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The Spirituality of Aging

By Rabbi Mitchell Feld, M. S. W.

The Spirituality of Aging. What is spiritual about aging? Who thinks of the diminishment of our youthful capacity as spiritually uplifting and joyous? Very few to be candid. However, there is a realm of spirituality depending upon the attitude we have as either the aging individual or the family member of an aging loved one.

My own experience.

I remember when my parents had begun their respective late stage aging and decline. I knew the time had come for us to talk about things that none of us wanted to speak about.

I embraced this as a time to build memories and enjoy them to the extent they were capable. My sense of humor and awareness that they had lived two wonderful lives without tragedy, had been in a 60 year marriage filled with their own kind of love, and that they were in their late 80's allowed me to let them be who they were 'most' of the time.

I learned a whole new respect for who my parents were and what their rights were to live as they chose. I learned what issues were truly worth struggling with and most were not. My spiritual awareness of this allowed me to let them be as they were and not as I would have them.

My Dad was approaching his 89th Birthday and my Mother was constantly nagging him about not eating salty, fatty or sweet foods. What fun was it to be blind, deaf and sick if he couldn't eat those foods? That is the spirituality of aging; merging ourselves into the facts, emotions, meaning and soul of our loved ones. It took me a while to grasp the spiritual, holy and **humorous** moments we could share during these times and there were many. Allow yourself to find yours and you find balance in your journey.

My Mom had emphysema and struggled with her breathing and stamina, yet she did what others thought she should not; move furniture, laundry, yoga and more. Her spirituality was her acceptance that when she was done with each of these behaviors she would spend the rest of the day on the respirator. The other half of her spirituality was knowing that the day was going to come when she would want to do these things and would not be able to. My spirituality was letting her do as she pleased as I knew that I was not 86, did not have what she had and had no

clue what she truly felt like.

Did I rejoice over this? No, but I respected her right to choose her journey as she chose, not as I would have it. It was not my right to make these choices. This was her life and my soul needed to merge with hers and find joy in her.

Alice, my wife, and I learned much about ourselves in this journey to integrity with my Mom and Dad and as we commence a new journey with her parents, the merger has already begun.

Please do not believe that finding the spirituality of aging means that you will always feel good with the discovery. It is truly a mixed bag. Part of the journey will fill the heart and soul with joy and laughter while others will cause you madness and still others agony.

The one constant throughout the search for serenity in your loved ones' aging process, is your personal integrity in knowing that you have done everything you could while they were still living so that you never have to look back and wish you had done something you did not because of a historical resentment or petty reason.

If you can do that, you will have merged your innermost self with theirs and you will have respected their aging process, listened to the rhythms of their cadence, sat with the silences as well as the maddening outbursts of irrationality or the moments they did not know who you were, accepted the honor of their final journey and, **my friends, that is the ultimate spiritual act - the unconditional acceptance of those we love or hate the most.**

If you are a child of aging parents, I urge you to work at educating yourself about aging and see the joy, honor, horrors and beauty of loving, laughing with, crying and caring for your parents. Spend time in their comfort zones, speak to them as often as you are able to, involve their grandchildren in the aging journey, speak with your Rabbi, Priest, Reverend or other Spiritual Leader about your parents, grandparents or other loved one's legacies and support your spouse by helping with the other's parents as the 'button pushing' will diminish.

The greater your acceptance and respect for those that are aging and in decline, the greater your joy and spirituality will find you.

I wish you joy and warmth in your journey.

Rabbi Mitchell Feld is a modern and independent Rabbi who counsels aging adults and families, writes and speaks on aging and consults extensively to the aging industry.