

Act your age

During the past two years of retirement I have learned and enjoyed a few things. First of all, I discovered after 40 years what it is like to be part of your own family again, to be there to celebrate family birthdays, to enjoy Christmas, Easter and other holidays with family; to have a chance to indulge again in a farming environment, even as a “gentleman farmer;” to rediscover what it is like to serve as a priest in a community who knew you growing up and are not sure whether to call you “Michael” or “Fr. Michael;” to try one’s hand for the first time at organic gardening, turning over the receptive earth, planting adventuresome crops and anticipating their pregnancy and full term to grace the family dinner table.

My latest project is an ambitious one. Behind my home, there is a ½ acre of ground. A steep incline leads to it. Part of it contained my garden. The other part, I gave over to some hungry sheep but I didn’t like the sheep roaming into my “no go” areas so they were banned. Following discussions and advice, I hired a bulldozer and asked the driver to do a complete makeover of the place – room for an expanding vegetable garden, a lawn area, a terraced area covered with ground cover, room for some apple, pear, plum and gooseberry trees and some rustic paths.

As this project unfolds, fuelled by my expectations, I am drawn to a more mature relationship with Mother Earth. As a kid, it was a chore to hoe and weed; now, it becomes anticipated delight as I, in unison with nature, embrace the yearly cycles of dying and rising.

Now, in retirement, I don’t have to worry about schedules, appointments, collections to be taken up, meetings to attend, or new assignments. Instead, I am drawn deeper into the mystery of life as now experienced in my third age time of life.

Friends remind me that I am not as young as I used to be, that I could hurt myself with too strenuous work in nature. I am very much aware of their wisdom and concern but I am also aware of teachable moments never before experienced or learned.

Now, I no longer feel the need to succeed, having the answer, feeling guilty if I take time off. No longer do I feel straightjacketed by others expectations, role defining and lifestyle lived to this point,

Psychologist Carl Jung reminded us that what carried us through the morning part of our lives will not guide or satisfy us for the rest of the day because the questions we have to answer at the evening time of life are spiritual ones.

Spiritual writer, Joan Chittister reminds us of the kenosis that faces us in the evening twilight of life when she says, that “we cease to plunge headlong into every option, every event. Slowness becomes a virtue. We learn to live again, one activity at a time. Slowing down is the beginning of life. In the second half of life, everything we ever accumulated begins to disappear. We empty the cupboards. We strip and clear and bear the hollows of our tiny worlds till there is nothing left but the self, the memories, the footsteps of our lives. We find ourselves stripped of titles, and offices and importance. Feeling empty and vulnerable, we are cast adrift to contemplate what we have become and what we have done for others. Then, when it seems that nothing is right, we wake up one morning to our leaner, truer self. We are, we discover, now offered the prospect of doing the really important things we may have been too important to do before now.”

Now, as I sit back and ponder the rest of my journey, I prize wisdom more than knowledge, living more than life; silence more than busyness, letting go more than control; trust more than wanting to be right.

This time becomes a fertile time, both personally and in nature. As I engage in shaping and moulding my little corner of God’s garden, I know that, on a deeper level, the same God is moulding and shaping my inner garden. He is teaching me that, while age can make a person aged, the real challenge is to allow age to become honourable.