Sunday, September 18, 1983
GROW OLD ALONG WITH ME (How to Deal with Growing Older and with Others Who are Growing Older)
Psalm 90:1-4,12; Proverbs 3:13-18; Luke 2:52

Robert Browning wrote:

> Grow old along with me!
> The last of life, for which the first was made:
> Our times are in his hand
> Who saith, “A whole I planned,
> Youth shows but half; trust God; see all, nor be afraid!”

Recently a minister friend of mind sent me a copy of a letter of protest written to the poet Robert Browning about this poem. The letter said:

Dear Robert,

Were you an authority when you extended the invitation to grow old along with you? All these years we have followed that promise, “The best is yet to be” — a carrot dangling before us, just out of reach. Admittedly, life is quiet now, illusions gone, children grown, careers ended.

Did you take into account the wearied step, the slowed-down memory, bifocals, teeth not our own, and the arthritis? Oh, the arthritis! When comes “the best"? What is “the best"?

(Signed)
Miriam

This minister friend of mine also sent me the reply which someone else imagined that Robert Browning would’ve written. It said:

Dear Miriam:

Yes, I was an authority when I extended the invitation to “grow old along with me; the best is yet to be!”

If you have followed that promise, you’ve learned there is no frantic care in age. There is no rush to finish life today. You have accepted the chaos. You are a part of it.

Have you not found laughter in the souffle that falls? Or enjoyment with friends whose eyes, like yours, see no dust or litter in a happy house? You know now there is no disaster too tough for you that will not bring, after the tears, some joy.

And with the slowed-down memory, bifocals, teeth not your own, and the arthritis, oh, the arthritis! You have survived. This is the wonder you accept, walking the ice steps, gripping the railing tightly, on another winter’s day that freezes the metal pin in your hip. The wonder, that you are here — still!

(Signed)
Robert Browning

We all grow older, whether we like it or not. But we do not all grow in other ways. Some seem to stop growing in wisdom and maturity and understanding. That kind of growing is not automatic. A friend of mine who was in his late 60's was attending a conference for his own benefit when a younger man in his 30's asked him, "What are you doing in this group? You're so much older than the rest of us." Periodically during the session, the young man continued to ask the same question. My friend's reply was always the same, "I want to keep growing."

The younger person had not considered the fact that one could keep growing at any age. Later in the same meeting, the young man asked, "Do people of your age have fun anymore?" It became apparent that the young man was afraid of growing older, a fear that he continued to reveal during the conference by his questions.

One does not have to be a psychologist to see that a fear of aging abounds in our society. Society often looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret. But what is old age? Who can precisely define it? It varies according to individual and culture, and nowhere do we find any initiation ceremonies that confirm that status, unless it be a "retirement party."

For some, the feeling of advancing age can begin quite early. Here is an individual who realizes that he or she has taken the wrong road in life. Gifted artistically, under the pressure of family and for security, this person chose a safe career. Now he or she is bored, feels guilty and limited, and yet feels it is too late to make a change.

Or here is another person who realizes that she may not reach or realize a certain goal she has always had. She in on the plateau in her life's work, and from where she is, it looks as if the rest of life is all downhill. Then one can have a feeling of advancing age.

You can also feel very old if you do not learn how to accept and learn from failure and go on from there. Sometimes we live as if our whole life's success were absolutely tied to one particular event or one particular goal, and we act as if all else were but vain endeavor.

To some, prosperity or success brings on a kind of old age — premature, but false. Thus, we see people literally cave in the moment they achieve the goal which they had set for themselves, and for them life is over. The person with an empty life is already an old person, no matter what the chronological age.

When a person stops thinking, stops growing, stops searching for new interests, new meanings, becomes et in his or her ways, inflexible, then he or she is already old, and this happens to some at age 40 or sooner.

But most of us do have a fear of aging chronologically. What is it about aging that arouses our anxiety? In my own struggle with this question, several issues have emerged: 1) The aging process gradually, but insistently calls upon us to acknowledge our finitude. We are not immortal. Our lives as we know them here do come to an end.

2) A second issue is that of loss. By the time an individual has reached the age of 65, he or she will have experienced loss many times over. It is not uncommon to find longer-living people who have lost their jobs, their spouses, several brothers or sisters, their parents, their homes, many friends, in addition to the numerous losses in body function, such as hearing, eyesight, speech, or mobility.

Cumulative losses affect all of us. Some of the common reactions are denial, depression, anxiety, grief, rage, and a feeling of powerlessness. More than anything else, significant losses erode one's sense of control. As the illusions of invulnerability, built up over the years, comes tumbling down, anxiety is likely to increase.

The longer-living person's reaction to loss can also stimulate troublesome feelings among family members. Since the children of longer-living parents gradually become parents to their parents, this makes it all the more difficult for everyone. This reversal of roles can be burdensome and demanding. Some feel that they have to take on too much responsibility for the care of their parents, and others remain too distant.

I believe that adult children showing either extreme should be encouraged to talk and think through this issue with someone. Adult children who are confronted with the care of a long-living parent can react angrily to this intrusion in their life. The trigger for these feelings may have been the crisis with the parent, but the strong feelings are, more often than not, old feelings that have been there for years.

On the other hand, many adult children who have a health regard for the struggles of the longer-living parents may experience feelings similar to their parents, but for different reasons. For instance, they may feel powerless in trying to change the way the parents feel. They may experience grief at the loss of the parents they once knew, or they may feel great anxiety around the thought of losing this important person in their lives.

Another issue often connected with the longer-living is that of "confusion," or "senility." Unfortunately, the diagnosis of senility has been utilized in the last several decades to label longer-living persons and thus write them off as unreachable. This practice has also provided the longer-living individual with a convenient excuse or escape. For example, one may feign confusions, thereby establishing a defense against internal or external pressures. In this light, it can provide a safe haven in which the older person can escape the pain of loss.

Increasingly, research with the longer-living is demonstrating that much of the supposed confusion and disorientation is based more on psychological difficulties than physiological ones. The overwhelming loss experienced by the longer-living likely plays a significant role in forcing them to see the safety of confusion. Understanding this can help us in our relationships to the longer-living, and it will help us understand ourselves better, as well, as we continue to grow older.

As we continue to grow older, and as we relate to those who are much older than we, the issue of death and dying increasingly comes into focus. When we are young, we can find many reasons or excuses for putting off thoughts about dying. As we grow older, this self-deception become more difficult.

In the field of gerontology, the process by which the longer-living person faces death and assesses his or her life has come to be called "life review." The life-review process is a healthy and usually necessary one. In this assessment process unresolved conflicts get a new look. During this time, the older person may reminisce, tell the same story many times, fantasize about the old days, or simply withdraw physically.

Sometimes in this life-review process, the longer-living person will attempt to talk rather directly about his or her coming death. If Grandma says, "I'm getting very tired, and I think my time is near," the children are apt to say, "Don't talk like that! You're going to live a long time!" In such

an interchange, Grandma is making an attempt to talk openly about her dying. The children, on the other hand, are not ready to talk because of the fear and anxiety aroused in them. Hopefully, however, the children and others will instead pay attention that what Grandma is trying to say. It's a much healthier way to deal with growing older and with death.

"Grow old along with me; the best is yet to be." Our Christian faith underscores the fact that growing older does not mean that we stop growing — we can continue to increase in wisdom and in favor with God and others. But to keep growing means to practice "acceptance." So often we spend much of our time and energy trying to change the things that cannot be changed, and then we have no energy left for those things that can be changed.

I am now 52 years old — that cannot be changed. I need to accept my life at this age, and I also need to accept that I cannot do some of the things I used to do. Does this mean we are to accept everything? No! But it does mean I shouldn't waste my time wishing that I were 32 years old again. Acceptance means saying "yes" to yourself. The point is, we can accept our present age grudgingly or openly and joyfully. And it means accepting the age of those older than we also.

The point is, that we can accept our growing older grudgingly or openly. We can agree to learn to grow old, or we can try to stop time. A large part of the secret in learning to grow old joyfully is to realize that each stage in life has its benefits and its drawbacks. Many of the things we can no longer do in older age are in the field of action, not in that of spirit and mind. They belong to the order of doing, not that of being. One lives differently, but not less. We live differently as we grow older, but it is still fully life. Our interest and participation in the world need not diminish; they can increase, but it may be a different kind of interest and participation.

Part of the problem is within our culture. Our emphasis on so-called productive work makes old age seem like the end of life. Throughout human history, people have had to withdraw from some kinds of work in later years, but now they often withdraw into a vacuum. In many earlier societies, retirement from work meant entrance into the honored position of elder. One could give time to counseling the young, passing on traditions, and sitting in the seats of the venerated. Life did not end with retirement, but moved on to a new stage.

There is no such honored position for most of the longer-living in our way of life. We tend, instead, to honor the new and the youthful. Thus to many, old age has come to mean useless. We forget that there is a special kind of wisdom that comes only from age — a special kind of beauty, too — and we need to find ways to put that wisdom and beauty to use so that all of our lives can be enriched.

Our Christian faith underscores this. Thus, in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, there is an emphasis on wisdom. In the book of Proverbs we read earlier, "Happy is the person who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain for it is better than fain from silver and its profit better than gold."

But becoming wiser as we grow older is not automatic — it's a matter of choice. It we look at growing older as the enemy, we do not gain wisdom, we only become bitter and narrow.

There is one Biblical character from whose experiences we can learn much in this respect. If there ever was a powerful prophet, it was Elijah. With his own hand he destroyed 450 prophets of the false god Baal. For him the power of God burst forth in numerous miracles. At the height of his triumph, though threatened by Queen Jezebel, he goes off into the desert. Were all

those wonders for nothing? He is old; he is depressed; he hopes to die! It is a veritable crisis of retirement. Then God comes to meet him. God places the prophet in a cave and announces that he is about to reveal himself to him. A hurricane passes by, but God is not in it. An earthquake shakes the mountain, but God is not in it. Finally, Elijah hears the sound of a gentle breeze, and he recognized and veils his face.

Then God acts as a psychotherapist. He brings him out of his cave and helps him to confess his jealous zeal, his anger, and his aggressiveness against his people. God does not reproach him for having fought like a hurricane, or like an earthquake, or a fire. That was his vocation while he was still in the prime of life. But he invites him now to hand his sword over to Elisha, to designate him “as prophet to succeed you.” And God reveals to Elijah that he may still serve God in a quite different manner, with the softness of a gentle breeze.