

Reconciling With Our Past

I am sharing ideas with you today about making sense of reconciling with our past in older age. I am an older person, a widow, with children and grandchildren, and I have a social work background. In the last thirty plus years I have helped to run a hospice bereavement service, worked as a hospital chaplaincy volunteer and currently work in pastoral care with older people. These experiences have formed some of what I am about to say in general terms...

As an older person, like most of you, I think about my past. As older people we have a lot of life experience...some affirming and positive that has enabled us to find a way of dealing with life. We have acquired wisdom and knowledge and have often learned from our experiences. However, we all have situations from our past that are difficult and some may be unresolved. What if I had responded differently to that difficult situation? Why didn't I act more kindly here, or positively there? Why didn't we resolve that argument that then grew and festered? Or, I am pleased I said sorry.

How do I reconcile with my past?

Some of what I say may arouse difficult memories and emotions. As older people we all have a lot of life experience (positive and negative) with many personal and emotional resources. However, here is a health warning: be kind to yourself. If something is too painful, don't explore it deeply today, if you do not wish. You don't need to keep your video on and it is your choice to opt out of small groups which we will have later on. On the other hand, other people in the small groups may be helpful to you, or you may say something that would be helpful to them. Or you may choose not to speak This is your space. (Remember what is said to each other in this Session stays confidentially with the Group. We do not share any information to a third person unless we are very worried about you or the person you are talking about...).

John O' Donohue says in ***A Morning Offering*** from his **Book of Blessings**:

*May I have the courage today
To live the life that I would love
To postpone my dreams no longer
But do at last what I came for
And waste my heart on fear no more.*

In older age we have experienced many losses. These may be the death of partners, children, family and friends. We have learned to grapple with bereavement or loss, whether or not we have come to a place of learning to live with a different life, or some of it may remain unresolved.

We may be experiencing a loss of our health and independence. Perhaps we don't feel we have agency in our own or other's lives: making decisions, continuing to work or do what we used to like. We may like to have more time now to do " our own thing." We may be enjoying life and happy the way things are...

Part of older age seems to be about making sense of and reconciling earlier experiences: the wrong decisions, regrets, and the breaking up of earlier relationships. How do we now start to reconcile with our past?

And restitution? How do we make restitution? There might be opportunities to reconnect and reconcile with other people.

Much of reconciliation, and then possible restitution might come from individual reflection, prayer, spiritual thinking, and coming to terms ourselves with why it happened, forgiving ourselves or others, and then perhaps trying to let it go and allowing ourselves to get on with life, however changed it might be. *"It is what it is..."*

When I worked in a hospice bereavement service many of the conversations I had were with good people encountering anger and guilt and how those people tried to deal with those feelings...If the other person is still alive is it too late to resolve that situation? Can we write a letter, pick up a phone? But if it is too late to do that there are still things we can do.

Adults often feel uncomfortable feeling angry. In itself it is a natural emotion. It isn't wrong in itself, it is a reaction to a situation, BUT what we do with anger matters. It can be corrosive if we can't work it through. Exercise and sport sometimes help to get rid of some negative thoughts. Punching a pillow doesn't hurt anyone. Helping someone else or doing something new can be healthy diversions. We don't have to suppress the past but we may allow ourselves to live life again. We differ. Some of us need to talk more, others to act more and we all need to do both...We can get stuck. But life continues and we can move backwards and forwards: feeling the feelings AND moving forward into the future.

As well as anger and other strong emotions, we also can feel guilty, another corrosive emotion. It is helpful to decide whether this is realistic or unrealistic guilt. As adults we have done things which we do not approve of. This may be realistic guilt and we need to allow ourselves to be forgiven. We have choices. This may be by talking about it, going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, writing a letter. We may never send this letter but it might help us to sort out our feelings and gain perspective.

However, many of us feel unrealistic anger and guilt, that is, anger and guilt we no longer need to feel. We may have done the best we could under the circumstances. If someone close had cancer we might feel we should have known sooner and done more... But do we have X-ray eyes? We can't see inside other people. We don't have a crystal ball to predict the future. We now have the benefit of hindsight, but not then. We sometimes have magical thinking, for example: "I was irritated with you" but that doesn't mean I wanted you to be ill or even die...We need to realise we can't work that kind of powerful magic....

I remember seeing the widow of a miner. He and his brother had been on opposite sides of the miners' strike in 1984. He died without apparently being reconciled with his brother. His widow needed to talk about how she was dealing with her strong feelings of grief, and what might have been if things had been different and what she might do next. In another situation a couple had had a row before they went to work. The wife died in a car crash. Her husband needed to work through and try to come to terms with this tragedy.

Sometimes, getting back to ourselves and our past lives, perhaps we idealised the other person or situation. Maybe, we were right to be angry with them in the moment. Jesus was righteously angry driving the moneylenders out of the temple. He was angry about injustice. We should be angry about abuse and injustice. If we have been angry with God, if we believe God is all - loving and all - understanding, might that help us to move forward? Does God not want us to be reconciled with our past?

How might we do this? A conversation: either real or imaginary? A letter or email sent, or never sent? Prayer? The Sacrament of Reconciliation? Conversation with a trusted person may help. Counselling with a neutral person may be useful. Later we are having a short Liturgy which may help.

And I quote from the late John O'Donohue again, as I find his compassionate words and images helpful. John says in ***For Grief***:

*And when the work of grieving is done,
The wound of loss will heal
And you will have learned
To wean your eyes
From that gap in the air
And be able to enter the hearth
In your soul where your loved one
Has awaited your return
All the time.*

As Ecclesiastes says (and I have altered it slightly), “*There is a time to build, a time to be happy, a time to mourn, a time to heal, a time to mend, a time to speak, a time to be silent, there is a time for everything...*”.

We sometimes need affirmation by ourselves and others. We probably have spent many years supporting others. Let us be good to ourselves.

In my last piece from “***Beauty: The Invisible Embrace***” John O'Donoghue writes:

It is a wonderful day in life when one is finally able to stand before the long, deep mirror of one's own reflection and view oneself with appreciation, acceptance and forgiveness. On that day one breaks through the falsity of images and expectations which have blinded one's spirit. One can only learn to see who one is when one learns to view oneself with the most intimate and forgiving compassion.

These are a few ideas to think about. We are each different and have our similarities. We bring our own positive and negative experiences in life to bear on how we reconcile and make restitution. We bring our culture, our experience of God and our unique personalities to our experience of older age. And, we always go on learning and exploring.

Pippa Bonner, Growing Old Grace-fully talk, June 2024