

# The Soul of Aging

## Introductory Session

### Calling in the Ancestors: Visions of Aging

The Gift of Hospitality: Welcome, Opening Reading & Silent Reflection  
**(Time: 25 minutes)**

Since this is our first meeting, I want to take a few minutes to welcome you to *The Soul of Aging*. During this session, we will introduce our topic, as well as discuss what we call the Touchstones, which lay out how we interact with one another when we use the process entitled circles of trust. A circle of trust is a highly structured, yet open format where the program is not designed to give you answers, but to evoke from you your own meaning and wisdom, the voice of your soul.

Since the language of the soul is indirect and metaphorical in nature, in circles of trust we use “third things,” such as poetry, stories, music and art that center on the beauty and power of metaphor and imagery, and which serve the soul's search for meaning. The metaphors and poetry offer images and archetypes which speak deeply of the inner life, and thus create a worthy map of the terrain one crosses when working together in circles of trust, an approach developed through the Center for Courage & Renewal and based on the pioneering work of Dr. Parker J. Palmer. If you would like to immerse yourself in understanding this process as you are experiencing it in the program, please read *A Hidden Wholeness: a Journey Towards an Undivided Life*, by Parker J. Palmer, where he goes into great depth about these practices and the foundations and philosophy that inform them. **Note to leader:** You may want to have a copy of the book with you.

So, to begin our journey of exploring the spiritual dimension of aging, let's begin with an introductory reading, entitled “Aging With Courage & Wisdom.”

#### **Aging With Courage & Wisdom**

Caryl Ann Casbon

*Beautiful young people are accidents of nature,  
but beautiful old people are works of art.*

--Eleanor Roosevelt

When I am actively enjoying summer, kayaking on my favorite lake, or biking 20 miles in a day, I initially fail to notice the signs that summer is winding down: the grasses in the fields gradually turning brown, the shortening day light, the cooler nights. Aging snuck up on me in a similar fashion. The omens at first were subtle: my range of motion suddenly limited by arthritis in my hip, my inability to achieve a good night's sleep. My doctor begins sentences with, "Well, for someone your age..." The work projects that once held meaning now begin to bore or feel burdensome as my colleagues retire and disappear. Time warps at hyper-speed when Christmas rolls around before I have even put up last year's gifts.

So much of how I organized my middle years no longer guides me, and I feel disoriented, like an adolescent, only in reverse. I am self-conscious about my body, discern an emerging sense of discrimination from society, and struggle with where my life will find purpose and empowerment outside of the work place. In a culture that values the three A's: *Achievement, Affluence and Appearance*, my age puts me adrift outside of the main stream, and even within myself, for I am embarrassed to admit I have internalized these prejudices and values. In a retreat that explored aging, I wrote a letter to God about my aging and was shocked to discover that I really don't trust God in this evening of my life. In fact, I have a lot of fear about aging.

At the same time, I experience my inner life calling me, discovering a deepening joy and capacity for interiority, for intuitive knowing through meditation, writing, and solitude. An emerging sense of freedom comes with no longer having my time organized around a work place. Deepening friendships and quality time with my partner and family fill my days with opportunities for savoring each encounter, heightened with the awareness of our finite time left together. "Mentoring moments" present themselves naturally, and I have time to offer my listening and experience to those who seek me out. Memories find me in this more spacious time zone, as I sort out the meaning of my history, stories, and experiences. It is a very rich time of life.

Clearly, moving into the elder years is an invitation that can only be met by drawing upon spiritual resources, community, and of course, the wisdom of the many who have gone before us! Eric Ericson recommends that adolescents take a "time out," a "moratorium" to discover who they are before settling on identities, commitments, and life-directions; the autumn of life also cries out for a "gap year," a place to pause, regroup, and reflect on where our aging is calling us now. In this guide, we summon this wisdom for creating a container for inner work where we can discover

the many paradoxes and invitations of this important time in the human journey.

There is no formula for how to “age well,” no fail-safe method for avoiding the changes, losses, and natural consequences of growing older. However, as in all stages of life, there is always the invitation to grow, learn, discover meaning, cultivate the inner life, and give back to the world in ever renewing ways, our gifts and wisdom. May your time in this program, in the company of others, offer you an opportunity to discover what it means to you to “Age With Courage and Wisdom.”

After reading aloud the reflection, invite participants to take ten minutes and journal on:

- ❖ What ‘signs of aging’ have you become aware of?
- ❖ Are there attitudes, prejudices or values, which you have you internalized?
- ❖ What callings or deepening are you experiencing?
- ❖ What questions do you bring to this program regarding your journey with aging?

#### Grace in Community: Reading the Touchstones (10 min.)

Before we share some of our thoughts with each other, we are going to introduce what we call the Touchstones for circles of trust; you will have many opportunities to review the Touchstones again, for they outline for us how we relate to one another in this process.

When we read the Touchstones in a circle of trust, we are establishing the ground rules. For this first session, we recommend you give each person a copy of the Touchstones, to be brought back for each session. Read them aloud to the group, making a statement that these Touchstones have been carefully designed to make it clear how we interact with one another, and ourselves, in a circle of trust. We also recommend that each person purchase a notebook to keep the handouts together. It takes awhile to understand the Touchstones, even longer to practice and embody them. When we are faithful to these Touchstones, the space between us remains safe for the soul to find voice, and prevents behaviors that are inappropriate and invasive to one another. Often when trust breaks down, it is because the group is not following one or more of the Touchstones. These will be read or discussed at each session:

## Circle of Trust® Touchstones

- **Extend and receive welcome.** People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.
- **Be present as fully as possible.** Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
- **What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.** This is not a "share or die" event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.
- **Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.** Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.
- **No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no correcting each other.** This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the "helping professions." But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.
- **Learn to respond to others with honest, open questions** instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help "hear each other into deeper speech."
- **When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.** If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.
- **Attend to your own inner teacher.** We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- **Trust and learn from the silence.** Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After

someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.

- **Observe deep confidentiality.** Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.
- **Know that it's possible to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed** when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

### Meeting on Sacred Ground: Check-ins (30 min.)

Invite participants (who are willing) to say their names and offer an insight from their reflections from the journaling as a way of checking in with each other. Remind them that this is not "share or die" so if they are not ready to share, that is ok. During this time, since the group is not familiar with honest, open questions, we simply listen quietly to one another. You can note that in a circle of trust, we usually check in from a grounded, quiet place that doesn't reference our roles or titles, but entails sharing that has meaning for us. We never march around the circle but let people enter when they are ready. The leader can begin with their sharing first in order to model how it works.

### Deep Speaks to Deep: Calling in the Ancestors: Visions of Aging (75 min.)

Begin this session by reading the following quote and then the poem.

"We do not need formulas or rigid models to follow (for aging);  
we need to be drawn into a common process of search  
that will suggest new ways of being."

Mary Catherine Bateson  
*Composing a Further Life*

### **Prayers Like Shoes**

by Ruth Forman

I wear prayers like shoes

pull em on quiet each morning  
take me through the uncertain day

don't know  
what might knock me off course

sit up in bed  
pull on the right  
then the left  
before shower before teeth

my mama's gift  
to walk me through this life

she wore strong ones  
the kind steady your ankles  
i know  
cause when her man left/her children  
gone/her eldest son without goodbye  
they the only ones keep her  
standing

i saw her  
still standing

mama passed on  
some things to me  
ma smile sense a discipline  
ma  
subtle behind

but best she passed on  
*girl you go to God*  
*and get you some good shoes*  
*cause this life ain't steady ground*

now i don't wear hers  
you take em with you you know  
but I suspect they made by the same company  
pull em on each morning  
first the right then the left

best piece of dress  
i got

After reading the poem, ask someone in the group to read it again, and then, invite the group to discuss the poem. Begin the discussion with, "How does this poem speak to you?" When we "unpack" a poem in a circle of trust, we share our insights into the circle, but we don't debate what the

others say. We speak for ourselves into the center of the circle, as our Touchstone names. If it takes awhile to get this going, the leader may want to share her or his insights first to show how it is done. **(15 min.)**

**Reflection Time:** When we enter a new stage of life, we often look to those who go before us. Our parents, grandparents, bosses and friends give us models of how to age, some positive, some models we want to avoid. **(15 min.)**

Invite the group to take fifteen minutes and journal on the following questions:

- ❖ When you consider your parents and grandparents, what do you remember about how they negotiated their elder years? Are there some sayings you remember them using? What messages and models did they offer that you either want to follow, or not?
- ❖ Who is a chosen model for aging, someone you would like to be like in your late adulthood? Write about that person and any story that captures their essence.

**Pair & Share:** Take five minutes each and share what you discovered from your models of aging with a partner. **Note to leader:** Signal when five minutes is up and it is time to change places. **(10 min.)**

**Large Group Sharing:** Open up the conversation so that whoever wants to share may do so with the large group. **(20 min.)**

Amen, So Be It: The Closing Circle **(10 min.)**

We always end a circle of trust with a closing circle and grace note. Each person is invited to name aloud what the session has meant to them, an insight they gained about themselves, where they were challenged, or what they are grateful for.

**Note to leader:** We suggest you begin this sharing and model how to participate in a closing circle. When the sharing is finished, read aloud the following grace note.

## Grace Note

### **Loving Kindness Prayer for Aging Well**

from *Aging as a Spiritual Practice* by Lewis Richmond

There are many forms of the Loving Kindness prayer. Some Buddhist teachers hold retreats where participants repeat the prayer in silence to themselves for hours or days. Profound experiences can occur. This prayer is suitable for every circumstance—for people who are dying as well as those who are healthy, for those young as well as old, for people in pain and suffering and people who feel quite content. Thus it can be a useful resource for us as we age. Whatever circumstance, whatever our age or state of health, we can wish happiness for ourselves and others.

In *The Soul of Aging*, we will end each session with this prayer. Please close your eyes and take in the intention of these words:

As I grow older, may I be kind to myself;  
As I grow older, may I accept joy and sorrow;  
As I grow older, may I be happy and at peace.

As each of us grows older, may we be kind to ourselves;  
As each of us grows older, may we accept joy and sorrow;  
As each of us grows older, may we be happy and at peace.

As all beings grow older, may they be kind to themselves;  
As all beings grow older, may they accept joy and sorrow;  
As all beings grow older, may they be happy and at peace.

Before ending this first session, please take a few minutes to schedule your next session, and read the “Extending the Learning” suggestions below.

### Extending the Learning

The writers of this guide humbly acknowledge the complexity of this study, and the limits to how much we can accomplish in ten, 2 ½ hour sessions. In that spirit, we want to make some recommendations for extending the inner work outside the confines of the group time. It is, of course, in your hands how much you want to participate and accomplish.

1. It would be very beneficial to buy a notebook or journal to accompany this program and to reflect, after each session, on what you read, discussed, and wrote about during the session.



Write down questions that are coming up for you and deepening insights as you have time to consider the themes.

2. We suggest that you find a conversation partner, either from within the group, or someone you live close to, and share what you are learning about yourself in this program.
3. After this first session, write a dialogue through letters to God about how you are feeling about your aging process and your life at this time. As you begin this program, this is a good time to consider how your faith journey informs your experience. A "Letter to God" is a very simple way to begin this reflection. Begin the letter with....

Dear Holy One (or insert how you address the Divine),

It is me, (your name), and I need to have a perfectly honest conversation with you about what I am experiencing as I grow older. I have some complaints, questions, and wonderings I need to share with you. What do you have to say about this?

Dear (fill in your name) I am so glad you are writing me. I can tell you are struggling....(and continue the dialogue from here).

4. There is a rich body of new research on aging, much of it spiritual in nature, much of it coming from the "Baby Boomer" generation. Since this program can only go so far, we highly encourage each of you to choose one or more books to supplement your study, and at the end of this series, we will offer a circle of trust format for you to share what you have learned with one another from going deeply into one topic. We will provide a list of possible books to choose from, or you may know of one you want to read as well.

**Note to leader:** Handouts for each session accompany this curriculum. There is also a worksheet on the following page that you may use as a sort of Cliffs Notes to use while leading. As a group leader, you can discern what you wish to copy for participants. If everyone in your group has email, you can also email the whole session to the group, and they can refer to these handouts on their computers.

## The Soul of Aging Leader Worksheet

1. The Gift of Hospitality: Welcome, Opening Reading, & Silent Reflection (Start time \_\_\_\_)

2. Grace in Community: Reading the Touchstones (Time\_\_\_\_)

3. Meeting on Holy Ground: Check-ins (Time\_\_\_\_)

4. Deep Speaks to Deep: Taking the Theme Deeper (Time \_\_\_\_)

5. Amen, So Be It: The Closing Circle (Time\_\_\_\_)

6. Grace Note