**Longevity & Spirituality** – homily for May 31, 2015 at Capital UU – Peter Scales

Our little Unitarian Universalist congregation has about forty members and a dozen ‘Friends’ and adherents. Let’s say we have fifty ‘regulars’. Two of those regulars are 100 years old. Three more are 93, 91 and 90. There must be six regulars who are in their 80s, and a dozen in their 70s. Those in their 60s seem pretty youthful, even to the handful of us who are in our 50s. The two people under 40 stand out in our pond of active longevity.

It is against that demographic backdrop that I conceived and wrote this homily. The homily is not directly about the fifty Capital UU regulars but I had us in mind as I thought of connections between spirituality, religiosity and healthy aging.

Does spirituality contribute to longevity? Does church attendance contribute to longevity? Do “church people” live longer or better than “non-church people”?

We have heard two related homilies during the past six months and there is still interest in the topic. Dr. John Pullyblank talked about “Mental Health, Atheism, and the Religious/Spiritual” and Dr. Ingrid Friesen spoke about “Memory and Aging: Is Decline Inevitable?”

A few definitions: last November John Pullyblank said, “Defined loosely, religiosity refers to personal beliefs in a God or gods and organized or institutional practices and beliefs…whereas spirituality is described as a belief in a higher power and/or mystical experiences accompanied by less participation in traditional forms of worship.” People can be religious, i.e. they attend services or conduct the rites, but not spiritual; we also know that people can be spiritual, having a deep sense of connection to the divine, while not being religious at all.

Writing in *Psychology Today* in 2013, social work professor Dr. Mario Garrett concluded, “Spirituality does not confer longevity although having meaning in life does -- not necessarily spiritual. Especially if you compare people’s religious participation with other older adults participating in other social events, the difference in longevity between religious and non-religious participants disappears. Being religious by itself does not promote longevity, but it might help how you are treated should you lose your independence.”

Howard S. Friedman and Leslie R. Martin [in *The Longevity Project: Surprising Discoveries for Health and Long Life from the Landmark Eight-Decade Study* – which started in 1921 at Princeton University] found that the character trait of conscientiousness (being thrifty, persistent, detail-oriented, and responsible) was the best predictor of longevity. Those people who — through an often-complex pattern of persistence, prudence, hard work, and close involvement with friends and communities — headed down meaningful, interesting life paths and, as we have illustrated, found their way back to these healthy paths each time they were pushed off the road. [this paragraph is an excerpt from a book review by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat]

First Nations perspective [www.fnha.ca/wellness/our-history-our-health]: “In pre-contact times, First Nations enjoyed good health due to an active lifestyle and healthy traditional diets. Oral history suggests good health and longevity. This good health included ceremonial, spiritual, and physical elements. In addition, there were customary laws regarding food and hygiene that assisted the people in staying healthy.” Today many Saanich First Nations people are Roman Catholic… in some cases third and fourth generation Roman Catholic… and I expect that their spiritual lives help them in much the same way as it helps non-First Nations people.

The following is excerpted from social psychologist David Myers [www.davidmyers.org/Brix?pageID=52, *Psychology* (textbook), 8th edition, by David G. Myers, copyright 2007 by Worth Publishers, New York]: “A U.S. National Health Interview Survey followed 21,204 people over 8 years. After controlling for age, sex, race, and region, researchers found that nonattenders were [1.87 times] more likely to have died than were those attending more than weekly. [snip] These correlational findings do not indicate that nonattenders who start attending services and change nothing else will live … longer. But they do indicate that as a predictor of health and longevity, religious involvement rivals non-smoking and exercise effects.” Religiously active people have healthier life-styles; for example, they smoke and drink less. Social support is another variable that helps explain the faith factor. For Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, faith is not solo spirituality but a communal experience that helps satisfy the need to belong. Researchers speculate [… about] the stress protection and enhanced well-being associated with a coherent worldview, a sense of hope for the long-term future, feelings of ultimate acceptance, and the relaxed meditation of prayer or Sabbath observance. Although the religion-health correlation is yet to be fully explained, Harold Pincus (1997), deputy medical director of the American Psychiatric Association, believes these findings "have made clear that anyone involved in providing health care services...cannot ignore...the important connections between spirituality, religion, and health."

Last week I asked Durga for her opinion about spirituality. “Spirituality supports physical and mental health and successful aging and understanding meaning of life. For me, God is like a railing. When I walk and I’m trembling, I grasp the rail and I am steady.” This helps with healthy aging. “Besides, it is better to have spiritual things in our heads than to have garbage.” This seems to me like very practical advice!

I want to suggest that social action groups – Kinsmen, Kiwanis, Freemasonry, Rotary – likely serve most of the functions that religious groups do. I occasionally attended Rotary lunches with Dad – he jokingly referred to his Rotary club as his church – and noted the similarities regarding social connection, encouragement to thoughts of higher things, and sense of purpose. Each of these organizations has a board with president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, etc., and I am hoping that time served on a church board is time that will be added to the end of my life. If this piques your interest, please speak to our Nominating Committee.

Elsie Farr turned 100 yesterday…she has been attending Church of England, or Presbyterian, or Unitarian services regularly since the First World War. I asked Elsie, Are you a spiritual person? “There’s a god in me. God is a spirit, and I think I’ve got the spirit. How can there be an exterior god? It’s got to be in you.” I asked if church-going helps a person live longer? “I’ve got a conscience, and that came from church training. So the answer is yes, religion has helped me live longer. I knew that if I did wrong I would be punished.”

There is an inspirational TED Talk which you can watch when you get home [www.ted.com/talks/dan\_buettner\_how\_to\_live\_to\_be\_100]. In 2009 Dan Buettner spoke about communities of 100-year-old people in Sardinia, Okinawa and among Seventh Day Adventists in the United States. The study found nine factors that appeared to lead to healthy aging, and these factors included taking time to slow down and pray or meditate, as well as the importance of life purpose and community. John Pullyblank reminded us of the writings of Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl, who said that a sense of meaning and higher purpose was among the top things that helped people survive adversity. And what is life if not a collection of opportunities to face adversity?

What do you think about this topic? Discussion…

Conclusion: Does spirituality contribute to longevity? Does church attendance contribute to longevity? Do “church people” live longer or better than “non-church people”?