



*Our lives are meant to be useful
and full in our older years.*

By Martine Leavitt

I've always thought it a poignant moment in the scriptures when great men, like Jacob, Enos, and Mormon, tell us, suddenly, that they "began to be old" (see Jacob 7:26; Enos 1:25; Mormon 6:6).

I knew I had begun to be old when one Sunday I forgot to take my reading glasses to church, and I couldn't see the words in the hymnbook. That was no surprise. What surprised me was discovering that, in singing the hymns for so many decades, I had unconsciously memorized them. It all worked out.

I knew I'd begun to be old when the missionaries all looked 12 years old to me. At church, people stopped calling me by my first name: it's always Sister Leavitt now. They're giving me the veneration due the aged. I've noticed that my stamina is not what it was, and I have many aches and pains and little signs that my age is not, as some say, just a number.

Of course, with age comes many blessings: grandchildren; the wonderful sense that you have accomplished a thing or two; a deeper understanding, perhaps, of the meaning of life. Still, in my new status as a senior citizen, I've put more thought into what it means for a Latter-day Saint to be old. I have heard the phrase "aging gracefully," and I've pondered what that might mean in the perspective of gospel living.

Getting Old "with Style"

I remember when President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) began to be old and first appeared in general conference with a cane. He said: "People are talking about why in the world I'm walking with a cane. . . . Well, I saw that Brigham Young used a cane. John Taylor had a cane, and Wilford Woodruff had a cane, and President Grant had a cane in his old age. And I've seen President McKay with a cane and Spencer Kimball with a cane, and I'm just trying to get in style."¹

Now that I've begun to be old, I have begun to pay more attention to the example of those who have been old before me and to how I might do it with style.

Out in the world, aging is spoken of, at times, as something slightly sad or even preventable: "Well, if you'd just taken care of yourself, this wouldn't be happening to you!" Another worldly view of aging sends the message that we are entitled to a life of meaningless relaxation after all those years of hard work.

I'm coming to the understanding that neither of these notions is accurate. Yes, I should care for my physical body even into my older years, but I haven't done anything wrong by getting old. And yes, I may be retired from my day job, but the example of the prophets and apostles says that I don't want to retire into years of endless



relaxation. There are some things, it appears, that we can never retire from.

Keeping Covenants

Those who have begun to be old may have tread the covenant path diligently for many years. It is a beaten path, and we have walked it steadily enough and long enough that it no longer sprouts weeds. But perhaps with every age comes some obstacle along the path, small or large temptations to deviate from the path.

For me in my older years, I've been tempted to sit down by the path and take my rest, to leave certain callings to younger people with more energy or ideas. I've caught myself thinking that surely, at my age, I needn't attend the optional Church activities that people work so hard to plan. Don't they know I go to bed at 8:00 p.m.? It can be tempting to think that we may be too senior to serve a senior couple's mission. It may be easy to become casual in daily repentance.

But being old, should we not also be wise?

The covenant path is about making covenants and also about keeping them. We never retire from keeping covenants. It takes a lifetime of trying to get it right, even all the way to the end of a lifetime, be it ever so long. Surely we don't want to rest ourselves on the path just yet. What a blessing to meet the Lord, when our days are over, knowing that we endured to the end—the very end.

Example of Church Leaders

Thankfully, we have a wonderful pattern in our Church leaders of how to begin to be old. They do not retire. They continue to serve with all their hearts. They make themselves aware of the issues of the day. They counsel and travel and learn and teach and love. They do the work of the Lord until the end of their days.

President Hinckley said at the age of 87: "I am no longer a young man filled with energy and vitality. I am an old man . . . given to meditation and prayer. I would

enjoy sitting in a rocker, swallowing prescriptions, listening to soft music, and contemplating the things of the universe. But such activity offers no challenge and makes no contribution."²

What a blessing to understand that even in our most senior years, we can—we are expected to—make a contribution, take on a new challenge! Perhaps it's partly this determination to be on the Lord's errand that makes our leaders so long-lived.

Finishing Our Work

Our beloved prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, aged 95, has taught: "Even though our Creator endowed us with this incredible power [the ability of the body to heal from injury or illness], He consigned a counterbalancing gift to our bodies. It is the blessing of *aging*, with visible reminders that we are mortal beings destined one day to leave this 'frail existence.'"³

He seems to be saying that our aging bodies should be reminders that our time may be short on the earth, and so we should be about finishing our work, not stopping our work. Nephi, Jacob, Enos, and Mormon, when they began to be old, set about passing on the responsibility of the records to make sure all was in order before they passed into the next life. What a blessing to know that our lives are meant to be useful and full in our elder years.

I've decided that aging gracefully will mean, to me at least, to age with the grace of my Savior, Jesus Christ. He will ease the way when it needs to be eased and give me strength to carry forward. I will continue to pray for determination to walk the covenant path and to do it in style—even if it's with a cane. ■

The author lives in Alberta, Canada.

NOTES

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Good-bye for Another Season," *Ensign*, May 2001, 85.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Testimony," *Ensign*, May 1998, 69.
3. Russell M. Nelson, "The Atonement," *Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 34.

