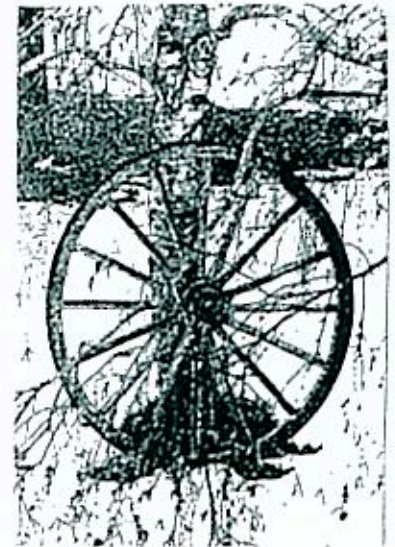


**Kennebec Valley Community College
Fairfield, Maine**

**MHT 116 – Mental Health and Aging
Dr. Robert L. Veon**



Adapted from AGING by Henri Nouwen

How do we see Aging? This what the large wagon wheel reclining against the old birch in the white snow teaches us by its simple beauty. No one of its spokes is more important than the others, but together they make the circle full and reveal the hub as the core of its strength. The more we look at it, the more we come to realize that we have only one life cycle to live, and that living it is the source of our greatest joy.

The restful accomplishment of the old wheel tells us the story of life. Entering into the world we are what we are given, and for many years thereafter parents and grandparents, brothers and sister, friends and lovers keep giving to us – some more, some less, some hesitantly, some generously. When we finally stand on our own two feet, speak our own words, and express our own unique self in work and love, we realize how much is given to us. But while reaching the height of our cycle, and saying with a sense of confidence, “I really am,” we sense that to fulfill our life we now are called to become parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, teacher, friends, and lovers ourselves, and to give to others, so that when we leave this world, we can be what we have given.

The wagon wheel reminds us that the pains of growing old are worthwhile. The wheel turns from ground to ground, but not without moving forward. Although we have only one life cycle to live, although it is only a small part of human history which we cover, to do this gracefully and carefully is our greatest vocation. Indeed we go from dust to dust, we move up to go down, grow to die, but the first dust does not have to be the same as the second, the going down can become the moving on, and death can be made into our final gift.

Aging is the turning of the wheel, the gradual fulfillment of the life cycle in which receiving matures in giving and living makes dying worthwhile. Aging does not need to be hidden or denied, but can be understood, affirmed, and experienced as a process of growth by which the mystery of life is slowly revealed to us.

It is this sense of hope that we want to strengthen. When aging can be experienced as a growing by giving, not only of mind and heart, but of life itself, then it can become a movement towards the hour when we say with the author of the Second Letter to Timothy:

As for me, my life is already being poured away as a libation, and the time has come for me to be gone. I have fought the good fight to the end, I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4: 6-7)

But still – without the presence of old people we might forget that we are aging. The elderly are our prophets, they remind us that what we see so clearly in them is a process in which we all share. Therefore, words about aging may quite well start with words about the elderly. Their lives are full of warnings but also hopes.

Much has been written about the elderly, about their physical, mental, and spiritual problems, about their need for a good house, good work, and a good friend. Much has been said about the sad situation in which many old folks find themselves, and much has been done to try to change this. There is, however, one real danger with this emphasis on the sufferings of the elderly. We might start thinking that becoming old is the same as becoming a problem, that aging is a sad human fate that nobody can escape and should be avoided at all cost, that growing towards the end of the life cycle is a morbid reality that should only be acknowledged when the signs can no longer be denied.

It is not difficult to see that for many people in our world, becoming old is filled with fear and pain. Millions of the elderly are left alone, and the end of their cycle becomes a source of bitterness and despair. There are many reasons for this situation, and we should try to examine them carefully. But underneath all the explanations we can offer, there is the temptation to make aging into the problem of the elderly and to deny our basic human solidarity in this most human process. Maybe we have been trying too hard to silence the voices of those who remind us of our own destiny and have become our sharpest critics by their very presence. Thus our first and most important task is to help the elderly become our teachers again and to restore the broken connections among the generations.

The elderly or our “elders” are truly our teachers. They alert us to the dangers of decisions which can affect the process of living toward fulfillment in later years. We are all in “the process of becoming” as Carl Rogers would say. The value of our process will be in direct degree to how much we learn to live. The elders can show us that growing older is not the pathway into darkness but the highway into light and enlightenment.

We want to talk about the elderly and their pilgrimage into aging so that we can appreciate and see them in a new way and they can help us, in turn, see ourselves, as we mature, with a new intimacy and understanding.

We want to talk about “positive aging” and “successful aging” which makes the maturing process not a reason for despair but a basis for hope, not a slow decaying but a gradual graduation, not a fate to be struggled with but a future to be welcomed and embraced.

We want to talk about aging and the need for caring and compassion. But it is a caring and compassion which begins with ourselves, so we are able to care and have compassion toward others. Nothing can happen through us, until it has happened to us. Real care and compassion takes place when we are no longer separated by fears, bias, and tradition, but when we have found each other on the common ground of the human condition, which is mortal but, therefore, very very precious.

