

## Growing Older – Gratefully and Gracefully

Review of

*On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity & Getting Old*

By Parker J. Palmer

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Reviewed by **Kathleen Noone Deignan, CND**

Over the past year a congenial circle of seniors, mostly from North America, has been gathering to explore “Eldering in Grace” through the Deignan Institute for Earth and Spirit at Iona University. One evening a month we virtually came together facilitated by Dr. Danny Martin to dialogue mindfully about array of concerns that preoccupy those of us blessed enough to be living into the grace of elderhood. The themes and conversations have been rich and deep, affording perfect strangers the chance to become engaging companions for the final trek of this marvellous, perilous earthly journey. We have been for each other a safe space and welcoming place to listen deeply and compassionately to the alternations of resilience and anxiety that set the mood of this last arc of time while we have time. It has been good. Even the actual elderying part. It has been blessing. (If you wish to join us, please contact me at [kdeignan@iona.edu](mailto:kdeignan@iona.edu) and I will send you our invitations.) Little did we realize during our year of convening that a familiar and celebrated guide had offered a resource that will surely enrich future gatherings in the pattern of a contemplative summation of the personal, historical, psychological, relational and ultimately spiritual itinerary each of us is making. Thanks are due, then, for such a testament of a life intentionally lived from a wisdom teacher all of us doubtlessly know, or know of: Parker J. Palmer. An American author, educator and activist, he is a singular voice illuminating issues of education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. To many of us he has been a gifted and courageous comrade, speaking his clarities to our culture and communities for decades. A prolific author who has published ten books and numerous essays and poems during his career, he is, in the words of Krista Tippett, a great mentor with “the spirit of a poet and to the stature of a prophet.”

Like many of us Boomers, Parker Palmer has lived through the several decades of upheaval that inform the stories of all sexagenarians, septuagenarians, octogenarians and nonagenarians. For our benefit and his own integrity, the social philosopher Palmer made a vocation of writing and teaching about life in the turbulent world. We have been beneficiaries of his clarity and comprehension concerning the challenges of faithful citizenship and Christian discipleship especially in the United States. During the ongoing crises of the later twentieth century to the present and against the

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backdrop of the contemporary American enterprise, he wielded his pen – in the internal forum of self-reflection and the external forum of public presentation – as a potent instrument of resistance to deformation by the empire. In this way, he boldly composed a life as a public intellectual and moral guide, honest and humble, exposing his and our vulnerabilities in striving to become whole in a fragmenting world. Now in his richly lived ninth decade, Palmer demonstrates the elder’s need to take stock, to put in order and to decipher the manifold meanings of the mystery of making our way through space and time as a person, a partner, a life-long participant in the evolution of this living, thinking commune of Earth. With his signature style and grit, Palmer demonstrates in seven-storied chapters, that the farther we stagger or stride toward the culmination of our time, the more we desire to see it whole. We want to see it with the gaze of gratitude and compassion.

Palmer titled this personal summa *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity & Getting Old* – a fine name for the ultimate verge of existence. Palmer’s narrative, however, is not laser-focused on death and dying – nor on aging as such. Rather he has composed a work of memoir accounting for himself and us the ways he has authored a life of meaning, of conscience, of service and care. In recounting his own life, he instructs and invites us to do the same as an elder’s practice of setting in a wide frame the privileged seasons of living into one’s seniority. What he offers is not a book about mortality but about ongoing vitality, and the unnameable bestowals of grace that gives us length of days. What he offers is a template for our own life-review.

Palmer’s autobiographical meditations are laid out neither sequentially nor chronologically but thematically, giving whole chapters to those formative events or encounters that have shaped his life. Among them the chapter most relevant to all of us in the International Thomas Merton Society is the power and presence of that prophetic monk who became Palmer’s traveling companion for half a century. Sound familiar? Doubtless each of us has made in our own words a similar tribute and testimony: “I met Thomas Merton a year after he died. I met him through his writing and through the communion that lies ‘beyond words,’ met him in the seamless way good friends meet again and again after a long time apart. Without Merton’s friendship and the hope it has given me over the past 45 years, I’m not sure I could have kept faith with my vocation, even as imperfectly as I have” (60-61). For Merton disciples the relevant chapter in this multi-foci book is titled “Getting Real: From Illusion to Reality” (53-83), where Palmer describes the effects of the life-changing encounter with Merton. His early Protestant upbringing left him seeking for something more vital than “a head full of religious ideas.” Yearning for a lived experience of Christian life he one day listened to a taped talk that Thomas Merton had given to his young novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Echoing his beloved desert masters, Merton challenged them to inquire about the authenticity of each one’s actual life before setting out to cultivate a spiritual life. As Merton learned from those earliest wisdom teachers, there needs to be a daily examen of one’s actual habits of living toward wholesomeness before embarking on a contemplative life. Palmer took to heart this daily challenge to unmask the false selves that layer up on us arising from the internal forum – the voices in our head – and from social projections. Over the years Merton taught him how to undertake the subtle work of self-inquiry, of daily examen, so that spirituality would not be another kind of mask set upon our anxious existence. Rather, the habit of self-witnessing is the very process of unmasking till we and others can behold the actual shining forth of a truer self.

Palmer begins his Merton chapter with a confession that he became a contemplative by catastrophe, not unlike his mentor. Nor would he have arrived at a practice of life-long self-

examination had he not experienced with Merton “a friendship, a love, a rescue.” With Merton he discovers that “contemplation is any way one has of penetrating illusion and touching reality” (57). With this broad-band guidance system Palmer sets out on a life-path committed to an authenticity he embraced as his particular virtue – one might say, his personal charisma. It leads him to embark on a journey toward well-being from a life of disorientation, confusion and depression toward profound relationality and compassion: self-compassion and social compassion. He credits Merton for ultimately guiding him toward his own worthiness beyond all self-recrimination. In this commitment to seeing and saying all things true, Palmer’s book celebrates Merton’s real presence as real wisdom – the saving grace of his life.

Reading Palmer’s seasoned meditations one can see the influence of Merton everywhere. He took seriously the challenge to live marginally in his personal, social and political commitments, and cultivated the inspiration to become a writer and teacher like his mentor. Not just in the quest for an authentic and vital self, Palmer vowed to be a revitaliser of others by working to restore the integrity of the nation’s distressed social fabric as a community organizer, and later as guide for the Quaker living–learning community at Pendle Hill near Philadelphia. Undergirding it all were his own native monastic orientations. Early on Palmer heard and responded to Merton’s silent “dog-whistle” to the souls of countless monastics without monasteries who made a sacred path by walking into the wounds of the world. Like so many others who have been under the suasion of Thomas Merton, Palmer found in his redemptive writings enough orientation and specific direction to move from the margins to the heart of every matter: racism, militarism, plutocracy, ecological desecration, inter-religious dialogue, cultural disorientation and the spiritual hunger famishing so many in the modern world. In his kaleidoscopic awareness there was ever the sense of the merciful, hidden wholeness which only the contemplative eye can see.

Not unlike Merton, Parker Palmer also struggled with doubt and depression and the need and desire for perpetual conversion. Merton has inspired countless souls to become attentive witnesses to the movements of spirit-life in them. Merton the spiritual journalist par excellence, modelled for Palmer his signature practice of mindfully tracking the days and seasons of one’s life in self-reflective, narrative ways that awakened in both of them the gift of poetry. At the end of this rich chapter in homage to Thomas Merton, Palmer offers a prayer-poem celebrating the gift of Merton’s blessing on his life. “Welcome home” is about a long trek taken in snow blown woods in zero weather. It summarizes the salvific bestowal of a guiding presence that never failed him:

I stopped on a rise to catch my breath as the sun, setting through bare bone trees, falls upon my face, fierce and full of life. Breathing easy now, breathing with the Earth, I suddenly feel accepted – feel myself stand on my own ground, strong, deep rooted as a tree – while time and all these troubles disappear. And when (who knows how long?) I move on down the trail and find my ancient burdens returning, I stopped once more to say no to them – not here, not now, not ever again – reclaiming the welcome home the woods have given me. (83)

As Parker Palmer, teacher and storyteller, knows well, this world, this country has great need of authentic elders beset as we are by a grave epidemic of infantilism even at the highest levels of the political order. How welcome, then, this book about human maturing as we all inevitably are facing “the brink of everything.” It is at once a catechesis for eldering in grace, and an invitation to memoir with him as a practice toward wise eldering.