

RISING TO THE HAPPINESS OF THE LIFE OF THE SAINTS

By KAY COLE

WHEN I WAS ASKED FOR SOME REFLECTIONS on 'the spiritual challenges of the later years' I immediately thought that the 'later years' part of the request presented no problem at all. It is well over sixty years since I brought joy to my mama by being the girl she had hoped for.

The 'spiritual challenges', however, took more thinking about. As I get older and the time shortens, I often pray a prayer written by Michel Quoist which goes like this: 'I am not asking you, Lord, for time to do this and that, but for your grace to do conscientiously, in the time that you give me, what you want me to do'.

As it appears that the Lord (or at least the Lord's servants at *The Way*) want me to write down some reflections on spiritual challenges, I asked the holiest and oldest friend I have for some ideas. He is a Franciscan friar of nearly eighty years of age who told me that he longs and longs for God – to see him face to face at last. In case it sounds as though he sits all day in the chapel longing and longing for God, I should tell you that our conversation took place in the sun surrounded by gum trees, birds and the stillness of the countryside, and as we talked we drank good red wine. These reflections are the fruit of our conversation, and a celebration of the lives of the many friends whom we visited in our conversation.

We agreed that the greatest spiritual challenge is the searching for, the finding, and then the building of the kingdom of heaven. Other challenges fit into this. They include accepting the bodily failings of the later years, the changing circumstances of life, and the feelings of uselessness which follow retirement or the independence of a grown family. It is a challenge to accept the status of old age in a society where the wrinklies are of no account, and where we have to accept that never again will we be able to run for a tram. Violet, an independent 86-year-old friend, had a stroke and after some months was able to go home, but was very frail indeed. She told my sister that she simply could not believe that she would never again, all by herself, be able to

drive to her favourite shop, pick a new dress, try it on, and take it home. 'Never again' is so final.

We know that the kingdom of heaven is within. We know it – and we play lip service to it. If we are lucky we realize, as age slows us down and leaves us with more living in this world behind us than in front of us, that what is most important is what God wants, to do things God's way, and to see life through God's eyes. In racing parlance we older ones are making the dash up the straight, but the final sprint is not much good if we have not kept up during the middle part of the race.

As we talked about this, I remembered Ursula, a woman whom I visited years ago in Nazareth House, a home for the elderly. She was not old but was incapacitated by motor neuron disease and was in Nazareth House to give her carer a short respite. Poor woman – nothing and nobody suited her. She could not listen, kept moving her electric wheelchair around to find a corner where we could be away from 'those others'. One place we visited, but did not settle at, was a mezzanine floor above and to the side of the sanctuary in the chapel, an ideal place to sit in peace looking down at the tabernacle, lost in the kingdom within. But to be able to do this takes preparation.

After this visit, I was so impressed by the terrors of growing old, of losing physical capacity without having sought for and found the kingdom within, that I nearly drove two of my fellow-workers away from their work by going on and on about the importance of our interior life. But I said then, and I still believe, that we are challenged deeply to realize that our interior life is our real life and is not affected by our circumstances.

Under the gum trees, my friend and I also talked about Aileen, a middle-aged woman who had a severe stroke and for some considerable time could not see, speak or move. But eventually she regained her speech, sight and quite a lot of movement. The striking thing is that while she lay there, unable to see, speak or move, she could hear and think and pray. But although she was alive, her interior life was not enough for her, and she prayed and fought her way back to movement and to living physically. We are body and soul, and perhaps it is not altogether true to say that our interior life is not affected by our circumstances.

To the theological-college library, where I was working, used to come Kevin, one of the students. He was an ex-Army officer, and had suffered from MS for some years. A large, serene man, he was confined to a wheelchair, and accepted help from others with perfect courtesy and simplicity. One day he asked me if I would like to join him in

prayer for half an hour or so a week, and perhaps we could get others to form a prayer group. The secret of his serenity became apparent. He taught us to relax our muscles and for half an hour to listen to God in silence. He told me that he could not endure his physical life without that interior listening to God. His serenity and acceptance of his physical limitations came from his prayer, which he had learned to be a matter of listening to God. He said that it is not what we say and do but what we are that counts.

If we could meet the challenge of realizing this and of putting ourselves at God's disposal, we might be far happier in later years when it is natural to look back on our life. It is a challenge to accept inactivity, not accomplishing as much as one did in earlier days, especially if one is bored by bingo or evergreen club outings. It is also a challenge to look forward – instead of back in regret, rearranging in our minds the actions of our lives as they might have been. For this reason, amongst others, it is important to live in the present.

We reflected, too, how noticeable it is that people become 'more so' as they age. If a person has been contented, and not envious of others during life, the later years will bring a placid acceptance of wrinkles, arthritis and deafness instead of a bitter comparison with those who seem better endowed, less arthritic, wrinkled or deaf. The later years hold more challenge for those of us who have been the bossy and competent organizers and enthusiastic helpers of this world, as it is harder for us to accept a life where others do and we are left to a contemplative life where there is only God and me. So it is a challenge to accept our lack of importance, and to recognize that the family, the job or the parish no longer depends on me.

An example of someone who made the best of her last months of life was Kitty, my 90-year-old friend, who went overnight – without warning or preparation – to live at Nazareth House. A year previously, she had buried her only child, with whom she had lived, and her only grandchild moved into the house to live with her. When she realized that she would be at Nazareth House for the rest of her life, she felt guilty about leaving her granddaughter on her own. However, when she understood that the arrangement was better for her granddaughter, she settled down to make the best of it. She never complained, took an interest in everyone else and soon knew everyone's name. After she had been there for some months, she told me that she had finally noticed something which I had probably known all along – that most of the ladies were there because they were dotty!

By that time I could see that she had become everybody's favourite. I used to take lunch to her on Tuesdays, as I had done since her daughter

died. The nuns, who found her a delight to care for, encouraged me to come, and especially to bring my labrador whom Kitty loved. As soon as I appeared I was warmly welcomed by everyone I met, because they knew I was Kitty's friend. We ate our lunch in a sitting-room away from the main dining-room and as soon as the others had finished their lunch they came to join us. She was interested in them all – telling me little bits of news about them, getting them to show me new bits and pieces of clothing and trinkets. I could see in their eyes their affection for her.

Kitty was an energetic person. She had been a caterer for most of her life, and so enjoyed cooking and shopping for food. Although she could not see very well in later years, she would peer at the butcher's cuts of meat, discarding what she did not think came up to scratch. The butcher did not mind because it was obvious that she knew what was good, better and best. She would spend a day cooking, then freeze the results so that, with the help of the microwave, she could always produce a delicious meal at a moment's notice. There was nothing she liked better to do. But she let all that go without a qualm. I suppose there were lots of inward qualms but she never let them show. On one dreadful day for me, she was in bed drifting in and out of consciousness, and when she recognized me she said she was going to die soon. I asked her if she minded, and she said, 'Not a bit', in her old decisive way. As she had lived her active years, so she lived her last days.

These days in countries like Australia it is common to live to 80, 90 is merely a longer than average life, and to live to 100 is unusual but not unknown. My mother, who was born at the end of the nineteenth century, told me about her visits to her grandmother as a small girl. Grandmother seemed to do nothing at all but sit by the fire, dressed in deep black, being waited on by all the household. One had to be very good and very quiet when near her because she was an old lady. Actually, as my mother realized later on, she was only in her forties. She was a widow who had borne eleven children under spartan conditions. Nowadays her later years would probably be her eighties, not her forties, and she would live them very differently. Would her spiritual challenges be the same? As my old friend and I talked about her we recognized that one of the hardest spiritual challenges today is to face being thought a nobody – just a nuisance. My great grandmother probably did not feel a nuisance, she certainly was not a nobody in her household, and throughout her whole adult life her household had been her world.

It is a challenge to accept the feeling of uselessness which can accompany retirement. These days it is usually a long retirement

because, although people live much longer, the age of retirement does not advance with their life expectations. It is a time for reappraisal, a time to change and to reassess the values by which we have lived our lives. This is a real challenge in the later years, for most of us come to hate change as we grow older.

Many old people find it a challenge just to go to Sunday mass. Most have just got used to the vernacular, the priest facing the people, women distributing communion standing beside the priest, and the kiss of peace. But then they encounter inclusive language and welcomers at the door! In an effort to build community and have more people taking part in the liturgy, our parish introduced the ministry of welcome in our parish. At first it was not well received by the older parishioners. One young person, after smiling happily and greeting a parishioner of mature years, distributed a hymn-book and the parish paper. She was crushed by being informed that the recipient had been in the parish for thirty-four years and certainly did not need welcoming from anyone. Most, however, rose to the challenge and now enjoy the change of actually smiling at fellow Catholics attending the same mass on a Sunday morning, and even of speaking to them and greeting them during mass with a word and gesture of friendship.

It remains a challenge to avoid thinking that the world used to be better, that our way of thinking is right and that the younger ones are on the wrong track if they differ from us. Of course, older people have always complained about the young. But now there does appear to be less respect for, and acknowledgement of, age and experience than in previous generations. The idea that older people should radiate wisdom and hope to younger generations seems laughable. Is this because older people do not have wisdom and hope, or is it because younger ones do not think they have? The elderly remember that as students we were thought by those around us to know nothing, and were there to learn. When middle-aged we faced the fact that it was now commonly accepted that middle-aged people were over the hill and useless. Now that we are no longer middle-aged, what remains to be accepted? The benefits of euthanasia?

One of my aunts, widowed when she was thirty-five, lay dying at the age of eighty-four. One of her chief worries was the thought of meeting her husband, for he had known her as a beautiful young woman, and not the lined and white-headed old woman she had become. Would he know her? Would he still love her? It did not seem, at first, to make much impression on her to point out that she was about to leave her body behind and it was her beautiful soul that he would meet – after all

he was no longer body and soul, having left his body behind many years before. But when she grasped this, her dear old face lit up and she murmured that she had not thought of that and looked forward, quite happily, to meeting him again in God.

Our thoughts turned from my aunt to the Communion of Saints. We asked where those who have transferred from the Communion of Saints on earth to join the Saints in heaven actually are. We concluded that they are in another dimension, but are still with us. For the kingdom of heaven is within. Years ago a friend of mine gave me a vivid illustration of that other dimension. Suppose that a baby, while still in the womb, could talk to its mother. It asks questions about what its surroundings are like outside. The sun is pouring through a window in front of mother (and baby). But mother is unable to describe the window and the light in a way that baby could understand because the baby has no terms of reference, knowing only darkness.

We are like the baby. We are unable to comprehend the light even though it is around us, and we will not do so until we leave our body behind. Dying is not going up and away. It is perhaps best described as slipping sideways – we are still there, but in another dimension. The idea and knowledge of the Mystical Body of Christ, the strong links between those on earth and those with God, is very comforting in the later years when death cannot be far away. Evelyn Underhill wrote:

The real and vital communion between souls is invisible and spiritual – so deeply buried that we can think of it as existing unbroken below the changeful surface of daily life. External contact is at best only the outward sign of a more profound inward grace – that mysterious interpenetration of all living souls which is the secret of the Communion of Saints.¹

Transferring from the Communion of Saints of earth to join the Saints in heaven becomes more attractive when we are older, as so many of our relatives and friends are amongst their ranks. I look forward to meeting St Joseph, St Teresa, John XXIII and Julian of Norwich, but even more strongly to meeting my mother again.

We also spoke of the challenge of loneliness. There is no doubt that the later years can bring loneliness. But my friend put it beautifully into perspective by saying that loneliness is like a door. I can shut myself in, away from God and others and away from my own true self. My true self is loved by God and is, in God's open eyes, a person worth living, dying and rising for. So the spiritual challenge is to open that door and keep it open. How to do this? It is being aware of the reality of God's

presence, aware that I am loved by God, of my own worth and of the worth of others who are also loved by God.

We had begun our conversation by saying that the greatest spiritual challenge is to search for, to find, and then to build the kingdom of heaven. The awareness of the kingdom within is the awareness of God's loving presence. Prayer is the way that we become aware of God's presence – and in the later years prayer becomes, perhaps not easier, but simpler. It is, after all, not what we say and do but what we are that counts. It was always like that but when we were younger and active it was not so apparent. When we are able to do nothing else, we can radiate God's love by sitting in a chair doing nothing else. We need to 'base our life on prayer making it part of ourselves, so that after much practice and persistence we can hope to participate in the mind of God and so see things his way'.² It is through us that God reaches the world; he uses us if we place ourselves at his disposal. 'God himself completed the work of transformation, his love for his creation is unconditional and does not depend on its failures or successes.'³ So it is important to accept this and live in the present, not reliving the past. For our generation it is not easy to accept the bit about failure, because we were taught that we would have to account for every idle word, a doctrine that has given me many uneasy moments!

Is fear of death a challenge to be met in later life? My friend did not think so – he longs for death – but I, a decade younger and still struggling, was not so sure. It is change that frightens one. I was reminded of a story that my mother-in-law used to tell me about an old man in her village who was dying. He was very uneasy. He said that the only time he had left the village was many years before when he had gone steam-ploughing in the fields about eleven miles away, and he did not like it. He was glad to get home. But the journey which now faced him was much longer and there was no return. We, of course, are used to a much wider world, but still . . .

Trust is always important, of course, but it becomes vital at the approach of death. Not long before she died, my mother said to me that she had had a good innings in life and she was not frightened to go because, she said, God had always looked after her in any crisis in her life and she supposed that he would at the end. Teilhard de Chardin has written a lovely prayer, part of which goes as follows:

When the painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old: and above all at the last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the great unknown forces that have formed me: in all these

dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is you (provided only that my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate the very marrow of my substance and bear me away with yourself.⁴

NOTES

¹ Lucy Menzies (ed), *Life as prayer, and other writings of Evelyn Underhill* (Harrisburg PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), p 56.

² John Dalrymple, *Longest journey: notes on Christian maturity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), p 16.

³ Mary d'Apice, *Noon to nightfall* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1989), p 233.

⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le milieu divin: an essay on interior life* (London: Collins Fontana, 1964), pp 89-90.