Review for Religious

Retirement: A New Version of the Identity Crisis

Sr. Jean Flannelly, SC

Originally published in Review for Religious *online — September 20th, 2022*

This article makes the case for an elder identity crisis for religious associated with retirement. Heeding the call to an inner journey, religious typically deal with three movements of recognition: pervasiveness of egocentrism, inaccurate self-knowledge, and factors limiting one's inner freedom. In asking the Holy Spirt to be guide and healer, the person is able to move more closely to one's "true self."

Usually the phrase "identity crisis" is associated with late adolescence—that time in life when young people question who they are and feel pushed to develop their personal "center." Eric Erikson,[1] the coiner of the phrase, identified the major work as the formation of an identity, that is, the individual commits to their personally owned values and beliefs in order to become the person they want to be in the future. Though Erikson's focus was on the inner work of the individual, it is now understood that identity formation takes place in a social context. One's identity is always in conversation with the significant communities to which one belongs. James Fowler[2] named the work as the development of an "executive ego." But whatever it is called, it is not usually associated with retirement. Retirement from full-time

[1] Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968).
[2] James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

active ministry, however, can create a new version of the identity crisis for apostolic religious. Ministry, with its many relationships and calls to go outside oneself, has been the main scheduler of time, focus of creative energies and the source of affirmation—and now all of these no longer exist!

The initial response to retirement might well be delight in the time and space, so longed for in the busy years of full-time ministry. But before long, simple enjoyment is replaced by questions: "How will I spend my days?" "With diminishing energies, changes in mental functioning, and limiting mobility, how do I continue to be of service, to carry out the mission?" Some questions can become quite radical: "What is the meaning and purpose of my life?" "What kind of person do I wish to be in the future as limited as that might be?" Erikson brought attention to a dynamic that is characteristic of this stage of life—older adults look back on their past, reviewing choices with their consequences. This is not a trip down memory lane for its own sake, but to ask the question, "Has my life been meaningful and satisfying?

A Call to an Inner Journey

Questions like these invite a turn inwards. If the call remains unanswered, two things happen—first, we may take on someone else's answers to our questions and fail to develop our unique identity. Second, and more significant, we may fail to hear a yet deeper call to become our true self, the one that Thomas Merton frequently wrote about, especially in his *New Seeds of the Contemplation.*[3] Inward gazing is best understood as both

[3] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961).

an end-in-itself and a means-to-an-end. As an end, the immediate goal is more accurate self-knowledge. As a means it offers the invitation to deeper union with God and the capability for becoming one's true self which in turn equips one to see more clearly the signs of the times (*Gaudium et Spes,* 4) and respond more freely and creatively.

If the journey is to be life-giving and not-dead-ending, it must have the Holy Spirit as its guide. Handing control over to the Spirit as our lead, we are able to uncover dimensions of self, previously hidden and a new identity. The corresponding gift of knowing oneself is coming to "know" God more truly and intimately. Solitude, silence and patience are prerequisites for this journey, if one is to learn the voice of the Spirit.

Phases in the Inner Journey

How one comes to deeper self-knowledge and hears the invitation is unique to each person. However, there are typically three common phases or dimensions, but not necessarily in the order described here: uncovering the pervasiveness of egocentrism; seeing more clearly our inconsistencies and negative traits; and recognizing the sources of voices that limit our inner freedom. But before looking at these, a word about our idea or image of God's Spirit is needed.

Who Is God for You?

Humans are blessed with imagination. Among its other benefits, the imagination help us navigate new and unfamiliar territory. We use our imagination to think about the Mystery of God which profoundly affects our openness to what is being revealed. If God who is leading and removing the cataracts clouding our self-knowledge is perceived as any less than loving and desiring our flourishing, all discoveries will be partial and limited. This

is because of our human penchant to see ourselves in a positive light. Without the inner conviction that God is for us in ways beyond our wildest imaginings, we shy away from and even deny the negative and less than ideal traits, and motivations which direct our choices and limit our freedom. Convinced of God's love, we hear, as wounds, scars, limitations, and sins are discovered, a quiet voice suggesting that we ask this same Spirit to heal what has been uncovered. The Spirit is mightily at work in the process, transforming this journey into a healing one.

Egocentrism: The Balloon Encasing the Self

Instead of moving directly into an exploration of egocentrism, some distinctions will help in understanding its nature. In the popular imagination "ego" is a bad word, loaded with negative connotations. From the signs in every Planet Fitness heralding the message "no egos here" to the egotist, it is a derogatory concept. But a strong ego is needed to negotiate one's world and make positive contributions to the welfare of others. In other words, the ego is very important!

Egocentrism is part of the world of the egotist, but much more is involved. Egotists are narcissistic, having an exaggerated sense of their self-importance and excessive admiration of themselves.

In addition to this, egocentrism is often confused with selfishness. The latter refers to how generous or stingy one is with one's time, presence or goods. A person can be very generous in all areas and still be egocentric. Very simply, egocentrism is a cognitive shortcoming that lies beneath one's failures to recognize the idiosyncratic or unique nature of one's knowledge and the subjective nature of one's perceptions.

Ego Psychology[4] provides clues for understanding egocentrism as a natural outcome of the psychological birth of the infant starting around the second year of life. At this time the infant is beginning to see the self as separate from others and the environment. We can imagine the process being something like the infant "building a wall" or "developing a skin." What is inside the "wall" or "skin" is "me;" what is outside is "not me." We call what is inside, the "me," or the "ego." There is an unconscious assumption that what is inside ("me") is the center and it is normative. By its very nature, the ego is protective of this sense of itself and becomes defensive, if it feels threatened.

Around seven years of age, as the brain is growing in complexity, the mind is developing the ability to see from a perspective other than its own.[5] Even though this capacity is developing, the child maintains this egocentric worldview which only intensifies during the adolescent years.[6]

The development of empathy, falling in love, interacting with people from different backgrounds and cultures can expand the balloon and make its skin more transparent thus making our natural egocentrism more subtle. These experiences alone do not prick the skin. Individuals, as it were, are trapped inside separate balloons. It is only when the Spirit pierces the skin that we are led out of our separated worlds to the realization that we are one, even though we have different perspectives which are not normative!

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[4] Margaret S. Mahler, Fred Pine, and Anni Bergman, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant (*New York: Basic Books, 1975).

[5] Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of The Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

[6] David Elkind, "Egocentrism in Adolescence" in *Child Development*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Dec. 1967): 1025-34.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is speaking of his death when he says to his disciples, "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (Jn 12:24, NABRE). These same words can be applied to the end of egocentrism and an identity based on it. In the dying to egocentrism, we shift the locus of our identity to our true self.

Seeing More Clearly Our Inconsistencies and Negative Traits

Erikson described the crisis of older adulthood as that of achieving Ego-Integrity. That is older adults look back on their lives with the question, "Has my life been meaningful and worthwhile?" The crisis' successful resolution requires a review of one's life and judging, that in balance, one's life had a sense of coherence and wholeness—"it is the only life I could have lived." This backward glancing provides the fodder which can lead to a deeper and more accurate knowledge of oneself. Events, interactions, successes and failures are seen now with new eyes and perspectives because of a number of factors. We are more compassionate because the years of living has taught us to be. And our eyes have been opened because of the distance of time joined with an understanding of the complexity of human motivation. Equipped with some insights from depth psychology, we can now look at remembered events knowing that there was more going-on in our choices and behavior than what was seen at first glance. Likewise, we are able to recognize that any choice made satisfied multiple motivations. Still another insight leading to more accurate self-knowledge is the awareness that some choices are not rooted in the reality in front of them, but in the past or in the person's idea or interpretation of what is. With

these insights and others, we have developed along the way, we are able to look more closely and critically at our remembered events and present interactions.

Paying close attention to our interactions and responses, we gradually recognize the mixed motives behind our actions or the shabbiness of our responses. For example, we can see that underneath the "altruistic choices" there was also self-seeking: to be recognized, to achieve, to have a place, to be Number One, etc. We all have needs for belonging and affirmation, but they are so radical that only God can truly satisfy them. To look elsewhere is to invite frustration because of the partiality and passing nature of human satisfaction. Furthermore, to seek the satisfaction of these needs in our service to others is to muddy the purpose and outcomes. We also come to realize that even though we have said God is the "center of my life" there are pockets of resistance to God's transforming presence.

It's a humbling experience to see and own our inconsistencies, negative traits and resistances. As the Spirit opens our eyes and ears with each revelation, she asks, "Is this who you want to be?" There is no shaming or coercion, just the simple question. Another aspect of the gift is the realization that who I think I am, who I have aspired to be, and who I present to others as myself to others is not the real me. Being stripped of our familiar and comfortable beliefs about ourselves can be painful, but it points us in the direction of seeking our true identity—our true self.

Recognizing External Forces that Limit Freedom

As mentioned earlier, our identity is always in conversation with the significant communities to which we belong. Knowing this helps appreciate the extent to which the

various groups have impacted our freedom. These differing groups—be they religious congregation, local community, parish, ministry setting—each has a "culture" promoting certain values and ignoring or even denying others. By becoming a member of a group, we absorb the group's perspective and valuing. Our need for belonging plays an important role here; the stronger our need, the more fully and uncritically we absorb the culture.

The intuition, "We are not as free as we would like to be or even think we are" suggests that we examine these groups significant to our identity. Questions like: "What does the ideal member look like?"; "What are the group mores?"; "What attitudes and behaviors are valued?" can be helpful for discovering areas where we might have traded some freedom for a sense of belonging. John Kavanaugh's[7] and Michael Gallagher's[8] reflections on culture are helpful resources for uncovering the hidden assumptions of the cultures in which we live. The important follow-up question is "Do I wish to continue this trade-off?"

Many Voices

So many voices crowd our heads and clamor for attention. Voices that say "This is who you are." "This is how you should act and what you should choose." "This is what's important and of value." We cannot listen to all, yet we must pay attention to all—their different tones, content, and emotions they stir up on us if we are to learn to recognize and respond to the voice of the gentle shepherd. Tones vary in range and intensity; some are

[7] John Kavanaugh *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance (*New York: Orbis Books, 2006).

[8] Michael Gallagher, SJ, *Clashing Symbols (New and Revised Edition): An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

comforting, some challenging, some judgmental, some alluring, some harsh, some gentle, some caressing. A similar variety exists in the messages: "same old, same old," or new vistas, or outside one's comfort zone or anything in-between. Finally, the emotions triggered need to be examined to see where they lead: closer to God, hiding from, or maybe distancing from the Holy One.

Whose Voices are They?

Depth psychology has shown that during the toddler and childhood years, one takes in or internalizes significant "voices"—those of parents, religion, society and culture. In later childhood and adolescence, the peer group joins the inner conversation. Still later, in becoming adults, the voices from the numerous roles played and the professions entered are added to the mix. This process is reflexive and occurs largely out of conscious awareness.

Also out of conscious awareness are the messages from the different groups or communities that are important to one's identity. They too have become internalized. These voices would serve us better if they were reviewed, critiqued and then interiorized. Numerous other voices find their way into a level of consciousness below awareness. For example, the culture of consumerism is constantly and consistently telling us "buy, buy, buy" or "with this product, you will need nothing more." These subliminal—and not so subliminal—messages become internalized over time. The culture of productivity with its insistence that one's worth and value come from one's efficiency and output is still another voice competing for space in our already over-crowded psyches. What other unwanted messages from the culture have you discovered?

Listening to the Voices

The ideal setting for listening is centered presence, much like the context for the consciousness examen.[9] And like the examen, this review of one's life is best done frequently. After becoming more mindful of God present to us, we ask the Spirit to help us look at our day: our behavior, our choices and our reactions. The important thing here is handing over control to the Spirit and then following its lead. But unlike the examen, we are not looking for our responsiveness to the Spirit's presence and promptings, although these may come into awareness. Rather we are to be observers of our choices, behavior, and reactions. We look without judgment and with simple curiosity.

Keeping a Journal

We believe that the Spirit will guide, but control and direction need be handed over, again and again, so that this can become a reality. As we grow in trust and rely more of the Spirit's lead, we discover that we need to find ways to slow down, both physically and mentally so as to pay closer attention to what is right in front of us, in all its layers of meaning. Journaling is a valuable tool for doing this. Periodically reviewing its contents helps us notice recurring themes and issues which would benefit from further exploration. The journal is also a great way to record the surprise gifts of the Spirit—a memory, an insight, or a topic for reflection.

[9] George Aschenbrenner, SJ. "Consciousness Examen" in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (1972): 14-21.

Toward a Resolution of this Adult Identity

This journey under the direction of the Spirit has led us to discover much about our self, our motivations and constraints to freedom. What then, are we to do with this knowledge? A review of the dynamics of the original identity crisis can shed some light.

In adolescence, the identity crisis is resolved when the youth choses the beliefs and values they espouse as their own, followed by a commitment to live out of these, so as to become the person they wish to be. The process is not as conscious and intentional as the foregoing description, but decision and commitment are essential. Failing to do so, the adolescent never really takes hold of himself. The process is fueled and directed by the questions: "Who am I?" and "Who do I wish to become?"

Just as the resolution of the initial identity crisis was an on-going process, spread over time, so too this later version. In the adult identity crisis, the same questions are being asked. But the central work, as we've described it is somewhat different. From the vantage point of age and decades of being a prayerful woman or man, we are aware that we have internalized voices from significant others, especially from our childhood, and the calls from the communities to which we belong. The task is to sort through the voices and calls so that we are better able to distinguish among them. Our purpose is to be able to recognize the voice of the gentle shepherd. Committed as we are to the gentle shepherd, we heed his voice and are invited to follow him and be led more and more into becoming our true self.

In this Spirit-led journey, as we hear more clearly the voice of the gentle shepherd, we catch only glimpses of our true self. The glimpses or intuitions of the "true self" are

neither complete nor continuous, but nonetheless real. The voice and the vision are compelling. We find a growing desire to be one with the Holy One. Following that desire, we discover that the Holy One is present within and all we need do is put nothing in the way.

In Summary

This article has made the case for an elder identity crisis associated with the time of retirement from full- time active ministry. A fruit of this crisis is an invitation to become one's true self requiring a shift in one's identity and its basis. The article explored three dimensions of the journey in the process of resolving the crisis: pervasiveness of egocentrism, disparity between one's idea of oneself and one's true self, external factors conditioning one's inner freedom. The article asserted that central to the resolution was paying attention to the many inner voices so as to learn the voice of the gentle shepherd who is always leading to fullness of life.