

## **The Gift of Growing Old**

*A Talk given at Sacred Heart Church, Uxbridge, ON (September 24, 2023)*

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I remember an incident that happened at a 5 pm Mass, the first time I ever preached at Our Lady of Grace Church, in Aurora. It was 2008, the year I was ordained. I'm sure I spoke on divine providence, for all throughout my life that's been my favorite theme to speak and write about, but what I remember on that day is something that happened just before the Mass. I went over to the door of the sacristy to look at the congregation, and I saw an old man making his way up to the front, to sit down. He looked to be late 80s, possibly early 90s. And I remember having a bit of a panic attack. I was given an insight that I don't think I ever had before. I looked at him and thought to myself: "What am I going to say to him? What can I teach him? He's twice my age. I don't have anything to teach him. He should be the one teaching me." Those were not the exact words, but they express the thought I had. And I felt genuinely embarrassed to be preaching: here I am, a "young punk", who is going to go up there and preach to this man and all the others in the congregation who are twice my age. I was struck with a bit of fear, panic, and shame. But I had to shake it off and just not think about it: "Just go out there and say what you have to say. There's nothing you can do about it now". But that experience stayed with me all these years, and returned to me recently. And I believe that the experience, the thought itself, was a grace. The reason I say that is because such a thought would not have come naturally to me, at least I don't think so.

But what was that insight? It was that he knows more than I do, he's lived, he has so much more experience. That's why I find it somewhat annoying when a young priest, newly ordained, speaks to a congregation of mostly elderly people, as if they were fifth graders. I think to myself: "For crying out loud, they've been going to daily mass longer than you've lived on this earth".

One thing I really admire about my good friend, a priest of the Hamilton diocese, is the way he speaks to those at the nursing home that he visits and says Mass for; he preaches like he would preach to a regular congregation. And they appreciate it. They tell him so. Because so often they are spoken to as if they just graduated from kindergarten.

I retired from teaching high school in 2019, but a few years before I could retire, I remember telling my class that I have a friend who could have retired 8 or 9 years prior, but he's still teaching. I said to them: "I think my friend might be afraid to retire". I then told them that I would be able to retire in 2017 but that I am probably going to continue on for a couple of years. Then one student put up her hand and asked me: "Are you afraid to retire?" I was stuck for an answer. I said: "I'm not sure. I might be". The first year was not that easy. I said to a friend of mine, Barry White, a retired principal of St. Michael's Choir school: "We should write a book together on the spirituality of retirement". He agreed, because he was looking for one, but came up empty. Of course, we agreed that we'd have to be retired for a number of years at least, to learn something about it, before trying to write anything on this.

I'm still not quite ready to write a book on this, I'm still putting things together, and I think I'll be doing that for a long time now. Perhaps when I'm 75 or so.

In any case, I want to make an important point. I've been teaching Marriage Prep for the archdiocese since my retirement, and what I've discovered about myself and about the couples that I teach is the following: The couples I talk to are for the most part in their 30s, in their 40s, and I realize that I have this tendency to assume that they know certain things. So, I think to myself, "No need to get into that, they know this, or they know that", etc. What

I've come to discover is that they don't. They really don't know. And the reason is that they lack the necessary experience, and experience is very important. It has tremendous significance. I tend to forget how much information experience has brought me, information I did not have when I was in my 30s and 40s. Nor did I have the time to reflect upon the experience I had acquired at that point in my life. I was too busy to reflect adequately upon it; I had meetings to attend, lessons and exams to prepare, young athletes to coach, etc. I was acquiring valuable experience, but I had no time to seriously ponder and reflect upon that experience. Also, the information that I derived from that experience was very limited. There was still much more information that I needed that only later life experience would provide.

So I had to learn to stop assuming that people in their 20s, 30s and 40s know this or that or the other thing with respect to marriage, for example, or with respect to how to teach a group of students, the importance of diplomacy, or with respect to the limitations of human knowledge, etc. All sorts of things. And I don't think I'm alone in this. I think a lot of people in their 60s and 70s make similar assumptions.

Allow me to make another important point. It was Rene Descartes, the Father of Modern Philosophy who coined the phrase: *cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am. He was trying to discover one thing that he can be absolutely certain of, one principle that he cannot doubt, and from that principle he was going to deduce everything else. Well, he discovered that he cannot doubt that he's doubting. To doubt that he's doubting is to doubt, and to doubt is to think, and if I think, I must exist. Hence, "I think, therefore I am". That principle had a powerful influence on modern philosophy, changing its direction and the problems philosophy was inclined to deal with from that point onwards.

St. Augustine, however, said not *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), rather he said: *fallor ergo sum*: "I err, therefore I am". It was error, being mistaken, that was the important datum that characterizes the human person. Responding to the Skeptics, Augustine says, in the City of God, book 11, chapter 26: "If I am mistaken, I exist". We may not be certain of much in this world, but we are at the very least certain that we exist, because we are so often mistaken about things.

I err, therefore I am. This brings me to a very important point, something that is difficult for young people to appreciate. We are almost always wrong. Allow me to explain. One of my favorite saints is St. Thomas More, who had his head cut off by Henry VIII when he was 57 years old. When I was young, I'd think about being 57. It seemed a long way off. But I do remember thinking that it would be pretty cool to be 57. It seemed old to me at one time. I actually determined, through an Online site, the exact number of days Thomas More lived in his life, and determined the exact day and year of my life when I would reach the same number of days he lived, somewhere in my 57th year—it was a day in February if I recall correctly. Now, all throughout my life I was continually learning, reading, studying, and revising my views on this or that. But when I hit 50, things were a bit different. You see, 30s or 40s is still young, and when you revise your point of view on something, it's easy not to think about the implications of that, because after all, 30s or 40s is young. But when a major revision took place in my 50s, a change of perspective, I remember thinking to myself: "Wow, it took me 53 years to learn this", or "It took me 56 years to learn that", and that process has not stopped. I'm 62, and I'm still saying things like that: "It took me 61 years to figure that out, and yet it is really quite simple. Why did it take so long?"

Now, I was given a new lease on teaching during my last 5 years in the classroom; the school at which I taught introduced the IB program, and the central course in that program is the Theory of Knowledge. I was asked to

teach that, because it's a branch of philosophy. It was very hard to teach that to young people, because they just haven't lived long enough to understand the important points about knowledge. It's a tremendous program, but one of my criticisms is that it presupposes a maturity level that kids just don't have at that age—perhaps in their late 20s, but not late teens, so it was tricky teaching that course. But one of the things I tried to get them to understand is that knowledge is difficult to achieve. Much of what we have in our heads is not really knowledge at all. It may feel like knowledge, we often think it is knowledge, but it is very often a matter of belief. It might be a well warranted belief, or a not so well warranted belief, but rarely is it knowledge in the strict sense of that word. Our conclusions are for the most part drawn on the basis of information that we have at the time, but we tend to forget that our set of information is limited and often deficient. With more information, we are forced to draw a different conclusion. The problem with being young is that we remember those times when we were right, but quickly forget those times we were wrong. We tend not to pay too much attention to the times when we were wrong. It feels much better to be right. And, interestingly enough, being wrong feels the same way as being right. So, we can come to a reasoned conclusion on the basis of deficient information and feel exhilaration. It was hard to get young students to appreciate the fact that “feeling right” is not an indication or sign that you really are right.

And so I got into the habit of paying close attention to the times when I discovered that I was wrong about this or that or the other thing, or made some inference that I eventually discovered that was mistaken, an inference about a person or situation, because I intended to use them as examples for my Theory of Knowledge class. For instance, I recall a student of mine who sits at the back of the class, that day sitting with his head down while I'm teaching something important. He lists up his head and gives a big sigh. It appeared to me that he was bored out of his tree, and he's not trying to hide it at all. I thought to myself, “What's his problem?” I continued to teach, and he did it again. Big sigh. I started to get angry inside, but I decided to leave it. He did it again, and I finally blew up. I stopped everything, pointed him out and said: “If you don't want to be here, get out. You expect me to do a song and dance? You think I'm here to entertain you?” And he just looked up at me in shock and said nothing. I could feel my blood boiling.

When the ball rang, I thought to myself: “Should I go up to him and ask him what's going on?” Thank God I did: “What's going on with you?” I said.

He said: “Sorry sir, it's just that I'm feeling nauseous. Ever since I woke up this morning, I've been feeling as if I am going to throw up. It was like that in the 1st and 2nd period”.

As you can imagine, I felt like a tiny piece of rabbit turd at that very moment. I apologized to him and said to him: “Why didn't you say anything?” I felt so bad and thought about it for the rest of the day. Another example of a mistaken inference to use in my Theory of Knowledge class.

Those are the kinds of things I'd look for to use as examples. On the basis of information, we interpret, we form a hypothesis, and instead of testing that hypothesis, we typically draw a conclusion that makes sense to us. The problem is that there are 10 other possible hypotheses that also make good sense, but we tend to settle on the worst possible hypothesis, losing sight of the fact that there are other possibilities.

Good scientists know not to trust the first hypothesis, but the rest of us typically don't. That's why good scientists will not speak with a rhetoric of certainty, but will offer their thoughts as a tentative conclusion. Most people outside the world of science, however, tend to speak very dogmatically, especially young people.

What is interesting is that when I entered my 50s, I could no longer hide behind the youthful number 30 or 40. Fifties just felt older. It felt like I'd crossed a milestone. I am no longer young, or so I thought. So, as life continued to go on and I continued to study theology, philosophy, history, etc., I continued to discover, for example, that I was mistaken 30 years ago when I had that debate with so and so, or 20 years ago when discussing this issue, etc., but it was not a painful experience because I was used to it, spending so many years looking for examples of cognitive error to bring up in class. What was also interesting for me to think about is that I was so certain back then. And of course, this process continues. Lately I've been reading some 19th century non-Catholic theologians, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anglican, and I have to say, I very often feel like a beginner all over again.

Now, for some people, that might be an unpleasant experience; for me it has become a rather exhilarating experience. It's like time travel. Going back in time and meeting people that I soon discover are much smarter than I am and who thought of things centuries before I ever did and wrote about them with a depth that I can only dream of. Indeed, technology continues to improve, a steady trajectory upwards, like a 45-degree angle, so we have no use for a 30-year-old computer. But wisdom does not work like that, philosophy, theology, insight, does not work like that at all. We can actually progress technologically, but go backwards in terms of wisdom and insight, which is what we see on a cultural level, because of our worship of youth.

This is why these years are a gift, and not a curse. We are told that we reach our prime in our 30s. After that, it's downhill. I remember playing tennis with a friend of mine: we'd play every summer, and I was pretty fast. I could react quickly. But I recall the day I just watched the tennis ball go right by me, while my mind was saying to my body, "Go, get that, you can get that, you've done it a thousand times, that's easy". My body just took its time, and the ball sailed right by. I was in my 40s. I knew that I was now past my physical prime.

And that's the point: that's just the physical level. We don't decline intellectually. It might be difficult to recall facts like we used to when we were younger, but spiritually, we do not necessarily decline. So, it all depends on what it is we value most. If the physical is the center of our lives, then it's downhill from this point on. But if we value spirituality, if we value intelligence, wisdom, insight, then we're really just getting started.

I remember making a similar point during a mission I was asked to preach in Ottawa, that when you finally learn how to be a teacher, when you are finally getting the hang of it, getting a real handle on it and enjoying it, you are one or two years away from retirement. It takes that long. I remember saying to myself: "I feel I'm just getting started, and it'll be time to retire in a year and a half." My friend Steve Stokl is a psychiatrist, and he read that in an article I wrote, and he said to me: "I'm just getting started", and he's older than I am. He reflects upon the mistakes he's made as a young psychiatrist and at this time, after 38 years of practice, he now feels he's really getting the hang of this. The good news for him is that he does not have to retire—not that teachers do, but after a certain age, it is very tiring to have to stand up all day in a classroom, attend meetings, etc.

But the point is: we're just getting started. 30s are not the prime of life. In our 50s, we're moving into our prime; 60s, 70s, 80s, these are the spiritual prime. These are the years in which we are given the time to reflect upon the years of experience we've had. We have the time to reflect upon that huge and unique reservoir of experience and make connections. In fact, those connections are made in silence. I once visited a man in prison over the course of a summer, and he was in isolation for his own safety. He said to me that he's never had so much silence in his life, and what would happen is that memories would come to the surface like bubbles, and he'd get certain insights from that, and he would make decisions on the basis of those memories. That's what happens in silence, especially silence

in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament—and that's why it is very important for Churches to be open during the day. This is the time and stage in life that the Lord calls us to spend time with him in silence, to really descend into that region within us where we are completely alone with God, that region that no one else will ever have access to—not even in eternity, that region within where God alone waits for us and loves you as if you are the only one that exists. It is from that region that we find lasting intimacy, and that region is so brightly illuminated—because God who is light from light dwells there—it is so bright that it blinds us and is experienced by us as darkness. But it's really light. And the more time we spend in that interior region, the more our spiritual eyes are adjusted to that light, and the resulting illumination influences the way we see the world outside of us. The world becomes brighter, and we begin to see that it all comes from God and announces God in some specific way. And when we look back, we see now what we might not have been able to see at the time. Jean-Pierre de Caussade writes:

There is no moment when God is not present with us under the appearance of some task or duty. Everything that takes place within us, around us, and through us involves and hides his divine action. That action is really and truly present, but hidden; therefore, we do not recognize its workings until it has ceased. If we could penetrate the veil that hides it, and if we were vigilant and attentive, God would reveal himself, and we would recognize his action in everything happening to us. At every event we would exclaim, "It is the Lord!" (Jn 21:7), and we would see each circumstance of our life as a special gift from him. We would regard creatures as weak instruments in the hands of an all-powerful Workman; we would easily recognize that we lack nothing, and that God's watchful care supplies the needs of every moment. If we had faith, we would be grateful to all creatures. We would cherish them and, in our hearts, thank them that through the hand of God they serve us and aid the work of our perfection.

Our own unique life experience is the content of his providence in our lives. Every moment is packed with divine meaning and purpose. In that silence, we reflect upon that life experience, much of it forgotten, and we allow God to bring to our minds certain insights into the meaning of the parts of that vast experience, and these will be unique to us, insights that others need and only you can provide.

This brings me to another important point I'd like to make that underscores the uniqueness of your own experience. To do so, I'd like to employ an analogy. Think of the taxonomy of the sciences, the various branches of a science that there are, i.e., branches of chemistry, such as biochemistry, organic chemistry, synthetic organic chemistry, or branches of psychology: cognitive psychology, environmental psychology, humanistic psychology, etc.

In 1911, there were only two branches of Astronomy, and two branches of Optics. In 1970, however, there were 10 specialties of Optics, and 26 specialties of Astronomy. And currently, there are so many more branches of psychology than there were when I began to study: social psychology, forensic psychology, clinical neuropsychology, positive psychology, abnormal psychology, clinical psychology, evolutionary psychology, industrial psychology, and the list goes on.

How does this happen? How is it that the sciences become increasingly complex, with more and more branches? It all begins with the question. The word question comes from the Latin *querrere*, which means to quest, to journey. To pose a question is to position oneself for a journey, an avenue of inquiry. If I decide to go down this avenue rather than that avenue, I will discover things, houses, types of trees perhaps, whatever, that I would not have discovered had I taken a different avenue. What happens in the sciences is that an individual scientist asks a different kind of question, because he's interested in a different problem to solve, perhaps as a result of the situation he finds himself

in. And posing a different question takes one down a different avenue of inquiry, and that opens up a whole new world to discover. And so, we have forensic psychology as well as positive psychology, both rooted in two different problems that two different psychologists wanted to solve. What we are interested in determines what it is we notice. For example, I can walk for an hour with my daughter through a mall and at the end of that hour, she will have noticed things that I had no clue about. She'll say that she saw this many people with a Louis Vuitton purse, and that lady is wearing very expensive high-end shoes, and that woman is rich, because that sweater is high-end, etc. I've noticed nothing like that. Interest plays a similar role in the sciences. One physicist is interested in solving certain problems, and so asks different questions, which lead to a whole new branch of that science.

But it's the same with us. Each person here has different interests, each person was and is interested in different problems to solve in their lives, which has led each of us to ask different questions, which take us down different avenues, and those problems are rooted in our unique situation, our unique circumstances. Each one of us is a "branch" unto ourselves, a world unto ourselves. Your world, your experiences, your knowledge, are unique. In some ways they may dovetail with those of others, which is why friendships are usually formed, but there is also a world of differences between friends.

Each one of us, in particular those in their 60s, 70s, 80s, etc., has a unique world of experience and knowledge that others simply do not have, and it is so easy to assume they have it, so easy to assume that since we live in the same world, our experiences are pretty much the same. They are not. They are not the same because we are not the same. The world is inexhaustibly complex. There are aspects to this world that have not been uncovered yet, and will only be uncovered through very specific questions that have not yet been asked, and there are insights that others have had in 1885, for example, that took me 61 years to appreciate; for it took me that long to ask the same question that some others asked that long ago.

We live in a society that doesn't get this, because it values the physical above all, the body, the pleasures of the body. It doesn't get the spiritual, the philosophical, the theological, the artistic, etc., at least not on a large scale. We are taught to love others primarily for what they do for us in terms of pleasure, such as athletes that provide entertainment, hockey and basketball players for example, we sign contracts with single players for millions of dollars so that they will play for us and provide entertainment, we value good looking actors, physically fit actors, etc. But in terms of the potential wisdom and insight that those past their physical prime can offer the world, perennial insights, we don't value. We don't see the value, because this culture is focused entirely on this world, not on the next, the temporal, not the eternal.

But that's our vocation. You have a rich world of experience that is unique, a unique source of knowledge, and our vocation is to spend time reflecting, in the presence of God, in silence, on that rich experience and allowing the Lord to bring to the surface insights that those in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and even 50s do not possess. They can't possibly possess them. They don't have the information, the data, they haven't lived long enough and they haven't spent enough time thinking about the experience they already have.

And finally, that's why we must become a more listening Church, a Church that really is ready to listen to you. That's the direction Pope Francis is taking the Church. He points out that we need to be a more listening Church. His experience in South America has brought him to this point. It is very interesting to watch what's happening in the Church today with respect to the upcoming Synod. Initially, I was only getting information on the Synod from certain online journals, and the articles I read were rather negative. That's all I was reading. And I heard a woman, a

consecrated virgin in our parish, talk positively about the Synod. I sent her one of these negative articles, and she replied saying that she really takes issue with that article. She urged me to go to the CCCB web site and read the Continental document on the Synod, so I did. And it really was interesting, to hear from people all over the world, what their concerns were, and it had nothing to do with Church teaching on this or that, on the hot button issues of the day, etc. Their concerns had more to do with relationships. People all around the world were talking about their parishes, i.e., the new priest who would come in and make all sorts of changes without consulting anyone in the parish, or the clericalism that persists, the divide between the clergy and the laity, and things like that.

But the online journals I was reading that spoke negatively about the Synod were talking on a different level, a more abstract level. They were thinking in terms of teachings, issues, moral principles, problems and questions, in the fear that these were going to be changed by dissenting bishops. But I didn't find that in the Continental document. Pope Francis is not thinking in terms of issues, teachings, moral problems, but rather in terms of concrete relationships: what do people encounter when they walk into a parish, perhaps for the first time in 30 years? That's the level that Francis is operating on. Concrete, flesh and blood human persons. He's been very critical of clericalism, the clerical elite with all the answers to the world's problems: "You, the laity, just pray, pay, and obey. If you have questions, we'll provide the answers". He's been critical of that attitude, which has not completely died at this point in time. He envisions a more listening Church. And I've had enough experiences since ordination in 2008 to know that this is precisely what is needed in the Church, that is, the direction we need to go.

But listen to who? Well, to you. Not necessarily in terms of Church doctrine or moral issues, but in terms of the unique insights that only you can provide, because you have a rich treasure house of experience that is specific to you. God's providence bears upon our concrete circumstances. He is in control, providentially governing every moment of our lives. We look back on our lives and we realize that our greatest disappointments turned out to be our greatest blessings, we become less doctrinaire because we've had so much experience in being wrong, and we look back and see genuine miracles that have occurred.

I visit a nursing home in Aurora/Oak Ridges, and there's a 90-year-old woman in a wheelchair who reads so much and who has tremendous wisdom. Every time I sit with her, I write notes when I get home. On one visit, she told me about her son, who purchased a house up north and paid about a million for it back then—now it would be 2 or 3 million. But he discovered later on that the retaining wall on the property was beginning to collapse. He asked his son, an engineer, to have a look at it and his son informed him that this would probably cost about \$300,000 to repair, money which he of course did not have. Another problem was that the entire house would eventually slip into the valley, so he had to sell that house and do it quickly. About 100 people came to look at the house to buy it but of course when they found out about the retaining wall and the repairs that were needed, they decided they were just not interested. It looked like they were not going to sell this house at all and even the real estate agent was beginning to despair. But his mother said to him that she is going to pray and that he will sell this house, that he must have faith, and she said to me that she prayed next to her window right there, pointing to the window at the nursing home, and prayed all night Wednesday, throughout the night, and the next day a couple came to see the house, both of whom were engineers who had a developmentally disabled son who really loved the area, especially the forest area behind the house, and they decided to buy. They had the ideas to fix the retaining wall. This woman's son was so pleased that he ran to the church and fell on his knees and thanked God and he became a daily communicant. He had a genius level mind and worked for Microsoft as well as in high level banking, and when he was downtown, he would often buy food for the homeless on the street, but he would sit with them and eat next to

them, pizza or whatever. She said that one day a man walked by, looked at him and said to him: "Why don't you get a job, you bum". And walked off.

What a tremendous story. Talk about mistaken inferences. He died in December of 2021. But it is a great story because it does show the power of prayer, the tremendous faith of this mother, and the influence that she has had on her son. And she's a great source of joy in the nursing home as well. When she dies, there's really going to be a big hole there, for she brings so much to the other patients and the nurses. But this is just one story among many in her life. And each of us has these in our lives.

We in the Church have to start paying attention to the people among us. Individual persons are profoundly interesting. I am reminded of the one morning when Francis Hill and I went to visit our best friend Father Don Sanvido in Kitchener, Ontario. I would typically wake up early, and this one morning I went down to the living room to pray the Breviary, and after finishing, I looked up and saw this large bookshelf and noticed that he had the latest edition of Butler's four volume Lives of the Saints. I got up and went over to it, closed my eyes, picked a volume at random, and I kept my eyes closed and opened the book, and put my finger on a page. Wherever my finger landed, I would read the life of that saint. The first one I landed on was an unknown saint from the third century. I read the summary, which was about a page. But I remember, immediately after finishing it, feeling exhilarated. Her life was so interesting and inspiring to read. So, I did it again, closed my eyes and randomly picked a volume, opened it up, put my finger on a page, and this time I got a sixth century saint, totally unheard of, a male saint this time. It was an entirely different life than the previous, but once again, I felt it in my body. It was like I just drank a glass of good quality orange juice.

But it is not just the lives of saints that are so interesting. I find that almost everyone's life is profoundly interesting, when you stop and actually inquire of their lives. Again, although we live in the same world, the life of each one is made up of myriads of unique permutations. Which brings me to an important point I'd like to make. There are three people in my life, all of them priests, who were/are widely loved. The first priest was from the Archdiocese of Washington D.C., who back in 1979 picked me up hitchhiking outside of Columbus, Ohio, and who was the turning point in my life. He was a great friend from that point onwards. He witnessed our marriage, baptized our daughter, etc. He was murdered on June 8th, 2000, in Germantown, Maryland. The rectory was robbed and the housekeeper found him dead the next morning, stabbed to death. I remember that day looking at the Washington Post online and seeing, on the front page, the face of Monsignor Tom Wells. I was told that this was the only time that the Washington Post spoke highly of the Church. The headline read "Widely beloved priest Murdered". And he was widely loved. Going anywhere with him was always somewhat frustrating, because no matter where we were, someone would know him and come up to him. The other priest friend of mine, Father Don Sanvido, whom I just mentioned, is also widely loved. He is retired now, but he is still pestered by all sorts of former parishioners to do weddings, funerals, Masses, etc. And the third priest in my life who is also widely loved is Father Frank Kelly, a Salesian of Don Bosco, originally from Brooklyn, NY. When I reflect back on these three priests, I often wondered what it was that made them so widely loved. It certainly was not any kind of theological or moral liberalism, for they are very faithful to Catholic teaching and were always willing to preach the hard and difficult truths, much more than I am. The reason they are so widely loved is that they have a genuine interest in people. When you meet them, they are genuinely interested in you. They want to know about you. They ask about you, they listen to you with great interest, about your life, what you do, how you got there, your unique gifts, and they are genuinely delighted in you. This is not typical.

I used to point out to my Theory of Knowledge students that you could be standing in line at a Tim Hortons and you see this old man sitting alone with a coffee, and he's a non-entity to you, and you are a non-entity to him, but if you were to sit down in front of him and ask him to tell you about himself for the next hour or two, a whole new world would open up before you and you wouldn't see that person the same way again. He'd have a definition and a life that would radiate.

And think of a cemetery, so many tombstones, but each one represents a rich world that is beyond us. Even if a thick biography were written about one of them, the biography would not capture all there is to know about this person, but only slivers of that person's life. And yet there are millions of tombstones. There is no doubt in my mind that the first few eons of heaven, which will be joyful beyond our imagining, will consist in the reading of biographies, not necessarily in print, of course. We will spend ages of ages, eons, (the Greek word is *aiionios*) revealing our world to others and receiving their offering of their world to us. Just think of how much fascination there is in reading a good biography, and yet the ones we read are always so incomplete. We don't even know ourselves, except very imperfectly. And think too of the joy of being understood, of having someone pay serious attention to us.

Instead of communication, we now have robots for nursing homes. On the CTV morning show, there was a segment on robots for the elderly, to reduce loneliness. They talk to you, call you by name, can even laugh, and they all seemed to agree that this was wonderful, "awesome" was the word. No one seemed to notice something seriously pathological about this. No sense of the mystery of the human person and what communication really is.

It's not easy to realize this today, because those advanced in age are told in various subtle ways that their days are past, and that it is the youth who are our future. But it really begins with us realizing that we have this treasure house of experience and potential wisdom within us that is unique, and which the world needs.