

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MOM — AND THANKS

My mother turns 95 May 1 and it got me to thinking about all the lessons she taught me with her life. I found myself realizing that I am the woman I am today in large part due to her influence. And I am very grateful. But often in our youth-oriented society our seniors tend to be pushed to the side and even worse, ignored and their wisdom lost to us.

The latest electronic gadget is in. Things of just a few years ago are seen as antiques. The Fisher Price farm my children played with is now a collector's piece and "could bring you a lot of money," according to a recent on-line news story. A friend recently sent me an email filled with memories of a simpler age—phones with party lines, full service gas stations, home delivery of milk, pick-up ball games in the street, doors left unlocked at night, Howdy Doody, the Shadow, and green stamps. What could anyone who lived in those "good old days" have to tell us in this "post-modern" age?

Often without realizing it we perpetuate that way of thinking. Everyone has a favorite "mother" quote—"Consider the source;" "If everyone else jumps off the bridge are you going to do that too?" "Always wear clean underwear—you never know when you'll be in an accident;" "You're better than that. Don't stoop to their level;" "Cheaters never win and winners never cheat." And so it goes.

We tend to chuckle at these maxims and sometimes dismiss the people and era that produced them, but we have much to learn from people who have not only survived the Great Depression, two World Wars, and myriad social changes—to say nothing of our immigrant and refugee parishioners who had to leave everything behind to escape wars and genocide. Even in their aging they are teaching us how to live with and accept diminishment as their bodies and minds wear out.

One of the traditions of the Burundian families is respect and reverence for their elders. If there is a problem in the community it is the elders who are consulted and looked to for leadership and advice. Though they have adopted many American ways, our African teens say that revering and listening to their elders is a cultural tradition they want to keep. You can hear that echoed in the short documentary they did about Burundi. (Check it out on our web page www.saint-leo.org. Go to publications and then to videos)

What could you learn if you sat down with one of the elders in your family and simply listened? You could ask about their childhoods, their families, schools, neighborhoods, jobs and happy and sad times in their lives. How did they make it through? What part did their faith play? One of our Burundian elders who brought a tattered prayer book with her to America says it was her faith that enabled her to forgive those who oppressed and slaughtered members of her family. Follow the pace of the one you are interviewing. As you sit with your elder you're likely to find that you will be amazed by the depth of their sacrifice, courage, hope, humor, and humility. And my guess is that you'll want more time with them.

One of the great gifts my parents have given us is writing their life stories. They're treasures we'll pass on to our children and grandchildren. In some ways, they are kind of like chapters in the Bible that record the stories of our elders in faith. Looked at that way, we just might want to curl up with the Bible and get to know our elders—complete with their fidelity and flaws. Who knows, we might discover a family resemblance?

—Angela Anno, Pastoral Associate

