly kindness, the nonprofit group Operation Enduring Gratitude, which helps Arizona veterans and their families, heard Gean’s story and rebuilt her house. Though Gean moved back into her own home, she remains eternally grateful for the blessings of kindness she was shown by the Silvas, who she now considers her adopted family.

Gratitude Gets Easier with Age

A sense of gratitude may be a particularly powerful tool for helping older adults face the challenges of aging. When confronted with illness or the need to depend on others for help, the choice to

respond with gratitude can create a sense of control, according to researchers. People who are happy tend to have better health, live longer, and have more meaningful relationships. While gratitude and happiness aren’t specifically dependent on one another, the two often go hand-in-hand. The good news for those who aren’t inclined to always look on the bright side is that gratitude can be practiced and cultivated—and it gets easier to do it, the older we get.

An article by Wency Leung in the *Globe and Mail* notes that changes in our brains as we age result in people reacting more to positive information than negative information. Therefore, senior citizens are more inclined to recognize the good things in their lives. Part of that, according to psychologists, is due to life experience. We learn that happiness and success are not simply handed to us, so we become more sensitive and appreciative of the good, partly because of encountering sad and difficult circumstances. So, if our brains are more inclined to focus on the positive as we age, how can we build up that gratitude muscle? Neuroscientist Christina Karns offers some suggestions:

- **Document It**—journaling the things you are grateful for every day and then going back over your notes (and even sharing them with others!) is a great way to notice and appreciate what is going well.
- **Choose Your Words**—people who report high gratitude tend to speak differently, using words like “blessed,” “lucky,” and “fortunate,” to describe their days and experiences. By making a choice to describe events with words of gratitude, it will reinforce your focus on what is going well.
- **Model It**—being grateful gets easier when you model the behavior. The more you intentionally do that, the more it will influence your outlook.

Aging with Purpose

Part of aging well is maintaining a healthy outlook. That means accepting limitations, but also being

Writing at *Aleteia*, Father Robert McTeigue, SJ, offers thoughts on growing in your faith, even in your senior years. He suggests some common ideas, such as counting your blessings, surrendering your illusions, and taking part in religious observances. He also offers a few other nuggets of wisdom. Among them:

- Be quick to forgive and to ask for forgiveness.
- Allow no room for resentment in your life—none. Resentment is a lethal toxin for the soul.
- The greatest enemy of love is selfishness.
- Don’t waste time!

appreciative of the gifts of age. Sure, you might not be able to ride a surf wave like a 20-year-old or go mountaineering with people in peak physical shape, but the wisdom, outlook, and experience that come with age have tangible benefits.

Author Marcy Cottrell Houle spoke to The Christophers radio show and podcast *Christopher Closeup* about her book, *The Gift of Aging: Growing Older with Purpose, Planning, and Positivity*. Marcy had cared for her parents as they endured illness and eventually passed away. But it wasn’t until she endured a serious injury herself that she realized she was entering her senior years.

After a bad fall in a parking lot which resulted in two broken arms, Marcy was laid up for months and unable to do simple things. The experience left her depressed and soon led her to think about the ways that people can stay healthy—mentally and physically—while getting older. She points out that a key factor to having a positive outlook on aging is having a sense of purpose. The secret? Have a goal higher than joy and your own enjoyment.

Marcy gleaned that pearl of wisdom from one of her interview subjects, Rabbi Josh Stampfer, who remained active at age 97 despite several health

issues. He told Marcy, "In all of us, there is an innate need for happiness, but happiness is not just based on good health. Not everyone has that...What I have found—and suggest to others—[is that] the way to be happy is to be good...When people do a good deed for others, they enjoy life more...Bringing happiness to others is the quickest way to have it yourself."

Helping others and contributing something worthwhile to their lives is a key factor in aging gratefully. As Marcy said, "These people [I interviewed] were given a gift of aging. They have made it into their 70s, 80s, 90s, and 100s, but they've made this time count. I want to make this time count too, not just living for me, but to make a difference. We have that opportunity. I think the world needs us."

Still Time for Change

We've all heard it: the pernicious myth that change and new experiences are only for the young. From expressions like, "He's set in his ways," to "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," it's easy for us to think that with age comes a hardening into a mold that was set long ago. One of the tricks of people who enjoy their age is not to fall into this trap! Change and growth are not only possible in your senior years, you'll find you have lost none of the exhilaration of discovery from your youth.

Author Xavier Patier penned an article on the website *Aleteia* that highlights the benefits of being

older. "We enjoy the freedom of not having to prove anything," he writes. "Old age is the most open age of all, the age of conversion of heart."

In retirement, we no longer have to focus on what we do for a living, but can reinvent ourselves around our passions—and in those passions (gardening, cooking, serving others or good causes, just to name a few), we can benefit others and continue to make our mark.

Growing in Your Faith

Focusing on your faith is an important component to growing older with grace and gratitude. Author Maria Morera Johnson writes on the *Catholic Mom* website about her experiences as a mother, first of young children and then, as the years went by, of adult daughters. She points out that while the demands of the years with younger children were exhausting, with hindsight, she can see they were happy and fulfilling. As her children grew and her role as a mother changed, Maria adopted a perspective on her faith that moved beyond simply wanting to teach her little ones about God.

Maria observes: "I need to tend to my own continuing spiritual well-being. To seek those groups of women with whom I can share these experiences, with whom I can pray, and learn, and let down my hair, and even explore new devotions and new experiences related to growing in relationship with Christ. I am still wearing many hats: wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, sister, aunt. I wear other hats, too: editor, writer, teacher, friend, whatever-somebody-needs-today. But always I am Maria, child of God."

Growing older brings new challenges, but also benefits and blessings. In looking at this season of life with gratitude, focusing on the good gifts we have to share and the opportunities we have to make life better for others, we can live our golden years with purpose and confidence.


**"It's better to light one candle
than to curse the darkness."**

A non-profit, founded in 1945 by Father James Keller, M.M., The Christophers encourages people to change the world for the better. Donations are tax-deductible. News Notes are published 10 times a year. Single copies are free.

President: Mary Ellen Robinson
Editor-in-Chief: Tony Rossi

The Christophers

264 West 40th Street, Suite 603, New York, NY 10018
212-759-4050, ext. 241

mail@christophers.org • www.christophers.org

Christopher News Note 669

ISBN: 8755-69601

**"Wrinkles should merely indicate
where smiles have been."
—Mark Twain**