Spirituality
Soul Seeing



"The Presentation in the Temple" by Byzantine Painter. Joseph (far left) and Mary (center) present Christ in the temple as his divinity is recognized by Simeon (right) and the prophetess Anna (left). (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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A lot of uncertainty exists in this precarious and troubled world, but one thing I am increasingly sure of is the wisdom and goodness residing within our older people. While some in our society ignore or readily dismiss aged persons as being a problem and lacking worth, elders in the last decades of life are revealing their ability to thrive and leave an enriching legacy for coming generations. I've spent the past seven years listening to and learning from these women and men.

Each week I spend Monday morning with two of these elders — my aunt and uncle, ages 97 and 98. Their astuteness shines through our conversations. A week ago, I asked tall, slightly leaning, uncle Beryl, "So, what's the good in the not-so-good of old age?" Without batting a wrinkled eyelid, he quipped, "Just waiting." I mused out loud, "Waiting for what?" To which he immediately explained, "Waiting to die."

To some ears this may sound dismal, but I know my faith-filled uncle. He holds a strong desire for full communion with Abiding Love. All else fades compared to this desire. Material possessions, once gained in multitude, now hold slight relevance. My uncle's yearning is one that grows with age, the timeless longing in the human heart as expressed in Psalm 63: "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you."

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My tiny-sized, white-haired aunt responded quite differently to my query, referring to the interior freedom that arrives with aging, "We have fewer years ahead and many behind us, so we spend more time in the past. We're looking at the choices and decisions made and what could have been different. Old age is about coming to peace with those things." An honest statement of hope and surrender, coming from a mother who has grieved numerous deaths, including two adult children and a grandchild. These sorrows plus her numerous hospitalizations have mellowed, not hardened, her compassionate heart.

These elders live from the inside out. They bookend their mornings and evenings by praying together. They've done so for years, dedicating themselves to a deeper spiritual life. No wonder their sights are set on full communion with the Holy One and

a hope-filled peace. They are mentors of the hope Jan Richardson describes in *Night Visions*, "Hope becomes easier to recognize when we learn that it rarely comes from outside us. More often it comes from within, emerging from the place where our deepest longings meet our willingness to make them real."

Two Biblical elders lived this type of hope. With just 13 verses in Luke's Gospel, he describes the wisdom resting in these old people (Luke 2:25-38). He introduces us to the dedicated sages, Simeon and Anna. We learn that Simeon is a city-dweller, "righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah." Simeon cared about what happened to his country. He was faithful to his inner life, one that put him in touch with hope beyond Israel's predicament and his own aging body.

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As for Anna, Luke wants his readers to know she is "a prophet … of great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four." Anna chose to live in a part of the temple called the Courtyard of Women. "She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day." Like Simeon, Anna focused on her spiritual wellsprings. With other women residing there, she would also have spun cloth used in the temple's rituals.

What especially inspires me about these two elders is their inner vision: an intuitive, sensitive perception of the Spirit moving within them. This kind of wisdom is gleaned by those who are attentive to both inner and outer aspects of life. No wonder then, that among the crowds of visitors to the temple it is Anna and Simeon who recognize Mary and Joseph's young child as being filled with incarnate love:

"Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in

peace … for my eyes have seen … a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Simeon waited a long time to have this moment of personal communion and to be assured of a future, peace-filled society.



(Unsplash/Jorge Lopez)

Luke's final statement about Anna tells us she, too, allowed herself to be guided by the Spirit: "At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." When Anna sees this couple with a young child, something inside her stirs with recognition. She is drawn toward the strangers and deliberately approaches them. Anna knows with a knowing that arises from faithfulness to prayer and attention to the deeper realms of one's self, that she is in the presence of the Holy. It is from this Spirit-filled recognition that Anna proclaims hope for the future of her people.

The aged Anna and Simeon are sages, mentors mirroring the effect of living interiorly. They are the kind of elders Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi describes as "activating their dormant powers of intuition … seers who feed wisdom back into society." In this era we desperately need our Annas and Simeons to keep us mentally and emotionally balanced when hope withers and uncertainty expands.

As we move through Advent and Christmas, pressed into the external realm of shopping, preparations and parties, we can quickly be consumed with hurry-up and get-a-lot-done. It would benefit us to look around and learn from the elders in our communities. Our country has an increasing number of men and women living into their 80s, 90s and beyond. These elders are everywhere, though easily passed by. They are our Anna and Simeon, our grandparents, uncles and aunts, neighbors and churchgoers. These sages are mentors of the heart. They teach us by their loving presence to be aware of our inner self where the light of Christ enkindles our hearts with hope.