

The bigger picture

by [Peter S. Hawkins](#) in the [January 30, 2002](#) issue

My guess is that most middle-aged people when prodded to consider “aging” think immediately about what the flesh is heir to. In my case, there is the hair once “prematurely” gray now (without excuse) white. The root canals. The face that looks increasingly lived-in, the lower back that threatens to go out. Like vultures circling, the American Association of Retired Persons invites membership just before the 50th birthday; after it, *Modern Maturity* continually threatens to show up in the mailbox. In sum, the view from 54 is not entirely a happy picture, although the only available alternative to growing older is a great deal less appealing.

It is not only the body, however, that changes with age. There is also one’s relationship to God and to what we speak of as the “spiritual life.” As in everything else, what it means to believe changes over the years. There is no solid state; rather, children have one version of faith, teenagers another, and so on into old age. Inevitably, therefore, some kinds of religious experience come to the fore while others recede.

Dramatic conversions, for instance, seem appropriate either to adolescents or to those desperate for a major change. For such folk it may seem possible, even desirable, to be born again: to fall off a horse and take a new name, to stumble about in a dark wood and grab whatever hand is suddenly there. But for those over 50? Discoveries tend to be muted, the “still small voice” more frequent than thunder or lightning. Losses mount (especially during wartime or in an epidemic) and you learn the limits of who you are and what you can expect.

Gratitude, then, seems the virtue of choice, not the young person’s courage or the elder’s patience. Big plans look suspiciously hollow and the sky is no longer the limit. Earth is the limit, and humility comes as a matter of course when you realize how very close to the humus we all are.

And God? God is less easily spoken about, more audible in silence or between the lines than in this or that formulation. Likewise religion: the rules of yesteryear, the demand for clarity, for what is pure and absolute, give way to a more

improvisational understanding of everything.

An example from my own life. I remember when I was in my 20s, in graduate school, that two of my friends became Christians. It happened quickly: rather than join me for brunch after my churchgoing, as was our weekly custom, they decided one Sunday to come with me to the liturgy. The service seemed like standard fare to me, but the two of them were swept away—so much so that at the appropriate time they tearfully wended their way to the altar and received communion. Several months passed and they asked the rector if they could be married in the church. The following year, they presented themselves for baptism.

Hmmm. I had a master of divinity degree and knew that baptism was called the “rite of Christian initiation” for a reason: it was where you started. Then came the Eucharist. *Then* holy matrimony.

Sometime before their baptism—I was to be godfather for both—I recall speaking to the priest who had charmed them with his preaching on their very first Sunday, who received their marriage vows and who then poured water over their heads in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. I asked him—my brow wrinkled, my thin lips pressed together—if he was at all uncomfortable with the order of their sacramental life. Wasn’t baptism supposed to make everything else happen? Hadn’t he instructed them? What would the bishop say? He looked at me with weary disbelief (the gaze of a 50-something encountering a young man’s Invincible Ignorance) and replied, “Well, lovey, it didn’t work that way for them.”

God didn’t. God often doesn’t. The pious young (despite youth’s general reputation for rebellion) are uncomfortable with the way he plays hide and seek, shows up in the wrong places, overturns furniture, breaks rules. We need the order, the expectations. Little by little, however, these constructs can seem like the next best thing to reality that is always enlarging boundaries, stretching envelopes.

I am speaking for myself here, of course, and not for the many white-haired ecclesiastics who would regard these opinions as hopelessly jejune. Authorities are invariably older men, curmudgeons in fact or in the making, whose numbers would seem to invalidate my claim that 50 marks an opening up. Even in my own case, moreover, the generalizations I have made must be qualified for even me to buy them. Increasing respect for the mystery of life, for instance, has not led me to a tolerance of murk. My belief in an improvisational God does not mean that I could

stomach improvised liturgies week after week. Structures are important and distinctions need to be made. Baptism *is* the Christian rite of initiation (at least most of the time) and participation in communion comes with a larger commitment of faith (except when it happens to be the first step toward faithfulness).

Yet the qualifying parentheses mount and the rules require their exceptions. It was not always so. When I was a teenager, I loved the clarity of catechisms, the possibility that there was an answer to every question—a text to give proof. The impulse is still there, but experience is the great teacher and lets the questions remain unanswered. And why shouldn't they remain open and the horizon be a luminous, receding, hopeful blank?

For me, Father James Flye put it best decades ago, at an adult education hour held between services in my parish's parochial school dining room. Father Flye was well known as the friend and mentor of the writer James Agee. Despite his diffidence, not to mention his advanced years, Father Flye had been asked to speak about his faith in "personal terms"—it was the 1970s, after all. I recall that he gave a brief history of his vocation and some considerations on "the church today." I remember looking surreptitiously at my watch, hoping that before the hour was over he would reveal something not yet published about Agee. He did not.

Instead, as the 11:15 early birds came foraging for coffee, he stopped speaking when he arrived where he wanted to end. He said something like this: "The older I get, the more I realize that God is an ocean. A vast ocean. There is no far shore I can see, no bottom. The picture, you see, is always bigger; the ocean just goes on."

Maybe he said something else that I don't remember. For the longest time, we all just sat there. The silence made me nervous, and I recall wondering if this ancient man (hunched over, eyes watery and foot tapping) had finally "lost it." But no. Father Flye had just finished giving us the bigger picture in his own personal terms: the horizon limitless, the boundary between sky and sea lost in radiance. There was no reason to worry about the time or to say anything more; nor did any of us even think of moving. We were in the presence of an old man with a mature faith—someone who had grown up into God.