

The Years of Ripening

Reflections on Aging in the Later Years

Joyce Rupp

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rupp, Joyce, author.

Title: The years of ripening : reflections on aging in the later years /
Joyce Rupp.

Description: Maryknoll, NY : Orbis Books, [2025] | Summary: "A companion volume to Vessels of Love, spiritual reflections on aging"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025005071 (print) | LCCN 2025005072 (ebook) | ISBN 9781626986381 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9798888660935 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Older people--Religious life. | Aging--Religious aspects---Christianity. | Christian life.

Classification: LCC BV4580 .R87 2025 (print) | LCC BV4580 (ebook) | DDC

248.8/5--dc23/eng20250505

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025005071>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025005072>

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INTRODUCTION

“Now I Become Myself”

*The thing you are ripening toward
is the fruit of your life.
It will make you bright inside,
no matter what you are outside.
It is a shining thing.*

~ Helen Nearing

By the time we reach our eighth decade we will have entered the stage of life known as Elderhood, the last portion of life where we engage with the ripening of our spiritual orchard. Throughout our past, we seeded and grew our positive qualities. Now, in old age, we complete what still needs maturation, while rejoicing over the sweet taste of what has already been gathered into the harvest. We have the graced time and spacious presence to reflect, integrate, and bring to wholeness the significant features of our individual transformation that were previously set aside or not given enough attention.

The well-known lines in one of Robert Frost’s poems,

But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,

are relevant in midlife but lose their potency when we reach eighty years. Now every day counts as never before. The reality of the road's ending looms closer. Our miles are no longer limitless. A lot of promises have been kept. Even if we live to be a hundred and five, the years will fly by quickly. So little time left. Now that I am in my early eighties, this thought does not produce dread. Rather, it creates a desire to live each day with a passion for living and increased spiritual attentiveness.

In the past, I lacked a thorough perception of what stirred within my deeper self because I was constantly rushing and pressing forward with the next thing to be accomplished on the "to do" list, intent on activating my fullest potential. But now my aged body will not allow hurrying. Neither will my mind. Both insist on slowing down. Consequently, the journey I am making as an elder has moved from a focus on the exterior realm of productivity to the interior realm of a contented presence. My urge to "do" has given way to a yearning to "be." I gain inner freedom as I release the "might do, could do, should do, and didn't do" insisting and scolding in the strained voice of my ego.

As you may have surmised by now, this book does not address issues of aging such as financial management, residential options, living wills, and medical insurance. *The Years of Ripening* focuses on personal transformation, the wonder and goodness of our hidden self, how the qualities of our personhood have been expressed, and in what ways we can claim ever more of the truest reality of our inner being. May Sarton's poetic verses in "Now I Become Myself" speak to this late-life occurrence. Her

perception inspires me to live the quiet grandeur of the elder years, to rejoice in the song of myself, and to gladly tend to the aspects of core goodness that await their completion.

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
"Hurry, you will be dead before _____"

...

As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root,
So all the poem is, can give,
Grows in me to become the song,
Made so and rooted so by love.

The developments in Elderhood provide yeasty occasions to become our clearest self. As old age takes place, our physical being naturally weakens and wrinkles. At the same time, our non-physical being smooths out with a peaceful satisfaction. The tight ridges of past failures recede and dark illusions fade as we increasingly trust our life to be a harmonious song "rooted so by love." This encourages us to shed our self-willed, false control until we become freed from what binds our spirit. We let go of who we imagined ourselves to be and grow in a transparency that reveals our seasoned-with-love self.

The Experience of Elderhood

Several years ago I received a message from Olive, whom I'd never met. Her honesty shook loose any misgivings I had about addressing the journey of elders. "I have your book on what you learned from your mother's aging (*Fly While You Still Have Wings*)," she wrote, "but now that I've turned ninety I need you to write one on very old age and its challenges—and I have to say, its scariness." Olive's message reminded me to avoid having this book be the type that urges "you can do anything at any age if you just give yourself to it." I've learned from those in their eighties and nineties that it's not a cheerleading voice they need to hear but a compassionate one. One that understands diminishment and decline, which is not to dismiss the joys and fulfilments inherent in old age.

I'm aiming for a presentation of what is great and not so great about Elderhood. Certain researchers and authors tend to depict later life as "the golden years." Yes, aging does encompass that, but it also includes corroded silver, rusty bronze, and chipped paint. Ask any older woman whose beloved spouse of five decades is now deceased, or a ninety-eight-year old whose severe arthritis confines him to a wheelchair. They will remind you that the last decades involve not only gifts but also gashes.

Numerous books on the topic of "aging" exist, many of them with titles using terms such as *conscious aging*, *creative aging*, *successful aging*, *mindful aging*, *healthy aging*. Most of these resources pertain to persons in their sixties and seventies. While some of the particulars directed to-

ward aging relate to the final quarter of life, much does not sufficiently address the increasing challenges that arise for a person eighty or older—the reality of death drawing much closer, a body definitely wearing out, fading energy, distractedness, inability to quickly recall details and names, continual downsizing of space and material items, fewer items (if any) on the bucket list, accumulating deaths of family members and friends, and medical issues rapidly increasing in size and seriousness.

Besides these undesirable features of the final years, numerous positive ones also emerge, including increased freedom to be one's self without concern for what others think and judge, little interest in the pressure to be professionally successful, easily recognizable joys, cherished memories, less need to “run around,” clearer insight and growing wisdom, sufficient time to spend with those counted as dear, a more peaceful spirit, a waning passion to take on projects to fix the world, an ever growing list of reasons for gratefulness, matured perception of what is truly meaningful and worthwhile, and the wideness of love that keeps expanding.

Best of all, the older we become, the more opportunities we have to develop the full potential of our goodness. Because of our less hurried life, the roots of selfless love have the space to grow stronger, and the fruits of that love can ripen into their fullest, juiciest flavors. Like other aged persons, I desire to strengthen this part of my being, to allow my inherent virtues to develop further. I do not want to miss a single piece of this precious life while trusting I can positively affect others by being a compassionate presence.

Elderhood Explorers

A year or so before poet Stanley Kunitz died at the age of one hundred, he spoke about getting back to writing after having been seriously ill: "I feel as though I am a traveler exploring territory that may not be wholly new, but it has reverberations and images that seem to have a collective presence. I don't know exactly where I am at this moment, in terms of the imaginative, creative process, but I know I am searching for something different from the terrain I was familiar with. . . . When I finally come to grips with my night vision, I'll know more clearly what it is I have in mind." A bit later in *The Wild Braid* Kunitz adds, "There seems to be a transformation going on in which I have a sense of a new life that I'm possessing. That I am not at all lost. I feel I have found myself, my strength. And I feel in possession of my destiny, not a victim of it."

I found the clarity and hope that Stanley Kunitz described regarding his inner exploration and future death to be a part of the lives of a group of women from age ninety to ninety-seven. When I first invited these members of my religious community to meet monthly, I proposed we name our gatherings "The Elderhood Explorers," describing my vision of our time together as "one of searching for deeper meaning, continued spiritual growth, and firmer peace in the ripening stage of Elderhood." I based this approach on a statement that Kathleen Dowling Singh makes in *The Grace of Aging*: "Aging can offer us the time to deliberately reorient ourselves toward the inner life, an infinitely more reliable refuge than anything the world can offer."

During the four years that we met, the elders' perceptive minds stayed open and attentive, even though their bodies grew increasingly frail. They would come into our gathering space using canes, wheelchairs, and walkers. Few managed to be free from those necessary aids. The sisters did not always immediately conjure up a detail from memory but they were fully alert to the content of the books and articles we discussed. They amazed me with how open, curious, and engaged they were in exploring their old age.

I also felt humbled by the sisters' honesty regarding how aging personally affected them. They awakened my understanding of late-life processes in countless ways, particularly in seeing how they differed from my then quite-active mid-seventies. Here are some comments I heard: "I don't think about hope so much as it is a time to rest." (At ease with slowing down.) "The things that used to be so important don't matter that much anymore." (Willingness to let go of what was once valued.) "God doesn't expect me to be perfect." (Acceptance of one's honest self.) "I've always had somebody to pull me out of the hole." (Gratitude for people who helped in the past and trusting someone to be there in the future.) "It takes me longer and longer to get dressed in the morning." (Progressive physical impairment.)

While I met with this group, I began delving into dozens of books and websites about aging. When the time drew near to begin writing *The Years of Ripening*, I also invited three dozen men and women to either respond to a written questionnaire or be personally interviewed about their approach to the final years. In contacting them, I sought confirmation of the topics relating to older persons that I planned to include. Their responses assured me that

I was on the right track. Since then, I've also received emails in which elders tell me of their situations. Some of these (whose names I've changed) are quoted with their permission in various essays. Each one corroborates my intuition and gleaned awareness that Elderhood deserves to be given as much attention as any of the earlier stages of adult development.

About This Book

The Years of Ripening does not approach aging as a right or wrong way to live. It is not my intent to lump older persons into one category by contending that the characteristics of Elderhood are true for every person. Each one has his or her own family history, individual personality, health condition, and life experience. No two persons manage to grow old in exactly the same manner. Some require assistance with ordinary tasks long before they are eighty, and others retain their adeptness at self and home care far into their nineties. Yet, commonalities do exist, enough to allow for a strong sense of kinship with other people making their way along the ever-changing route of Elderhood.

The contents of this book relate to the profound transition of personal transformation that takes place in old age, one in which death's insistent whisper in us becomes louder. We learn how to be at peace with who we are and how we are as we gradually accept the third stage of aging, which Hindu wisdom terms that of "the forest dweller." As we embrace the inward focus coming from this slowing down mode and trust the value of being a loving presence, we eventually slide into the final stage of adult transforma-

tion known as that of “the renunciate.” This is when elders pare down to the bare minimum, oftentimes becoming immobile and reliant on others for a good portion of self-care. As renunciates, we either choose to release our attachments, (both material and non-material), or they are wrenched from us by such things as ill health and cognitive impairment. This final stage signifies harvesting—like the dried husk of an ear of corn torn off to reveal the golden sustenance inside, or the shell of a walnut being cracked open so the nutrients can be retrieved. In this stripping down to the bare essentials, we gain what truly counts: an inner self overflowing with an abundance of ripened love available to those who enter our lives.

I invite you to walk into the orchard of Elderhood. *Your* orchard. Consider the valuable history found there. Taste the texture of your vast experience. Let the nectar of transparent love flow into and out of your heart. Welcome with grateful gladness the wonder of who you have been and are today. Enjoy your ripening spirit. Ready yourself for the final harvest.

If we approach our last years as an opportunity to bring the harvest to fruition, we will have aged well. We will have given a precious gift to those close to us and to the larger world as we freely offer the gift of the person we are, the one we have come to know, accept, and value. We will be like the father in Anchee Nin’s *Pearl of China*, living peacefully until we depart.

A week later, Papa stopped breathing.

Like a ripe melon, Papa hung happily on his vine before dropping to the ground.

All is not ended with our final departure. We leave behind the beauty and bounty that resided within our aged selves. Like a ripened melon on the vine, so the matured fruit of our loving heart and weathered wisdom leave a beneficial legacy to nurture a future generation.