Journal of Population Ageing (2021) 14:411–423
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12062-021-09338-2

'Elderhood' and Sabbath Rest as Vocation: Identity, Purpose, & Belonging

Autumn Alcott Ridenour[1]

Received: 6 April 2021 / Accepted: 16 June 2021 / Published online: 19 July 2021
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2021

Abstract
Recognizing the challenges associated with aging in western culture and its particular vulnerability to despair, this paper turns to an Augustinian theological anthropology in conjunction with Geriatrician Louise Aronson's social and medical description of aging among the human life stages. With Aronson, an Augustinian anthropology critiques western assumptions that autonomy, self-determination, and productivity are the primary arbiters of value. Instead, an aging anthropology marked by dependent participation, meaning found through purpose aimed at Sabbath rest, and an identity held secure through communal belonging serves as an antidote to the challenges of modern aging that ends in worship and hope.

Keywords St. Augustine · Louise Aronson · Aging · Elderhood · Sabbath rest · Communal belonging

Are we measuring time – or is time measuring us? This appears to be the fundamental question at the heart of human aging. Technology writer Nicholas Carr describes the impact resulting from the invention of the modern clock in its ability to assess time with the illusion of control (Carr, 2011, 41). Control, efficiency, and productivity are the values most associated with the capitalistic spirit in the modern west with far-reaching impact given connections through a global economy. Recognizing the cultural priority of productivity, efficiency, and self-determination, perhaps it is not surprising that Simone de Beauvoir concludes *The Coming of Age* (1970) describing the onset of old age as worse than death itself. The result is one of seeming despair given the assault on elders' core identity rooted in free choice and the ability to exercise such choice. Coupled with this loss, comes social marginalization in which the aged are often no longer valued given their inability to produce and contribute to society in terms of net utility.

✉ Autumn Alcott Ridenour
aridenour1@gordonconwell.edu; autumn.ridenour@gmail.com

[1] Mockler Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, MA, USA

In recent decades, however, alternative voices write on the benefits of successful aging most associated with the right kind of diet, exercise, cognitive and physical capabilities as well as commodities purchased to ensure sustained freedoms that result in what might be called success (Rowe & Kahn, 1997, pp.433–440). The latter strategy also focuses on identity as valuable insofar as individuals achieve freedom, whether through continued work or purchasing power as consumers. At times, the successful aging movement acknowledges economic, social, and racial inequalities along with the importance of public provisions to broaden the distribution of resources to aid such inequities. These concerns were made all the more palpable in the midst of the COVID-19 global crisis in which inequities and disparities in health were exacerbated across economic and social strata not to mention the challenges associated with long-term care facilities (Aronson, 2020a). Such disparities merit attention as part of a broader conversation about restructuring in ways that provide greater dignity and social support for seniors (Moses, 2020).

Yet even behind contemporary concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic remain biases related to aging and its meaning. Focusing on successful aging often proves inapplicable for those more frail elder experiences exceeding 80 years of age, though variance exists among the health capabilities of individuals. Moreover, operating under the guise of successful aging often lurks larger biases within western culture in its tendency to elevate the young, autonomous, and able-bodied individual while ignoring or often denying aging and the frail elder years as part of human development still worth valuing (Aronson, 2019, pp.64–7).

Challenging such cultural biases on aging and western medicine, Geriatrician Louise Aronson (2019) redefines old age in her recent book *Elderhood*, by remembering the central role aging plays among the life stages in continuity with birth, adulthood, and even death. Reimagining life as one that involves aging toward death within its natural arc, Aronson shares many assumptions with a robust Christian theological approach to aging that might be described as movement toward Sabbath rest. Turning away from western culture's focus on the autonomous individual embodied through free choice, and instead, articulating a theological anthropology informed by St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354–430 CE), I describe aging persons as valuable in terms of participation in the divine life with God and others through vocation (Ridenour, 2018). To communicate a renewed vision of elderhood that coincides with aging as vocation, I first identify agency as one of dependence and participation as opposed to autonomy as self-determination alone; second, I describe the teleological aim at Sabbath rest involving purpose and change; and finally, I consider the significance of belonging to God and community, most palpably seen through a life of worship and virtue through practices in religious liturgy and hope.

Identity: Dependent, Participatory Agency

Louise Aronson's recent book *Elderhood* challenges existing views of aging both in western culture and medicine. Aronson (2019) opens her volume on elderhood describing an exercise with medical students responding to the term "old" as opposed to "elder." With the term "old," came more pejorative descriptions

such as "sad," "stubborn," or "lonely," and even "smelling of mothballs and stale smoke," as opposed to more positive descriptions associated with the term "elder," including, "respect," "leader," "experience," "power," or "money" (p.5). Despite this small exercise, Aronson says "[The] idealistic students…define old with negatives because that is our culture's prevailing view. At this point in history, it's also the prevailing view on the planet. But of course this singular negative vision of old age doesn't tell the whole story" (p.6). Recognizing the dual responses to the term elder in this small exercise, Aronson laments medical and social attitudes that overlook positive approaches to aging in practice. The goal of her book is to unearth these biases while posing an opportunity to rethink the significance of the final stage of life she calls elderhood.

But in addressing elderhood, Aronson also criticizes the broader practices of American medicine at large. She says,

> In the twenty-first century, [medicine] worships machines, genes, neurons, hearts, and tumors but cares little about sanity, walking, eating, frailty, or suffering. It values adults over the young and old, and hospitals and intensive care units over homes and clinics. It prioritizes treatment over prevention, parts over wholes, fixing over caring, averages over individuals, and the new over the proven. Working as a geriatrician in such a system, I have had to wage daily, often fruitless battles against these structural forces to get my patients what they needed (p.7).

Considering medicine's focus on disease, symptoms, parts and cure as opposed to what she describes as health, illness, patients, and care, Aronson believes medicine holds an impoverished view of the patient as whole person, including the aging stage of life (Aronson, 2019, p.377).

Instead, Aronson privileges social approaches to health as opposed to technology-driven and "cure-based" medicine in which "Norm," (that is, the young or middle-aged adult) serves as the curricular assumption in medical education predating large portions of the American population living into their octogenarian years (pp.64–7; 341–4). For Aronson, understanding agency among elders begins with a relational vision of human development from birth to death that involves an interplay of dependence and independence (p.270).

Similarly, and even more pronounced, Augustinian theology in the Christian tradition presents a radical claim regarding agency. Individual identity, freedom, and agency stands vis-à-vis another with whom one exists in relationship (Augustine, 1991). Whereas philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas recognize the self in relation to Other, Augustinian anthropology recognizes oneself as creature in relation to the Creator, a dependent or contingent relationship by definition (Augustine, 1991; Levinas, 1999). St. Augustine, a central figure in western Christianity, constructs much of his theology and understanding of human nature in terms of creatures based on the narrative expounded in both literal and allegorical interpretations of Genesis 1–3. Former Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams describes Augustine's understanding of creation as one full of potential. For God to create something other than the Trinitarian self in its fullness is to create nascent beings

contingent on God for their existence and fulfillment, thereby creating a process of potential creatures moving toward actualization (Williams, 1994, pp.17–19). As creatures, dependence is integral to human identity. By depending and participating in the divine life, creatures are empowered to fulfill their purpose.

For Augustine, there are what Kathryn Tanner describes as two forms of participation – weak and strong participation (Tanner, 2010, pp.23–4; 27–8; 13). Our weak form of participation exists in our created capacities to image God given that they are contingent on the Creator by nature. Our strong sense of participation depends on our ongoing nearness, receiving and dwelling in God as the immutable good. This strong sense of dependence is available through union with Christ by the power of the Spirit (Tanner, 2010, p.25). This idea stands in juxtaposition to western culture's primary focus on autonomy in which an individual exits through self-enclosure or as a law unto herself, determining her own goals as well as the means to achieve such goals (Smith, 2009, p.175). As Tanner (2010) says, "Something images God because it comes from God. Indeed, it images God only by participating in God, that is, by continuing to receive what it is has from God. To be a creature just means to lead an insufficient life of oneself, to lead a continually borrowed life" (p.10).

In Augustine's *Confessions*, he considers his dependence on God from childhood to adulthood – even when he was unaware of God's presence (Augustine, 1991). His theocentric vision of the universe views his own life as dependent in addition to all contingent beings as dependent on God for life and sustentation. This participatory vision of creation is quite different than modern autonomy that sees life's value founded in the power of individual rational choice. Instead, Augustine's anthropology and morality depends on a benevolent divine being that originates, repairs, and fulfills this fundamental relational orientation through ongoing sustenance.

Scottish theologian and nurse John Swinton describes the problem of building our western anthropology on autonomy alone. He describes autonomy as it relates to the aging experience, particularly those patients diagnosed with dementia. Describing autonomy as illusory in his book *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, Swinton says,

> The problem of forgetfulness is not confined to the individual with dementia. The experience of dementia brings to the fore a broader amnesia that has befallen the world which has caused it to forget where and what it is: creation. When the world forgets its Creator, we begin to think we are the creators; we begin to believe that we are self-creating beings whose task is to shape the world into our own image. In such a worldview, *our capacity to do things becomes primary*. Unlike God, we demand that *people have gifts* instead of recognizing that in fact they *are gifts* (Swinton, 2012, p.164 ital mine).

Not unlike Swinton's anthropology illuminated through the experience of dementia, so too does the general aging experience with its loss of capacities in its frailest stage reveal the illusory vision of autonomy and its defunct claims that individuals are self-determining agents apart from outside assistance through fundamental relationship with God and others. Beginning with an autonomous anthropology often ends in despair given its view that "our capacities to do things [are] primary"

(Swinton, 2012, p.164). Aronson says that when we define good as the "young," [or able-bodied] then we set ourselves up for failure (Aronson, 2019, p.400). When autonomy, youth, and independence are supreme, attitudes toward aging either result in despair as originally described by Beauvoir, or its opposite, that of success based on the capacity to do things, which is temporary and subject to change.

Instead, with Aronson's focus on interdependence, an Augustinian lens acknowledges humans as dependent, relational creatures from beginning to end (Augustine, 1991; Williams, 1999, pp.251–4). Insofar as aging creatures depend and participate in the source of their beginning and end goal do we come to understand our lives as gift and with it, the accompanied value derived from belonging (Augustine, 1997, pp.9–10). But in order to understand belonging that comes through communal worship and virtue, one must first understand the meaning of aging's teleological orientation as one moving toward Sabbath rest as vocation.

Purpose and Meaning: Change Directed at Sabbath Rest

In Nicholas Carr's book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brain* (2011), he demonstrates ways that new technologies shape and change not only our culture, but our very sense of self. He says,

> What the map did for space—translate a natural phenomenon into an artificial and intellectual conception of that phenomenon—another technology, the mechanical clock, did for time. For most of human history, people experienced time as a continuous, cyclical, flow. To the extent that time was 'kept,' the keeping was done by instruments that emphasized this natural process: sundials around which shadows would move, hourglasses down which sand would pour…For most people, the movements of the sun, the moon, and the stars provided the only clocks they needed. Life was, in the words of the French medievalist Jacques Le Goff, 'dominated by agrarian rhythms, free of haste, careless of exactitude, unconcerned by productivity' (p.41).

This premodern understanding of time involved an organic sense of identity tied to a broader cosmos free from the primary medium of human control. But like most technologies, Carr writes, "The mechanical clock changed the way we saw ourselves. And like the map, it changed the way we thought" (p.43). The mechanical clock moved from an instrument by which we measure time to a tool that measures productivity, which then measures the value of the producer, the self.

Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007) describes the way our social and cosmic imaginaries have shifted from the medieval to modern periods, particularly in relation to time (p.323). Recognizing distinctions between what he describes as ordinary time on the one hand and higher times or eternity on the other, the ancient and medieval concept of eternity offers opportunities to recalibrate our sense of ordinary time in our daily, mundane activity (p.56). Eternity measures time as opposed to the modern tendency to measure time according to its hourly, daily, yearly, and calendar events associated with productivity. The modern concept of time tempts us to focus

on time as "part," "division," or "specialization," as opposed to time as duration or whole.

These subdivisions into "part," "division," and "specialization," parallel Aronson's critique of western medicine that focuses on efficiency as opposed to wholeness in patient care. Such efficiency often overlooks care that matters most to her aging patients, including enough time with their doctor, social support, or preventative care that "was neither billable (what mattered to my bosses and institution) nor part of my recognized work day (which mattered to me)" (p.7). Aronson continues her critique of western medicine's cure-based approach that often sidelines geriatrics to the specialty of internal medicine and primary care, attending to a broad range of adult health from young to old. Instead, she proposes reclaiming elderhood as a unique and anticipated stage in the life as a whole – both biologically and socially. While recognizing dependence as essential to the stages of infancy, childhood, and very old age, she also recognizes their fundamental difference. Aronson quotes Ignatz Nascher, saying,

> A comparison of the organism in childhood with the organism in old age will show that there is not an organ or tissue, not a function, mental or physical, identical at the two periods of life. Vitality, metabolism, even instinct differ. The process of senescence is progressive, not retrogressive, there is no reversal in the order of development and not a single tissue reverts to an earlier type (Aronson, 2019, p.194).

In other words, biology moves forward, not backward, even when moving through the stages of early and late elderhood. Aronson offers a positive vision of aging as one that belongs to the life stages, a life stage which we anticipate, involving a mixture of independence and dependence until it comes to a close (p.270). In fact, Aronson (2019) critiques medicine for divorcing aging from death and like Elizabeth Kübler Ross, argues we should acknowledge death and dying as part of human life and the completion of the human life span (p.370, 395; c.f., Kübler-Ross, 1969). Aronson (2019) concludes, "Physiologically as well as developmentally, then, the Victorians were right: life is a journey, not a cycle" (p.194).

The theme of life as a journey is one integral to Christian theology and specifically, St. Augustine who wrote his famous *Confessions* as a reflection on his own life journey. Biologically, psychologically, and spiritually, Augustine recognizes the life journey as one that progresses, which is best captured in his reflection on his own development from infancy to early childhood, adolescence, youth and mature adulthood that involves the philosophical and relational search for truth, identity, and belonging. In fact, Augustine opens the *Confessions* describing a fundamental restlessness that drives humans forward in the search for true rest throughout life's journey with his famous line "Our heart is restless until it rests in you" (Augustine, 1991, p.3).

In *De Doctrina Christiana* translated as *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine describes the Christian experience as one in which we are travelers away from our homeland (Augustine, 1997). He says, "So in this mortal life we are like travelers away from our Lord: if we wish to return to the homeland where we can be happy we must use this world, not enjoy it, in order to discern the 'invisible

attributes of God, which are understood through what has been made or, in other words, to derive eternal and spiritual value from corporeal and temporal things" (p.10). Augustine continues describing his order of love in which we are to use or love all temporal things as penultimate in relation to our ultimate, eternal love for God as the destination and end of all love. Easier said than done, much of Augustine's writings describe ways in which creatures often confuse and disorder temporal and eternal loves, tending to grasp onto existence in time as if it were ultimate. But even in this, Augustine accounts for the Creator's gracious posture by becoming creation itself, that is subject to time and change. Augustine (1997) says, "Christ, who chose to offer himself not only as a possession for those who come to their journey's end but also as a *road*…chose to become flesh" (p.26). In becoming flesh, the God-man, Jesus Christ, offers a new "road" or path by which the eternal and temporal are joined, leading creatures back to the ultimate, eternal goal.

In an interesting and often overlooked passage in Augustine's *Commentary on Genesis*, he offers an allegorical interpretation of the seven days of creation, comparing them to the seven epochs of history as well as the seven stages of life. While Augustine initially describes aging and death as negative, relating to sin and the disastrous consequences of turning away from God accounted for in the fall from grace (Augustine, 1984, p.537), he later offers a more positive role for aging among the Christian community. The culmination and goal of the life stages results in the aging stage or what Aronson might call Elderhood. In Augustine's commentary, *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, Augustine describes each life stage in turn. The six stages include infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth (as the prime of life), maturity (or productivity), and old age (Augustine, 2002, pp.62–7). The sixth stage of old age turns into the seventh day as Sabbath rest where there is morning but no evening, here representing eternity. After aging, one enters into eternity. Augustine recognizes spiritual development with each phase. While his theology acknowledges a negative or challenging component associated with old age as beings toward death and decay that are "outwardly wasting away," he also accounts for spiritual ways elders are being "renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4.16). Moreover, he most poignantly identifies old age as the "new man" intent on spiritual understanding (Augustine, 2002, pp.64–5). Herein, older men and women contemplate the wisdom of God in union with Christ while enacting the virtues of justice and love (Augustine, 2002, pp.64–5; c.f., Ridenour, 2018). Their agency involves both contemplation and action, giving and receiving. Closer to the journey's end, aging persons are signs and witness to eternal rest. In this way, older individuals demonstrate keener spiritual vision and witness to eternal realities among the intergenerational Christian community.

Augustine offers an example through the life of Simeon in the Gospel of Luke, saying, "…The clearest testimony is given in the words of the venerable old man Simeon, who took the infant Christ into his arms and said, 'Now, Lord, you are releasing your servant in peace, according to your promise, because my *eyes have seen your salvation*" (Augustine, 1984, p.1085). Here Simeon's spiritual sight led his physical sight while witnessing to multiple generations within his religious community. The aged become signs and sacraments pointing to the eternal Sabbath

rest through this renewed vision and focus near the journey's end (Ridenour, 2019, pp.54–7).

Augustine's focus on Sabbath rest as the temporal journey's fulfillment in eternity is powerful given that he concludes both his *Confessions* and *City of God* describing entry into this Sabbath rest. Concluding the *Confessions*, he says, "The seventh day has no evening and no ending… after our works, which, because they are your gift to us, are very good, we also may rest in you for the Sabbath of eternal life" (Augustine, 1991, p.304). Likewise, Augustine concludes the *City of God* describing Sabbath rest as the culmination of the seven epochs in history. He says, "After this present age God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day, and he will cause us, who are the seventh day, to find our rest in him" (Augustine, 1984, p.1091). The journey moves purposefully toward Sabbath rest, the journey's end in eternity.

Elderhood, or the aged stage of life, holds a privileged position in its experience through time and its proximity to eternity for Augustine, serving as a sign and witness to our final Sabbath rest. Taylor contrasts Augustine's understanding of time with the modern approach measuring moments, parts, or segments (Taylor, 2007, p.56). Instead, Augustine reframes our temporal understanding as "gathered time" fulfilled in eternity that we experience here as a journey. Near the journey's end, the aging stage points to a sense of completion, wholeness, or gathered time in full communion with God. A physical representation of the journey through life, uniting time with eternity might be portrayed in the image of the Labyrinth circle interpreted through various religious traditions throughout history (Eire, 2010, p.25). Labyrinths reflect the wisdom of Augustinian spirituality, particularly in its focus on reflection, the role of time and eternity, and the understanding of life as journey. A pilgrim spirituality is central to Augustine's many works. Unlike a maze, the labyrinth does not function as a puzzle to confuse, but a path coordinating direction and response that traverses various circuits by moving the wayfarer toward the center of the circle. The six central petals of the labyrinth as seen in an original model located at Chartes Cathedral in Chartes, France may symbolize the six days of creation, six stages of history, or six seasons of life. For Augustine, the sixth day of old age might move into the center symbolizing eternity or union with God. Taking each step along the labyrinth involves a rhythm and pace that provokes meditation and consideration. Whether young, old, or middle aged, walking the labyrinth invites spiritual reflection on life's journey, participation, and the goal to which we aim alongside the question of belonging in terms of the Augustinian journey homeward.

Belonging and Worship: Union with Christ and the Virtue of Hope

As depicted in the labyrinth image, the journey through time is one of identity, purpose, and meaning for Augustine. Integral to these themes is the issue of belonging for aging. Much like Carr's critique of the mechanical clock in its influence on our self-understanding, Aronson also recognizes ways in which our metaphors and tools impact the way we perceive ourselves in society (Aronson, 2019, pp.28–30). Aronson writes on the cultural shift in perspectives, critiquing ways in which old age became medicalized as a problem in the twentieth century (pp.187–8). Throughout

Aronson's polemical critique of medicine and its view of geriatrics is a strong overall critique of social belonging for elders within western culture. Aronson's work addresses beliefs about aging alongside life and health, demonstrating ways these beliefs shape practice (Aronson, 2019, pp.28–30). Fundamental to this vision is a relational view of identity. Defining elders in relation to others is significant for attitudes that suffuse western culture both within and without medicine (Aronson, 2019, p.60). In this sense, aging is not solely a biological experience, but also a social experience in which nature and nurture come together. Critiquing ways in which old age became medicalized as a problem in the twentieth century, the systems and structures intended to manage old age symptoms often reflect society's attitude to view frail elders as so-called "past their use-by date" (Aronson, 2019, pp.187–8). Aronson says,

> …In the late nineteenth century, when Americans began viewing the body as a machine and not a divine gift, their sense of old age changed too, in ways that encouraged looking over noticing [or gazing at the other rather than knowing in an intimate way]. Having previously seen old people as closer to God, Americans now saw them through an industrial lens, lacking function and efficiency. Old age began to seem 'less than' compared with youth, and aging came to be associated with decline and obsolescence—conditions people distance themselves from even today, invoking that same singular mechanistic definition of human worth (p.62).

The trouble with the mechanistic definition of worth is its reduction to dissecting time in terms of segments—not to mention superimposing evaluations typically used for inanimate objects onto organic life. Much like the use of the mechanical clock, the mechanistic analogy reduces the aging person to an object, thing, or part defined by a particular moment.

In contrast, an Augustinian perspective shifts the lens from one of object to subject, part to whole, time to eternity. Rather than discard elders through a mechanistic gaze that derives value from productivity, instead, an Augustinian vision sees value in Sabbath rest that moves from the beginning to the end of the human life span and then beyond. Imaging a God who rests in creation and rests in the Sabbath of eternity, elders reflect a special place in the intergenerational social and religious community in their seasoned perspective on life's journey that involves an interplay of contemplation and action, giving and receiving. Belief shapes practice and practice shapes belief. Engaging religious and specifically Christian theological approaches to aging challenges our functional understanding of worth, assigning value and belonging to all human creatures– across the life spectrum, including those in the frailest phase of the aging experience. Here value is derived and deemed good in its status as creature. Life is a gift to be received rather than a mechanistic product to achieve.

Augustine's writings reflect deeply the value extended to creatures through divine gift or grace. Departing from his peers, the Stoics who believed virtue could be achieved through human effort or Pelagius who argued creatures could achieve the law by human righteousness, instead, Augustine argues life, virtue, salvation, and the good in each stage – young, middle, or old – is dependent on grace (Ridenour,

2019). In this dependence, each creature belongs. Augustine cannot describe his own life journey throughout the *Confessions* apart from recognizing divine presence, relationship, participation, and union with God (Augustine, 1991). In doing so, Augustine reflects a particular kind of belonging for all creatures, particularly those who are aging.

C.S. Lewis describes the significance of belonging embedded within a teleological framework in his essay "Membership" later compiled in *The Weight of Glory* (1949). Critiquing both twentieth century individualism in which autonomy achieves identity and collectivism in which identity is defined by the group irrespective of the individual, he argues instead that both personality and identity are fulfilled through belonging to God and community. Through belonging, the self becomes more full, not less. Lewis (1949) says, "…The value of the individual does not lie in him. He is capable of receiving value. He receives it by union with Christ" (p. 174). Through union with the Creator who became creature, the eternal who entered time in Jesus Christ, creatures now know the presence and dependence on the Creator in each stage alongside fellowship with others through communion. This belonging is more than natural friendship that for Aristotle could wax and wane, depending on the friend's virtue or good qualities that may be lost, particularly in old age (Aristotle, 1955, pp.200–8; Ridenour, 2019, pp.222–3). Instead, such communion forms membership in what Lewis describes as "the mystical body" (Lewis, 1976, p.163).

Augustine describes this same mystical body as the *totus Christus* in which Christ serves as head and its many members compose the body (Baker, 2007; Ridenour, 2019, p.135). Much like the biological image of the patient as whole person in which all the parts belong together in medicine, so too does an Augustinian theology reclaim the image of church as the whole body in which all its parts—young, old, infant, frail, disabled and able-bodied belong together. With Christ as head, eternal and temporal goals align in works of love among the body (Ridenour, 2019). More than friendship, the Christian body is unified through belonging in corporeal, communal, and familial ways that are simultaneously future directed and hopeful in the midst of life's journey through peace and hardship (Bonhoeffer, 1954). As theologian Karl Barth describes, the young, middle-aged, and old need one another in interdependent relationships to offer virtues—the young: novelty, the middle-age: responsibility through work; and the old: wisdom to help combat the vices prone to each stage, including irresponsibility, prideful arrogance, or self-defeat (Barth, 1960, III/4, p.609–14; Ridenour, 2019, pp.94–8).

Belonging in religious community or the body of Christ is made manifest through the regular practices of worship through song, Scripture reading, and Eucharist or communion. David Ford writes how these habits shape practitioners to worship beyond the "idol self," thus uniting individuals to God and others in a shared vision of flourishing (Ford, 1999, pp.107–165). James K.A. Smith describes how liturgical habits of worship shape individuals by forging a shared sense of identity through imagination and narrative (Smith, 2016, pp.83–110). Repetition through these practices form habits that shape identity through community (or *communion*) across the life stages. These habit-forming practices are significant for both memory and hope in the elder years. As Psychiatrist and Bioethicist Tia Powell writes in her book *Dementia Reimagined: Building a Life of Joy and Dignity from Beginning to End*,

"The capacity to enjoy and respond to music outlasts many other cognitive functions; even after spontaneous speech has become difficult, many people can still sing lyrics to songs learned long ago. Even in advanced disease, when happiness is hard to come by, people can respond to music they love" (Powell, 2019, p.211).

Likewise, medical ethicist and physician Lydia Dugdale offers a poignant story in her book, *The Lost Art of Dying* (2020), saying,

> One of the most extraordinary events I have witnessed as a physician is the time a music therapist visited an elderly patient with advanced dementia. She could not get out of bed, rarely opened her eyes, and had to be spoon-fed. She never, ever spoke. Family members told the therapist, a violinist, that 'Amazing Grace' had been one of the woman's favorite songs. As the violin released the notes of that quiet, hopeful melody, the old woman opened her mouth and began to sing, her voice cracking yet steady, mostly on pitch. She could no longer talk. But she could sing' (p.212).

Here reflecting core belonging shaped through the habit of communal liturgy—Scripture reading, worship and song—often ends in the virtue of hope. Responding to song and remembering one's belonging to God draws forth hope, propelling the journey through time. Both examples offered by Powell and Dugdale demonstrates Swinton's understanding of our fundamental value as creatures apart from particular capacities that wax or wane throughout the life stages. Instead, our value derives from our creatureliness as relational beings dependent on the Creator. Here we live in the memories of God whether our moment to moment recollection reflects this awareness or not. Swinton says, "Memory is thus seen to be both internal and external. Some of it is held by the individual; some of it is held by her community; all of it is held by God" (Swinton, 2012, p.221). Response to familiar music often reflects our corporate sense of belonging to community through past, present, and even the future in hope.

For Augustine, hope is the virtue that unites time with eternity as the final destination. St. Thomas Aquinas described pride and despair as the dual vices that contradict hope (Aquinas, 1948, pp.1253–9). Perhaps Aquinas's perspective anticipates the modern temptation to either despair aging in its loss of autonomy or cloak despair through temporary successful aging as pride. Both construct identity more on autonomous self-reliance than an agency shaped by dependent participation, teleology, or belonging in eternal hope. Instead, hope grounds the aging experience—and every life stage that precedes it—in eternity and its impact on time. In other words, hope is the antidote to despair and the "worshipping self" is the antidote to the "idol" of autonomous self-reliance (Ford, 1999, p.107).

Such hope is not mere optimism or superficial escapism for aging Christians throughout history – as seen through Augustine himself at his own deathbed at the age of 75 (Lancel, 2002, pp.473–6). In his biography, Serge Lancel describes how Augustine initially reflected on the philosophical reality of mortality after falling ill to fever shortly before his own death. However, Augustine also requested copies of the *Psalms,* which were placed on his bedroom walls, thereby offering hope during the final hours that led to his own journey's end (Lancel, 2002, p.475). Hope is by definition an arduous or difficult task. As ethicist James F. Keenan, says, hope is a

"deeply realistic," virtue "rooted in the cross" (Keenan, 2011, p.161). For Augustine, hope looks toward union with the object of love that still remains beyond reach. Hope is distinctly tied to the anticipation of Sabbath rest in eternity. By love, eternity measures time. Hope anticipates—even longs for—such eternal completion. Much like the Eucharist or communion that simultaneously looks backward to the cross and forward to Christ's return through memory and anticipation, aging persons serve as signs of the vocation found in eternal Sabbath rest. This is the opposite of a mechanistic social imaginary measured by the mechanical clock. Instead, an eternal cosmological imaginary redefines value by pointing to completion through Sabbath rest that unites elders and the body of Christ as a whole. While such hope does not promise an easy aging experience or an easy death, it does offer presence, participatory identity, and belonging while moving through life's journey with the goal of eternity.

References

Aquinas, St. T. (1948). *Summa Theologica. Trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province*. Ave Maria Press.

Aristotle. (1955). *The Nicomachean Ethics. Trans. by J.A.K. Thomson*. Penguin Books.

Aronson, L. (2020a). "'COVID-19 Kills Only Old People.' Only?" *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/opinion/coronavirus-elderly.html. Accessed 27 May 2020.

Aronson, L. (2019). *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life*. Bloomsbury.

Aronson, L. (2020b). "For Older People, Despair, as Well as COVID-19, Is Costing Lives," *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/opinion/coronavirus-elderly-suicide.html. Accessed 27 May 2020.

Augustine, St. (1984). *City of God. Trans. by Henry Bettenson*. Penguin Books.

Augustine, St. (1991). *Confessions. Trans. by Henry Chadwick*. Oxford University Press.

Augustine, St. (1997). *On Christian Teaching, Trans. by R.P.H. Green*. Oxford University Press.

Augustine, St. (2002). *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees, Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis, The Literal Meaning of Genesis. Translation by Edmund Hill, O.P. and Matthew O'Connell*. New City Press.

Baker, K. F. (2007). *Augustine on Action, Contemplation, and their Meeting Point in Christ*. University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN.

de Beauvoir, S. (1973). *The Coming of Age. Translation by Patrick O'Brian*. Warner Books.

Bonhoeffer, D. (1954). *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. HarperOne.

Carr, N. (2011). *The Shallows*. W.W. Norton & Co.

Dugdale, L. S. (2020). *The Lost Art of Dying: Reviving Forgotten Wisdom*. Harper One.

Eire, C. (2010). *A Very Brief History of Eternity*. Princeton University Press.

Ford, D. (1999). *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*. Cambridge University Press.

Keenan, J. F. (2011). *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (2nd ed.). Sheed and Ward.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. Scribner.

Lancel, S. (2002). *St. Augustine. Translated by Antonia Nevill*. SCM Press.

Levinas, E. (1999). *Alterity and Transcendence*. Columbia University Press.

Lewis, C. S. (1949). Membership. In C. S. Lewis (Ed.), *The Weight of Glory* (pp. 158–176). Harper One.

Barth, K. (1960) *Church Dogmatics,* 4 vols. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Moses, S. (2020). "We Are All Responsible: Ethics of Elder Care in COVID-19." Georgetown University Berkley Forum Blog Post, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/we-are-all-responsible-ethics-of-elder-care-in-covid-19. Accessed 27 May 2020.

Powell, T. (2019). *Dementia Reimagined: Building a Life of Joy and Dignity from Beginning to End*. Avery.
Ridenour, A. A. (2018). *Sabbath Rest as Vocation: Aging toward Death*. Bloomsbury/T&T Clark.
Rowe, J. W., & Kahn, R. L. (1997). Successful Aging. *The Gerontologist, 37*(4), 433–440.
Smith K.A., James. (2009). *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation Baker Academic*. Grand Rapids.
Smith, J., & K.A. . (2016). *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Brazos Press.
Swinton, John. (2012). *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*. Eerdmans.
Tanner, K. (2010). *Christ the Key*. Cambridge University Press.
Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Belknap Press.
Williams, R. (1994). 'Good for Nothing?' Augustine on Creation. *Augustinian Studies, 25*, 17–19.
Williams, R. (1999). Creation. In A. D. Fitzgerald (Ed.), *Augustine through the Ages (pp. 251- 4).* Eerdmans.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.