



Living the Autumn of Life

Walking through retirement
beginnings and endings



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ISBN 978 1 80039 281 6
First published 2024
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
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Cover images by Zen Chung/pexels.com (top); Valiphotos/pixabay.com (bottom)

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Ministries

*With thanks to Paul Tournier
and all my third-age friends*

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all those who gave me hours of their time in 16 interviews. Thank you Alec, Bill, Brian, Christina, both Christines, David, Helen, Jonathan, Michael, Mike, Paul, Sue, Susan, Tim and Vicky. You were so patient with my 25 questions! You even let me dig deeper into your initial answers when I needed to. You gave me well-tryed advice as well as perceptive fresh questions. You were sources of new insights and also fortified some of my existing perceptions. Crucially you helped me believe that I wasn't the only one mad enough to think that trying to describe a conscious living of the autumn of our lives was a worthwhile pursuit.

My thanks also go to other anonymous characters. Some of you, by a chance remark, unwittingly opened a whole line of thought. Many more of you by your warm response to the initial theme of the book encouraged me to believe it was timely and needed.

Thank you Paddy McGlinchey, for steering me through the theological minefields of chapter 8 and heading off my more obvious over-simplifications.

My special thanks to my wife Helen, who contributed images and stories at various points. What you won't know was her encouragement when I couldn't find a word or, worse, got stuck or, worst of all, lost belief that I could do this at all and contemplated deleting all I had written. Thank you for always being there for me.

Introduction

Welcome to my world

Why this book?

I was drawn to write this book because I wanted to make sense of the stage of life that I am still living through. I realise that I began to be aware of something profoundly changing way back in 2011, when our youngest son left home. We drove him to start his first graduate job in the south of England and then had to drive back without him. It was the beginning of empty nesting and certainly a new stage of life. We drove north with a glowing setting sun in the west. I can still recall the feeling that I was seeing something special – the brighter colours together with the longer shadows and sharper contrasts.

I was 62 and, having passed 60, the question of when to retire had begun to raise its head. Work no longer stretched to an infinite horizon. I wondered then whether I was seeing the colours and perspectives of the evening of life. However, the longer I have lived since then, I realise that the time frame of the evening image is not really right. Even on a September evening in the UK, the night is not far away. And already a decade since my being 62 has come and gone. This metaphor of evening implies far too short a time frame. So at that point I didn't have a controlling metaphor to explore this shift, nor was it clear to me whether this transition was best understood as just being my age or was it something else?

During this period I began to notice that there didn't seem to be much written by Christians about this stage of life, which could be called being 'active elderly' or 'young-old'. Nor did it seem high on the list of church priorities. Understandably, in view of the declining proportion of young people in churches, the focus of books written and money spent is on reaching and then keeping children, youth, young adults and young families. The growth of Messy Church, school-based church and youth congregations are examples of this priority. There is, rightly, a humane emphasis on the spiritual care of the dependent elderly.¹ And there is also material on making thoughtful, caring, architectural provision for those older people still able to get to church, and recognising these people still have ministries to offer; they are not just recipients.

But what is written for people learning how to be retired, stretched by commitments to their wider family, some of whom may be far away, living with more in the diary than they expected, maybe looking for fresh outlets but not necessarily propping up existing ones any longer?

The little that I read at the start quickly convinced me that, whatever I called what was happening to me, it was not mainly about chronological age. Nor did everyone remotely fit into one neat box if you just define this stage of life by health. Sadly, I have known those who are chronically sick and those who died, in both youth and the so-called middle years. They and their relatives deserve our care and compassion. Conversely it is also a source of hope that there are those people who are remarkably fit in their 90s. I have been inspired and encouraged by the lives of people like Queen Elizabeth II, Captain Sir Tom Moore and Sir David Attenborough. They provide testimony that the role of attitude and the gift of enduring energy are crucial factors during this season of life. I have concluded that this stage is more defined by other factors than by the number of birthdays we have had. Bear in mind, too, that health has both physical and mental components. But the physical and mental health aspects will be the primary ones by which the ability for continued independent living is assessed, however positive and vibrant a person's inner attitude may be. When I first started thinking about this topic and reflected on my own state

of health, I toyed with calling the book *Creaky But Feisty* and started to make a mind map around it. That title may amuse, and it has been my lot to embody it, but it doesn't go wide enough.

It also isn't an image, and I was looking for one. During my 20-year research life working for Church Army, and trying to communicate what I was finding, I noticed that stating a principle tends to stifle engagement and conversation. Any responses tended to be binary – either approval or disagreement. Throwing out an image, on the other hand, tended to open conversation; people sensed themselves free to play with the picture or metaphor and apply it in unexpected directions. The result is richer, and the learning is deeper.

So this book deliberately brings to its readers a number of images. I doubt that the list of images is closed; I can't even know if my preferred is the best. But if a creative conversation follows, then I will be content. The book title tells you which one I chose. The season of autumn is a feature of the year that everybody knows; some may be especially drawn to it and call it their favourite one. It contains the glories of fruitful harvests, changing leaf colours and opening vistas, but it is also characterised by the loss of leaves, temperatures drifting downwards and less hours of light. It is those two intertwined themes of glory and loss that have dominated my perceptions. This book tries to unpack the contours of both realities and to insist that neither eclipses the other.

When is life's autumn?

Autumn marks an untidy end to summer. Those years which also contain an Indian summer make it especially hard to say when it actually starts; that warmth of the sun induces hope of an extended summer. By contrast, in 2022 I noted that the leaves were falling off the silver birches and chestnut trees as early as 24 July. Yet we can determine the calendar beginning of autumn, and I will give my understanding of that in this book.

It is equally true that autumn isn't dishonest about winter coming, and yet it celebrates its own distinct character. All this takes a fair time. In the annual calendar, it is no less than 13 weeks or 91 days. Maybe so it is in life. I am not what I was in the spring and summer of my life, nor mercifully am I in the state of physical dependence on others or of mental incompetence (though at times I wonder). Certainly I am not yet all that I shall be, when my winter is past, heaven's morning breaks and celestial spring has blossomed.

What then are the markers or borders of this autumnal stage of life? I have worked with these two markers: it begins with a person being aware that retirement is about to start, and it ends with realising that it won't be long before that person is no longer able to live independently. I know too that such an autumn, in the life of a given individual, might be only a few years or it could take several decades.

This is not a formally researched book. It's more like a bit of extended journalism in which I happen to be living out some of the story and watching others do the same. I freely admit that the story snippets this book contains, and the quotes from among those 16 I have interviewed, tend to be from reflective, candid and perceptive people. These are qualities I have especially valued. However, perhaps less helpfully, these folk were white British, middle class, middle income, existing Christians. One was ex-Catholic, one a Northumbria Community companion, three were Free Church and the rest Anglicans, as that's where most of my network of friends has fallen. I did achieve nearly equal numbers of women and men, and the length of their retirement varied from less than one year to over a quarter of a century. Their ages range from 63 to 87.

The least representative element was the disproportionate number of retired clergy, of whom I am one, not to mention a few recognised lay ministers. But at least the lay people outnumbered the clergy. What they all had in common was that they are among friends of whom I could ask a favour; namely two hours of their time to talk about their experiences, faced with 25 questions (found in the appendix). I realise these

are people whom life has treated fairly well, but I am certain their lives have not been all sunshine. Some readers may either think that this selection is too monochrome or that their own story is too different.

Also the book's content is somewhat narrow. I am aware that there are very deep transitions demanded of those who find they are now living alone. That might be either by their choice, by the force of unchosen circumstance or through bereavement. Neither does this book address the specific issues faced by the single person, the divorced or those living within emotionally dead marriages. It is not designed to offer wisdom to those living with a major tragedy, a life-threatening illness or in grinding poverty. There are specialist landmark books on some of these topics. What is common to all those human experiences is an experience of bereavement. It deserves literature of its own.

Who then is this book for?

As this book explores the beauty and fruits of autumn while noticing the leaves are falling, I doubt if it can be of much value for those people who are totally assured, who brim with self-confidence and seem to live full of trust and hope for the future. But I say to them – don't you notice that the leaves are falling? What do you make of that? Nor can I offer much help to those who are convinced the future is without hope, who believe that everything is dreadful and who may even wish they could end it all. I dare to say to them, would your friends say that your life has been totally without fruit? Are you of no value in yourself? Might God surprise you by the value in which he holds you? So tread with me some sort of middle ground to hold these two themes – glory and loss – in tension with one another.

I mention these two groups that I doubt I can write for, because I confess that I myself don't do well living with those people whom I find to be exhaustingly and indefatigably positive. Even the advent of a death, tragedy or disaster is met with a smiling face and cheerful words. Don't they hurt and suffer too? Are they immune to bereavement?

I ask myself whether they are truly heroic, yet wonder if it could be denial? Too often I come away from being with them not lifted up. Rather, I struggle with a sense of guilt that I can't be like them, and yet at the same time I remain unconvinced that they are being honest about living through hard realities.

So I was intrigued to find, quite by accident, at least one writer who thinks there is a cultural backdrop to what I saw as my own private struggle. Katherine May has been a university lecturer and is now an author and a podcaster. In her 2020 book *Wintering*, she comments on the prevalence of bland but positive social media posts supposedly sent to encourage people facing crises, such as 'Hang on in there' and 'You are stronger than you know'. I have met something similar in those people who describe their own profound discouragements and personal disasters as nothing but 'challenges', as though that word was all that needed to be said about how they felt and thought. May reflects: 'This is where we are now: endlessly cheerleading ourselves into positivity, while erasing the dirty underside of real life.' She asserts that this pressure urges that 'misery is not an option. We must continue looking jolly for the sake of the crowd.'² She then goes on to argue that unless we are honest about loss and sadness, we miss an important cue to adapt.





I meet this questionable ultra-positivity in two ways. I notice that funerals now have an enforced positivity by an exclusive focus on the celebration of the person's life, such that proper lament is excluded and lost. I meet it, too, in some younger adults and among those whom, in their onward and upward journey, have not yet met tragedy or profound disappointment. Nor, tellingly, have they hit the limits of what they are able to do. Looking back at my own springtime of life, I realise now that I had almost no idea what my own autumn would be like, and I regret how inwardly impatient I could be with my own much older family relatives.

I also struggle if I have too much contact with those unfortunate people for whom the glass is not merely half empty, but they are quite sure

that someone is drilling through the bottom of it. I find being with them is like being attached to a vacuum cleaner pipe that is never turned off, constantly sucking up everything that might be encouraging or transformative. In the end they drain the life out of me. Of course, they aren't manifestations of J.K. Rowling's dementors, who intentionally suck happiness out of all they meet, but you may know what I mean. I simply don't know what would help them enough to escape the prison they occupy. Meeting them, I am reminded of Jesus' penetrating question to the man lying for 38 years by the pool of Siloam: 'Do you want to get well?' (John 5:6).

This book, then, is for those who, like me, are themselves wandering through this autumn stage, wondering whether anyone else is being truly honest about what it is like. It may speak to those able to be glad of the highs, the satisfaction, the fulfilment and the freedom. Yet they are also those who are able to mourn the losses, notice the waning of powers, finding they are in a place they haven't been before. Perhaps worst of all, their previous stages of life have not prepared them much for this one. They know the leaves are falling off the trees. If you, like me, waver between hope and fear, and you know both doubt and trust, then let this book open an honest conversation between those of us who are living this stage, so that we notice and draw upon its glory with gratitude and wonder. And we face the realism – of watching falling leaves, of us living through it being our autumn, which will end sooner or much later in the season of winter. I hope it might also be read by those now old enough that they see their parents and relatives living through autumn. I wish I had understood more of this when I was in my 40s.

Application questions

-  How do you find you are reacting so far to autumn being an image of where you are now in life? Try to identify what is making you feel positive or negative about it.
-  Whose life and attitudes have inspired you for this stage of life? Jot down what they taught you.
-  How full or empty is your 'glass'? How do you best deal with those who see the glass differently?
-  Picking up Rohr's viewpoint (p. 17), how is it going identifying the 'second half content' to put in the 'first half container' you have built?



2

The fruits of living in freedom

Sacred Space is an annual publication from the Irish Jesuits containing a year's readings from the gospels with a brief commentary for each day. Across the years the series has placed significant emphasis on God-given freedom as part of setting the context in which a week's structured daily prayer occurs. Take 3–9 April 2022 as one example: 'By God's grace I was born to live in freedom. Free to enjoy the pleasures he created for me. Dear Lord, grant that I may live as you intended, with complete confidence in your loving care.'¹

I have noticed that many of my interviewees were very positive about the years of their retirement. Freedom was a word that came up often. This freedom was composed of many elements.

'Free to...' factors

A key aspect was *freedom to choose*: what to do; what not to do; what to take up; and what to put down. At times their descriptions of this freedom came across with lightness of spirit. There was real freedom to say no to invitations that in the past would have made sense or might have been taken dutifully, and also the freedom to yes. With a freer diary, one woman noticed she was responding to other people's innovative suggestions with 'Yes, why not?'

An associated and linked freedom was *freedom to spend time*. This would include time both for existing friends, in some cases deliberately building those relationships into stronger friendships, and time to make new friends. A few, including myself, have found some of those friendships cross international boundaries. These links, in particular, take blocks of time in order to travel to meet and when there, to stay for longer periods of time. In my case this wider set of relationships includes reinvigorating existing friendships with others from college days, via email and Zoom. The retirement gift of more time was also directed to doing those things that my interviewees enjoyed, whether indulging in a variety of cultural activities, watching or participating in sport, or developing hobbies.

Linked to the gift of spending time is the *freedom to notice*. One illustration of this is that my time spent birdwatching has increased during retirement. I have even bought a telescope. Telescopes are a bit unwieldy to use, but the magnification provides entrancing detail. I think that binoculars aid bird spotters, but a telescope turns you into a birdwatcher. More widely, one of my interviewees saw her retirement as the opportunity to notice ‘the now’ more. She related it to the R.S. Thomas poem ‘The Bright Field’, in which he reflects on the sun illuminating a small field and likens it to Moses being drawn to the burning bush.

Freed-up time was also linked by many interviewees with being *free to have time with the family*. I notice that the notion of family is more elastic than I realised. The closer end is the obvious, should I say familiar, relationships we have with children and grandchildren. This then can be stretched to include revived connections with extended family members, long-lost cousins and hitherto obscure members of the family tree. Martin, one of my two brothers, has been doing extensive research on the English and German sides of our family. Pursuing one’s ancestry is much advertised today. Beyond this, some couples without children have evolved family-like surrogate relationships with younger or similar age Christians which is a mutual delight and support, but which takes time to nurture and foster. I also know of single

people who have been informally adopted by a nuclear family and the time they spend together is highly valued. It's all time directed to relationships, and retirement is a chance to open those doors wider.

But this feature of more free time is neither an unalloyed benefit nor an easily defensible space. My most recently retired interviewee described its onset, and its time, as a liminal space, a time of leaving certitude and entering uncertain transition, and to what? I too recall the feeling that the early weeks and months felt more like a sabbatical from work than total release from it. I chose to mark that start in September 2017 with a trip round Europe, including memorable train journeys in the Alps. The suggestion of sabbatical carried the implication that a return to work was coming. Of course it wasn't, the sabbatical illusion was a form of denial, and it was only coming back home to apparent idleness which drove that home to me. 'Now what?' became a real question.

As for defending freed-up time, one classic observation of retirees is that they have never been so busy. They thought: 'When I retire, I'll have plenty of time to do whatever I want.' Yeah, right! It seems not only does work expand to fill the time available, but also that life abhors a vacuum. One interviewee described this stage as not just busy but giddy. She had been retired ten years and foresaw with some accuracy that her retirement would begin with an active phase and only much later a more passive one. In the gradual, or maybe sharp, transition that has begun to come for her now, the time issue will rear its head again.

Some interviewees spoke of finding more *time to pray*, which is true for me too. No less than five out of 14 people mentioned this, one way or another, and they were all clergy – people paid to pray, but only finding enough space for that now. I didn't push this issue with any of them at the time, as until I read all the transcripts I hadn't seen this pattern. Some expressed it as exploring Ignatian spirituality, others as going deeper or becoming more reflective, or moving towards the contemplative. Two women found they were drawn into intercession for the mess in the world, one with frequent tears over news items. She sees prayer for transformation as a calling for retired people.

All these routes require uncontested space, a background that preserves silence, and time. They have in common the questions ‘How is God at work in my life?’ and ‘How does God wish to be at work?’ These are good questions at any time of life, but great ones in the autumn of life when we have less ahead of us than behind us. I even wonder whether the other freedoms I have noted in this chapter would be so liberating without some of those steps forward in prayer. If our autumns are to be fruitful, they need to be purposeful; to find purpose and direction we need a spiritual compass. That is part of the benefit of a life of prayer.

The interviewees’ responses, and the fact that these changes had only come at this stage in their lives, made me reflect on my years of service in local churches and my decades of research. I admit that I seldom found the freedom or length of uncluttered time which I now can and do give to prayer and spiritual reading. What follows is only what I have found works for me. It may be that broad elements of it are transferable to others, for they are elements of classic liturgical worship: praise, confession, engaging with scripture, prayer for others and a dismissal blessing.

I’m useless before breakfast, so prayer comes after it. I have a favourite chair in our study/dining room and a door that is firmly shut. The shape of this time is provided through the Morning Prayer liturgy from *Celtic Daily Prayer*. Within it, at points, I talk back to God from either a line from the liturgy that strikes me or what I notice in Bible readings. These are from *The Daily Bible*, a lectionary compiled by Michael Perry in 1980, and from *Sacred Space*, mentioned at the start of this chapter. Intercessions for family members, friends, contacts and issues are spread across the week on a sheet of paper, which means that I focus on nine to ten people per day. I also pray through the daily prayer diaries from BRF Ministries, Church Army and Northumbria Community.






That may make this time sound very organised and fixed. Yes, the shape is fixed but the human–divine conversation within it is not. The tail piece, dismissal or signing-off procedure, has become important to me, yet it remains fresh. I always finish with the two Christ-centred

collects from *Celtic Daily Prayer*: ‘Christ as a light illumine and guide me,’ and, ‘May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you.’ I am still surprised that when I get up, often an hour has gone by. And often I notice that I am both stilled and more prepared for the day. Retirement has given me freedom to have time.

Don’t think that this experience of more time to pray is an even one. As one interviewee, David, a spiritual director, put it: ‘God has become more real... at times. He’s naughty; he does have coffee breaks... sometimes quite long ones.’ I asked him why that is so. He continued: ‘Firstly, that is life. If you were going to live on cloud nine all the time, it would become cloud zero and you would be always looking for something greater.’ He then added that to have life spun out, rather than all in one lump, is much more treasurable. It’s similar with food. Most meals are just totally ordinary but occasionally you go out or plan to stay in, and you have a feast that you will remember. So it is in my life of prayer – much of it is ordinary fare and a daily discipline, but occasionally I enter a mountaintop moment of enlightenment.

Till now I’ve explored what interviewees highlighted as freedom to. There is also freedom from.

Application questions

-  What freedoms have come your way in your own autumn of life?
-  Do you notice more 'freedom to' or 'freedom from' factors? Why might that be?
-  Tournier invites us to see life as an adventure. How does that strike you? Is that thought inviting or intimidating?
-  Willard wrote that we live in a 'God bathed and God permeated world.' You may or may not agree. If you thought that way too, how different would it make living your autumn of life?
-  What further new adventures could exist for you?



How can we best approach the season between retiring and becoming dependent?

Autumn is a time of gains and losses: fruit being harvested and leaves falling. This book charts the experience of living through both realities, drawn from the author's own life and from the views of interviewees. Informed by historical and contemporary reading, it offers snapshots of later life, taken against a backdrop of ageism in society and church. George Lings reflects on the identity of the 'active elderly', and considers through a biblical lens the challenges and opportunities that this season brings.



After 22 years of parish ministry, **George Lings** worked for Church Army from 1997 to 2017 directing its Research Unit, publishing stories and statistics of young churches. He is currently a vice-president of BRF Ministries. George is married to Helen and they have three children and six grandchildren.

