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Border Crossing

A Spiritual Journey

Katie Funk Wiebe

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BORDER CROSSING

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To my children: Joanna, Susan, Christine, James

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A big thank you to the older adults in my circle of friends who inspired me, and to my daughter Christine who kept me working at this manuscript when I wanted to quit and for her careful suggestions.

Preface

I thought I had planned well for retirement, what I was going to do, where I was going to live, what I was going to live on, and who I wanted to be close to.

Therefore I was surprised when I found myself going through a low-grade depression, in dissonance with myself but also with the world at large. Thirty years earlier, when I became a widow, I had gone through a severe identity crisis. I found extremely difficult the transition from being a member of a couple to being alone in a society that at that time did not make much room for single parents.

Was my present frustration a repeat of that but under different circumstances? Could I, by openly writing about it, dignify the discomfort which I was feeling and which I sensed others in the same circumstances were feeling? Could I turn this border crossing into an account that might be meaningful to others?

I probed my ambivalences about this life stage. The probing started a backward look to my growing up, to the aging of my parents and friends. I thought about other life stages and the securities and satisfactions of each.

This book is a record of that probing and my experience in crossing the border into the land of aging. During

this time one feels the uneasiness of being between nonidentity and joyous self-confidence. The boundary of this land of aging is undefined, yet entering this stage is a border crossing, nevertheless.

I know all retirees do not have my experience. But I believe that people who have found much satisfaction in their careers may find the road slippery when they begin to cross over. Men, more so than women, have difficulty with retirement from work that provided them with their main identity in life. In the future, women will experience this transition more directly. Some men and women glide across without a hitch, of course. But I didn't. And that is why I write.

I hoped to write frankly. The process of growing older forces admission of human imperfection and mortality. Life is going to end. We older adults are part of a vulnerable group, yet a powerful one. We have wisdom, experience, money, and loyalty.

Yet what does accumulated experience count for? I recognize that I am probably a better teacher now when I am not teaching than when I began thirty years ago, but I am not now teaching. Nor are many other older adults who have years of experience in their fields now active in them. What is this accumulated wisdom for? To rot?

These memoirs and reflections confess my valleys and my mountains. I wanted this writing to be inspirational rather than informational. Therefore I leave the topics of medical care, housing, and financial and legal arrangements to the experts. Instead I have added many stories, knowing a story has the greatest form of power to clarify, to name and rename. In addition to my own journey, I discuss such matters as older adult spirituality, servanthood, creativity, humor, life review, and facing change.

As I wrote and rewrote, the main question hammering itself into my consciousness during these border-crossing years was what God has in mind for the older adult and especially for me. Where do those in the last quarter or third of life fit into God's overall plan?

Some six to eight months into the project, it became clear to me that what I was trying to do was develop a theology of aging. I had already done a biblical study of aging (*Life After Fifty: A Positive Look at Aging in the Faith Community*, Faith & Life). Now I wanted to take this one step further and in a different direction.

Theologian Krister Stendall writes that "theology is worrying about what God worries about when God gets up in the morning: the mending of creation." What does God worry about regarding older adults? Some ministries to the older adult contribute to feelings of despair, futility, and loneliness because they are not tied to life purposes. Activity is encouraged for the sake of activity, which soon increases a sense of uselessness. Disengagement from life and waiting for death is not good for mental health. When people become older, what needs mending in their relationship to God and humanity? That is the essence of this book.

I recognize that caregiving to frail elderly must always continue. But maintenance of health and finances is not the only aspect of older adult ministries. Making sure that the person is on an inner journey, the goal of which is to make faith more intentional, is important. Old age is not the enemy, but the attitudes that accompany aging are. Because the agenda of life changes in the later years, we need to think along new lines.

My informal research revealed that older adults are seeking for a place, a home, not just a spot to rest their

bones. Their lives are as important to them as life is to a younger person. I hear repeatedly from this group that younger people are surprised to hear them say that their feelings are no different than when they were young. Falling in love is still an exciting experience.

A sound theology of aging will welcome older adults fully into the household of faith instead of directing them to the sidelines. That reorientation will require a major shift in the way we see and do church. My listening to older adults has showed me that they yearn for a clearly defined place and function that gives greater meaning to their lives. When you face the yield sign of aging, a reminder to older adults to allow a younger generation to move into the fast lane, it is important to keep affirming that life makes sense and has meaning even though death is closer and productivity lessened. Yet this means a shift in our way of seeing the world.

My months of writing led to renewal in my own life. Courage, strength, and joy grew with each month of working with the problems I set up. I found I was not tilting at windmills but at issues that many older adults face.

I do not claim to have come up with many answers. I am testing the waters. I merely state what I discovered. I live in an area where older adult ministries are as yet mostly a cloud on the horizon. The territory is big. The literature on the topic is extensive. The number of older adults is growing.

New models for looking at aging are developing in our society. God is doing a new thing with this generation of older adults who have received the gift of twenty to thirty additional years because of better health and technology.

Older adults once were highly respected and turned to for wisdom and advice. But their life knowledge became

obsolete in a quick shift to high technology, and their experience was discounted as also out of date. Then youth climbed onto the pedestal and received the applause. But they have also tumbled from the high place once accorded them. The mature middle-aged adult with power, energy, and public relations skills is the model for today's society. But older adults, because of their increasing numbers alone, will force society to consider them more. When their time comes, they will need to have something to say.

KATIE FUNK WIEBE
WICHITA, KANSAS
JUNE 1994

1

Specially Selected for You

You know you are old when the candles cost more than the cake.
Selected

The bright red printing on the brown envelope said loudly, *Dear Shopper:*
Look inside for offers specially selected for you!

The package had been sent from a large distributing house "specially" for me. Usually I throw such offers into the wastepaper basket. This time I slit open the heavy brown envelope and dumped out its contentscommercial coupons to be redeemed for the following products:

a laxative

arthritis pain medicine

denture adhesive undergarments designed for leakage control

bran flakes

a specially designed chair for people with back problems

door chimes to extend the sound of the doorbell

magnifier for reading

card shuffler

side-cutting nail clipper

night driver glasses

specially designed slippers for people with feet

that change in size with the time of day

a hearing aid

As I flipped over the glossy four-color advertisements, I felt myself deflating like a punctured tire. If these products were specially selected for me, who was I? What was in store for me? I did not want to be the person having to use these products, at least not all at the same time. But obviously there was some connection between them and my age.

A few years ago, I turned sixty-five. That was a big event. No little glitch in the road, but an all-out welcoming party to membership in the graying majority. Sixty-five was a benchmark no doubt about it.

My cousin Henry Funk sent me a specially designed membership card, making me, with due pomp and ceremony, junior member of the senior division of the Funk family clan. I felt almost as if I was being enrolled in an athletic club about to prepare for the Olympics. Now I know I was.

My daughter Joanna, a graphic artist, sent me a personally designed card that stated,

This is to certify that Katie Wiebe, having achieved sufficient experience and savoir faire, is now authorized to engage in spontaneous and outrageous behavior, including staying up past her bedtime, roaming the world, talking to strangers, and, of course, wearing purple whenever the mood strikes her.

She hadn't forgotten that I had once written that people would know I was old when I, like Jenny Joseph in her popular poem, "When I Am Old," wore purple with a red hat. Enclosed with her card was an outrageously beautiful purple and red silk scarf.

The family threw a coming-out party at a speciallyselected restaurant that caters to special events. No McDonalds was considered for such an occasion. They produced flowers and presents. A video camera was used to immortalize for all time my shape, size, and hair color at this turning point in my life, as well as any pearls of wisdom that might fall from my newly aged tongue.

"Tell us stories we've never heard before," commanded son James, as he pushed a microphone in front of my mouth. He apparently expected me to press a button in my memory bank and start spouting stories of the olden days.

That fall every medical insurance company in the whole of the United States somehow learned about this sixty-fifth birthday and offered a still better deal in supplemental insurance.

Obviously I had arrived somewhere. But where was I? I didn't really know. Four years later, as I write this, I feel fairly comfortable with myself.

But I wonder about seventy and seventy-five. Sixty was merely fifty-five extended and sixty-five was sixty extended. But it is hard to see sixty-five and seventy as part of eighty and eighty-five. And, if the actuarial tables are correct and I have inherited my mother's genes of longevity, it is hard to imagine what the next twenty to thirty years will bring. Mother was alive and in fairly good health at ninety-eight. She died a year later, her health having suddenly given way to a variety of medical problems. Ninety-eight is a long time to be old and waiting for the next transition.

Moving across the border into old age is frightening because of its uncertainty. I admit it openly. Will I become a couch potato? Will I turn into a cranky old woman? I anguish over which of the numerous physical disabilities

many older people experience will affect me. Hearing loss? (Noisy crowds bother me.) Eyesight? (I already wear trifocals. My mother had cataract surgery.) Arthritis? (Because I have tendinitis in one knee, when I get up from a kneeling position I look like a cow.) Loss of bone mass? (I broke an ankle last fall.) Forgetfulness? (Sometimes I can't remember which pocket of which coat I left my car keys in. Names of close friends may elude me.)

Most disconcerting is that I have little control over this cluster of losses. They invade and conquer without warning and without offering me a choice.

But what makes the journey into old age terrifying is that I hear no one beyond the middle years inviting me urgently and loudly to cross the border quickly because of its splendid advantages. A little child learning to walk has admiring fans in parents, siblings, and friends, cheering every faltering step. That cheering section was missing as I began to cross into the land of the aging. And that is the reason for this book.

I want a cheering section and can't find it. Therefore I want to learn how to cheer my own passage and that of others. And I can't before I know what I am cheering for.

The booing section is loud.

"I hate to think about growing old," said one friend.

"I don't even want to think about it," said another.

"Retirement scares me half to death," came from a professional.

"Retirement is most distressing," writes a retired minister. He feels shoved aside.

The newspapers carry their frightening articles about the elderly as sure suckers for bargains in shingling roofs or painting walls that turn into frauds. There are some cheery nursing homes. But one look into the front hall of

other nursing homes removes all joy for the journey that lies ahead. A few of the frail elderly sit in an untidy row near the front entrance, head sagging, half-asleep, yet hoping for a visitor to offer a crumb of hope to brighten the day. Some nursing homes keep them carefully out of public view. In my head I know that only about 5 percent of older adults end up in nursing homes. In my heart I can't believe it.

Older adults all kinds need cheerleaders or advocates for their journey, just as adolescents need youth leaders to coach and cheer them on.

I want to be a cheerleader.

I want others to cheer me on.

I want this part of the journey to have dignity and hope. I want this border crossing; this time between citizenships; between social uselessness and non-identity, on the one hand, and conscious journeying, on the other; to be overwhelmed with grace and joy.

I am convinced that God must have something in mind for older adults, a role that the church is not talking openly about yet. I want to find out what that something is.

At that sixty-fifth birthday I knew there was no turning back. Each birthday would come and go with the regularity of a digital clock until the battery ran down.

Some of us grew into adulthood with the assumption that truth was received once and for all, then we adults were on a safe journey. We made spiritual decisions at camp, or at mother's knee, or at the church altar. In young adulthood we figured out whom to marry, what kind of job to work at, and what worldview to adopt.

Then some of us accepted that growth stopped. An adult was a finished product. Adults lived on a spiritual plateau until they died. We assumed middle-aged and old-

er adults made few significant decisions or spiritual commitments to continued growing. Learning new facts and new approaches to living was not a viable consideration.

Amidst mail I received the year I was sixty-five was an invitation from a retirement center touting the many advantages of living there to enrich one's life. I found its message strangely unappealing as I read through this glossy four-color brochure. Then I figured it out.

This retirement center said much about what it did to provide topnotch meals, housing, exercise, and entertainment. It said little about how it encouraged residents to keep their minds stimulated and growing and to see themselves still on a journey, not coasting.

I also looked over a questionnaire prepared for church leaders seeking information about older members of the church. Again I was disappointed. The questions had mostly to do with maintenance-type issues, such as housing, finances, and health, and very little to do with the inner life, where the real battles of this transition are lost or won.

Though distributed through a church program, this public relations piece overlooked that older people have needs of the spirit, mind, and emotion that part of life where the real crossing is made to being a confident church and family elder. It overlooked that women and men my age receive the gift of a new period in life that people didn't have fifty years ago a gift of unmapped territory we are privileged to chart.

So I asked myself, What makes it hard to move into the land of the aging? Am I afraid that God will not come with me into this new stage of life? Why do I hesitate to step over the threshold? Why did the Israelites hold back at Kadesh-Barnea, the entrance to the Promised Land? Two

of the twelve spies came back with positive reports about the possibility of overcoming the inhabitants. But the Israelites listened to the ten with the negative report. Were they afraid God wouldn't go with them down the valley into Canaan even though God had promised the land to them?

The ancient Canaanites worshiped gods of nature, fertility gods in plain words, farmer gods. Baal was the god of earth and rain and sun, who ensured the rich harvest of grain. Were the Israelites troubled that Jehovah, who had provided manna miraculously in the wilderness, might not turn out to be like a Canaanite farmer god who could make crops flourish? In the wilderness, they hadn't learned to know God as an agricultural god who helped them with farming. In the wilderness God had worked miracles, producing manna, quail, and water not a healthy stand of grapes or grain.

Older adults facing the threshold of this last stage have both conscious and unconscious fears that old age may yet offer the greatest test of faith. This is the time when real living begins, real in the sense that this is the run for the finishing line. Everything up to this point was preparation for the run toward the tape. Some admit their fears. Most don't. They know only that God's divine power, incarnate in human flesh through Jesus Christ, will be sufficient for the time when one is especially vulnerable to the body's frailties and the indefiniteness of each day's activities.

Some older adults feed their fears on rumors that the needs of their particular age group are beyond God's power to help. The enemies are too many: loneliness, ill health, sometimes poverty, physical and emotional neglect and abuse by children. And loss of identity, of mobility, of friends, of family, of that wonderful sense of in-

vulnerability we thrive on earlier in life. Stories of these losses are as plentiful as the many grumblings of the ancient Israelites.

Older adults are encouraged to believe also that the real answers to their numerous needs don't come through a healing or prayer service but from the government. Political clout alone may provide money and services to make life easier for them. Technology, not God and the Christian community, has the key to the problems of aging.

Older adults remember that the past, when they had a daily routine and went to work, was comfortable and manageable. Older believers know who God was in relationship to their life as a person fully engaged with family and society. But who is God now, in this new limited role as an elder?

At sixty-five I wasn't sure. Sometimes I felt as if life was closing in. I listened to older women who also lived alone speak about not driving in the city at night; about not going for walks alone; about spending days without talking to anyone; about getting no phone calls; about getting no mail.

Did I have the promise of God's continuing help and presence with each successive year? What would I do with the thirty years that lay ahead if I lived at least as long as my mother?

If sixty-five had felt like a step down (even with the big birthday bash), retirement from a fulfilling occupation a year later was a plunge to the basement level. A number of messages told me this in no uncertain terms.

The first message came through strong and clear. My work at the college where I had taught for twenty-four years was finished. The school showed appreciation for my past work by awarding me the professor emeritus title.

But I was now as free as a farm animal penned in a barn all winter, then loosed in spring in a pasture of several square miles. The feeling was both exhilarating and terrifying.

The second message also rang clear. I might have retired, but society told me indirectly I should not think of myself as old or associate with the elderly, only with my own age group or those younger. I sense that some soon-to-be retirees consider old age a contagious disease, so they stay away from anyone whose hair is turning gray even if they're part of the same group. I cringed when people referred to my "retirement" as I sensed the meaning behind the words used up, on the shelf, finished.

The underlying messages were obvious. To let yourself look old, talk about being old, or associate with the elderly and enjoy them was treason to self. To connect with the elderly other than to acknowledge them as people you ministered *to* and cared *for*, not people you identified *with* and learned *from* meant your own death knell socially.

At an aging conference, I noticed that the people present, many of whom were well over sixty-five, kept talking about the elderly as "they," never "us." As long as they could separate themselves from these "old" people, they seemed to think they could keep the birthdays at bay.

I bumped into the third unwelcome message about aging before long. Older people are not to be taken seriously. Older people are to be endured, physically and socially nurtured, perhaps pampered, and that's about it.

Some consider a person of sixty-five a spent person. It's as if the warranty for a meaningful life expires at that age. I've encountered the stereotypical view that being older means being passive and dependent and on a steady decline until you reach the final home base.