

Soul Unfinished

FINDING HAPPINESS, TAKING RISKS,
& TRUSTING GOD AS WE GROW OLDER



Robert Atwell

WITH A FOREWORD BY EMILIE GRIFFIN



PARACLETE PRESS

BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

Soul Unfinished: Finding Happiness, Taking Risks, and Trusting God as We Grow Older

2012 First Printing

Copyright © 2012 by Robert Atwell

ISBN: 978-1-61261-236-2

Originally published in the UK under the title *The Contented Life* by the Canterbury Press of 13a Hellesdon Park Road, Norwich, Norfolk NR6 5DR and Americanized for this edition.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
may be obtained by request to mail@paracletepress.com.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in an electronic retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Published by Paraclete Press
Brewster, Massachusetts
www.paracletepress.com
Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

AUTHOR'S NOTE	vii
FOREWORD BY Emilie Griffin	ix
1 Invitation	3
2 Retirement	19
3 Living	37
4 Memories	55
5 Forgiveness	73
6 Becoming	89
7 Happiness	105
8 Finale	123
NOTES	139
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	143

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
*the clergy and people of the Diocese of Chester,
from whom I have learnt a great deal
and with whom I am privileged to serve as a bishop.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book began as a lecture to a group of older people in the Diocese of Chester who felt sidelined by our culture's obsession with youth and celebrity. "Have we nothing to contribute?" they asked. They were fed up with older people being seen as a problem, rather than an asset. They were equally fed up with endless talk about death and dying. What they wanted to talk about was life and living, and what they could contribute to their local communities.

So it was that I gave a talk on contentment and the gift of years. This was subsequently printed as a series of short articles and posted on the Diocesan website, where it generated a huge correspondence. In over thirty years of ministry, I have never had such a large and overwhelmingly positive response to anything I have written, which led me to believe

that the themes I was exploring might merit a wider audience.

I am indebted to those who first laid down the gauntlet and made me think about the challenges and opportunities that confront us as we grow older. I would also like to record my thanks to those whose stories are told in this book. Doubtless they will recognize themselves in spite of my efforts to disguise their identity. I am particularly grateful to Margaret Andrews, Rosemary Spencer, and John Varty, all of whom read a draft of the book and made helpful suggestions.

ROBERT ATWELL

FOREWORD

Toward an Artfulness of Aging

At both ends of life we face eternal questions. When we were younger we focused on the future. We wrestled with life decisions. We read how-to books about them. A few of us were occasionally unhinged by them.

In midlife we wondered, could we trim our dreams to match the practical options we had? What was the best way forward? We worried about making wrong choices. Sometimes the decisions we thought were good came back to haunt us. We struggled to apply the lessons we had learned.

Ultimately, by our later years, we had stretched our understandings of life until the rubber band felt sure to break. We told ourselves that we did not care about growing older. "I'm not buying this book for myself, it's for my aunt," we might say.

"Oh, yes, I have a charming uncle, he loves to read." But of course, before we let that needy, sometimes mythical aunt or uncle have a look, we'd plunged into the text ourselves, starving for a crust of consolation. How will I manage? What will I become? If I don't have the work or the celebrity I used to have, what will be left of me?

The later years provide a special challenge. We know we are expected to slow down. For some of us, this is a difficult thing to do. It confines and baffles us. We fight back against it.

Some of us find it hard to let go—of the managerial roles we had, the jobs we were used to, the particular delight and status of having achieved, being the sort of person that others admire and desire to follow. Our life's work is done, we think. It's time for the rocking chair. Which may be true, as far as it goes, but very much to our surprise, there's one more challenge ahead: the unfinished soul.

Robert Atwell explores this territory with a keen sense of authority. As a man of the cloth and a

student of the Christian life he knows and can share the Bible's wisdom. As a bishop, he offers the wisdom of the Christian faith, from his own angle to be sure. But he also dips deeply into the well of ancient wisdom, collected and collective, the straight teaching and knowledge on which so many Christian believers depend. He integrates ancient wisdom with modern experiences—including retirement, ways of living, memories, forgiveness, becoming, and happiness. I treasure the ways that he evokes the Scriptures like elders gathering by the temple gate to offer discernment on these aspects of growing older.

Bishop Atwell is especially good on forgiveness, one of the most important challenges of the later years. He knows the accumulated anger in families, the years of estrangement from friends, from relatives, from church. He knows how to frame the questions. He knows how to help the unfinished soul. He knows how deeply we need to forgive ourselves for what we have done and not done. He knows the heart longs to come home.

Who needs this book? I might ask: Who knows enough not to need this book? Will I, when I am ninety, know so much that I won't need the Lord anymore? Rash thought. Foolish generation. It is clear and simple. The surer our ascent into the blaze of wisdom, the greater our dependence on the Lord.

But here's a caution. There's no way to approach this book if you're not willing to dwell with, and live within, metaphors. Robert Atwell keeps them coming thick and fast. The tool box, the exercise bike, the hike up the mountain trail, the resting in the dark valley, all these come at us and we bat them away, telling ourselves we're far too practical for this poetic stuff. Telling ourselves we're much too grownup to be childlike. Figuring that we know the Bible already, we've consulted it on any number of occasions, we love the life of it, the sound of it, the resonance, the beauty of the royal tone. Atwell wants us to know the Bible, but he also wants us to live the Bible. To probe for the deep heart of it, surrendering to at least one and

probably multiple metaphors as part of what we do. And how we grow.

There is a warm and confident practicality in Atwell's teaching. He is the grandparent one always wanted, and the fellow adventurer who understands. He is willing to take his shoes off and rest awhile beside cool streams.

Learn to hope. Learn to dream. Learn to play. And most of all, tell the truth to yourself and others. Stop hiding behind the brilliant facades of a lifetime. Stop letting stereotypes of youth and old age dominate you. Admit your own dishonesties, the things you want to overcome, and will not. Forget them and forgive them and move on.

Put on the sandals of surrender. Walk with Christ. Prepare. Have a good time, but have your lamp ready when he comes. Be at peace. Know love and friendship. When you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.

Change your heart. Or don't change it, if it's already open and bleeding for grace. Change your heart, because today is your chance. Now is the

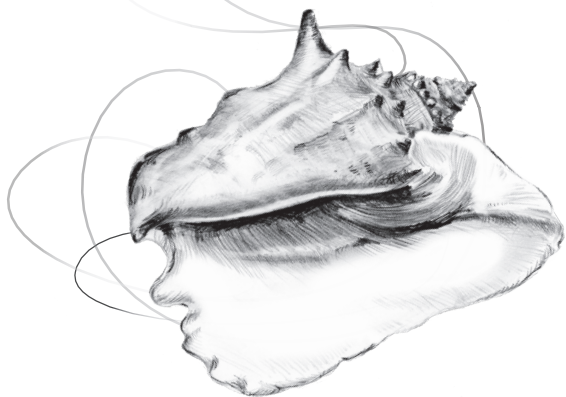
appointed time, Atwell tells us. There's no time like the present, and time is short. But although the way is hard, it is also easy when God's dwelling place is embedded in our hearts. Christ-life will wrap around us, when we follow the Lord's way, ever so practically, into an uncertain future.

EMILIE GRIFFIN

Soul Unfinished

You never enjoy the world aright till the Sea
itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed
with the heavens, and crowned with the stars:
and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the
whole world, and more than so, because men
are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as
you. Till you can sing and rejoyce and delight
in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in
sceptres, you never enjoy the world.

THOMAS TRAHERNE,
Centuries of Meditations



1

Invitation

One of the great things about the twenty-first century is that most of us can expect to live far longer than our grandparents. Modern medical care and good health permit a quality of life vastly superior to what was possible fifty years ago. Life—at least in the developed world—is now roughly divided into three parts: twenty years of education, forty years of work, followed by twenty or thirty years of leisure. But are we prepared for the opportunity that this represents?

Far from being a grim affair of shrinking horizons, growing older can be an adventure, full of new and exciting possibilities. With the mortgage paid and the children flown the nest, our time is our own. No longer at anyone's beck and call, we are free to do what we like. Cheap air flights make travel to remote parts of the world possible. The University of the

Third Age offers a range of educational opportunities. Fitness programs encourage us to keep supple and trim. All this is a rare luxury compared with the lot of previous generations, and marks us out still further from those who live in poorer parts of the world. Suddenly there is the chance to do things we always dreamed of. T. S. Eliot's words beckon us: "Old men ought to be explorers."¹

Of course, not everyone is energized by a fresh set of opportunities. The prospect of radical change in the pattern of daily life can generate waves of anxiety. Some find the relentless pace of technological change intimidating. They watch young people quickly master the latest piece of electronic wizardry while they fumble. Others find their confidence undermined by the way in which the values and principles they used to measure success no longer seem to matter to a new generation. Do you fight or capitulate? In a society where losing your looks and growing old is feared it is hard to believe your experience is valued, no matter what the official rhetoric declares. Not

surprisingly, many older people feel they no longer have significance.

In some professions age is not a handicap. Lawyers and judges in particular are respected for their accumulated wisdom and experience. Lord Denning, the famous Master of the Rolls, was firing on all cylinders to the end. But they are exceptions to the rule. The fixation of the media with youth and celebrity has the unfortunate effect of sidelining older people, whose voice is often under-represented.

It would be wrong to blame everything on youth culture or the media, but the fact remains that in the past older people were honored and valued, as they still are in many parts of the world. For example, the Bible describes the ancient Hebrew institution of the elders of a town gathering at its gate to take counsel or resolve a dispute. As one of the psalms lyrically has it, "The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of God. In old age they still produce

fruit; they are always green and full of sap" (Psalm 92:12–13). It is to our shame that we no longer expect the elderly to produce fruit, let alone be full of sap. But watch out: older people can take the world by surprise.

Mary Wesley did not publish her first novel, *Jumping the Queue*, until she was seventy-one. In 1990, at the age of seventy-two, Nelson Mandela emerged on to the world stage from solitary confinement on Robben Island to become President of the Republic of South Africa. By the sheer force of his personality and integrity, he transformed a nation haunted by years of apartheid into a rainbow coalition of peoples built on mutual respect and forgiveness. In 1958 when the cardinals elected Angelo Roncalli pope, they probably imagined that in choosing an old man of seventy-seven they had a safe candidate who could easily be controlled. In the event, Pope John XXIII turned out to be one of the great reforming popes, determined to throw open the doors of the Church to new ideas. Old men may not only be explorers, they may be revolutionaries.

Take risks

I remember staying with friends when an elderly neighbor came to lunch. Although he was ninety-two and tottered in on two sticks, he was alert and bright as a button. At the end of lunch our host escorted him to the door where a taxi was waiting to take him home. "Well, take care, Bill," he said, holding out his hand. Quick as a flash the old boy spun round. "I'm fed up with people telling me to take care. What I say is 'Take risks!' In fact that's how I end all my letters these days—take risks."

As I grow older the question confronting me is whether I want to end up like Bill or Mr. Grumpy. What sort of person do I wish to be? I have a choice. I can opt to live in the past, nursing my disappointments, and become resentful and embittered. Or I can live in the present with thankfulness, excited by new ideas, enjoying the

company of friends and family. And above all, prepared to take risks.

Sharing wisdom

In the sixth century St. Benedict wrote in his monastic *Rule* about the importance of *senectae*, "of wise old men" in a community. He celebrates the wisdom that can come from having lived a long time. Today more information is available to us than ever before. The Internet provides instant access to rafts of knowledge. We are bombarded with surveys and statistics. But having more information does not necessarily mean we are any wiser. We still need the wisdom of experience to navigate our way. We need the perspective that comes only with maturity.

Sadly, older people today are more likely to be seen as encumbrances to change than reservoirs of wisdom. In my experience it is usually the gray-haired, not the white-haired, the middle-aged as

opposed to the elderly, who resist change. Older people are often more tolerant of contradictions and are not fixated about discovering "the right answer" to problems. With less to prove (and lose) they can be remarkably free. Many are open to new things and embrace the younger generation gladly. They can draw upon deep wells of experience and play a significant part in the life of their families and neighborhoods. Time-rich, they often carry their wisdom lightly, but bring ballast and stability to a community.

Many young people have little to do with the elderly, and many older people feel they have nothing to contribute to the aspiring young. This is tragic because they have much to offer, not least sharing the secret of their resilience. Some find fulfilling roles within the network of their families, supporting their hardworking children and providing care for the grandchildren. Others take up positions of responsibility in their community or church, and gain a real sense of fulfillment. Yet others discover a new zest for life

working with voluntary organizations or helping children with their reading in local schools. The skills and expertise of older people represent a major resource that needs to be mobilized. Here are two examples.

For the last ten years Christine has worked one day a week on a voluntary basis for a charity dedicated to the rehabilitation of young offenders. Now in her early seventies and still a consummate “multitasker,” she juggles tap classes and looking after the grandchildren with mentoring ex-prisoners. She visits them in advance of their release date to build a relationship, and then weekly for three months to help them readjust to “life outside.” In the early days of release, she maintains daily contact by mobile phone. This is the crucial time when someone is most likely to drift back into old habits. By her own admission she is “pretty unshockable,” and being a volunteer and a woman, she says, helps. “These young men are not nearly as tough as they make out.

Few have enjoyed a stable family life. I'm not sure how they view me; probably somewhere between a friend and the mother they never had. But they can be vulnerable with me."

Derek, a former businessman now in his mid-eighties, acts as a mentor to two disaffected teenagers who are in need of a listening ear. He has been drawn into his church's social inclusion project that seeks to harness the wisdom and time of older citizens to help young people at risk of permanent unemployment, and even prison. He meets them on a one-to-one basis each week during their lunch hour or after school. In his new role of resident uncle, he listens, humors, and advises (for example) how to shape up job applications. He is a calming influence when they get angry. His aim is "to help them discover who they are and to steady them through difficulties." Beneath their youthful cockiness, he says, they surprisingly lack confidence. He feels that the key to success lies in being non-judgmental. Amazingly—or perhaps not—the young people

think Derek is “cool” and have granted him their ultimate accolade: “respect.”

In his poem “*Auguries of Innocence*,” William Blake was unflinchingly candid about the human lot:

Man was made for Joy and Woe,
And when this we rightly know
Thro’ the World we safely go.

For Blake naiveté is the enemy. Enabling young people to grow in maturity includes helping them cope with the shock that bad things can happen to good people, and that not everyone can win the race. Sadness and regret are just as much part of human experience as joy. Growing into adulthood is not simply about cultivating style or acquiring skills. It is about learning to deal with shame and embarrassment, to cope with loss and disappointment, and to find contentment in ordinary things. Endowing children and young people with the resources to grasp these insights is a challenge,

but also a wonderful foundation for their future happiness. The question is, how well do we cope with these things ourselves? Are we good role models?

Going deeper

And here lies the spiritual challenge. The last third of life is not just for doing exciting new things. It is also for going deeper into God. Unless we are prepared to grow in spiritual awareness we may end up dissatisfied and restless. Inevitably, as the years pass the accent will fall increasingly on being rather than doing. But this should not matter. When our inner life is kept true, our outer life becomes more fruitful. We may not have the raw energy of a twenty-year-old, but we do have a honed wisdom that comes from experience.

Growing older undoubtedly calls for adjustment. As journalist Richard Needham facetiously puts it, "As you grow old, you lose your interest

in sex, your friends drift away, your children often ignore you. There are many other advantages, of course, but these would seem to be the outstanding ones."² The pace of life does indeed change. Our health may falter. We may not be so agile or mobile. With the passing of the years we have to reconcile ourselves to the probability that we will not find fulfillment of all our aspirations, but we should still try and honor at least some of them. In novelist E. M. Forster's words, "We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

There is an art to growing old, and it includes acceptance of ourselves and of our circumstances, at least insofar as they cannot be changed. With a lifetime of experience on which to draw, the challenge is to share our insights without pontificating or becoming a bore. If we succeed, then the joys and disappointments of life will become a toolbox from which we gain wisdom. When we mine the seams of faith and spirituality, we unlock the full potential of this period of our life.

For those ready to grasp it with both hands, our latter years can be one of the most fruitful and rewarding chapters in life. It starts the moment we jettison the negative stereotypes that are thrust on to older people, and celebrate the freedom and opportunities that maturity brings. It entails re-visiting priorities. Above all, it means going deeper into God. A new quality of life can begin at any hour of any day, if we live in the present moment and live wisely.

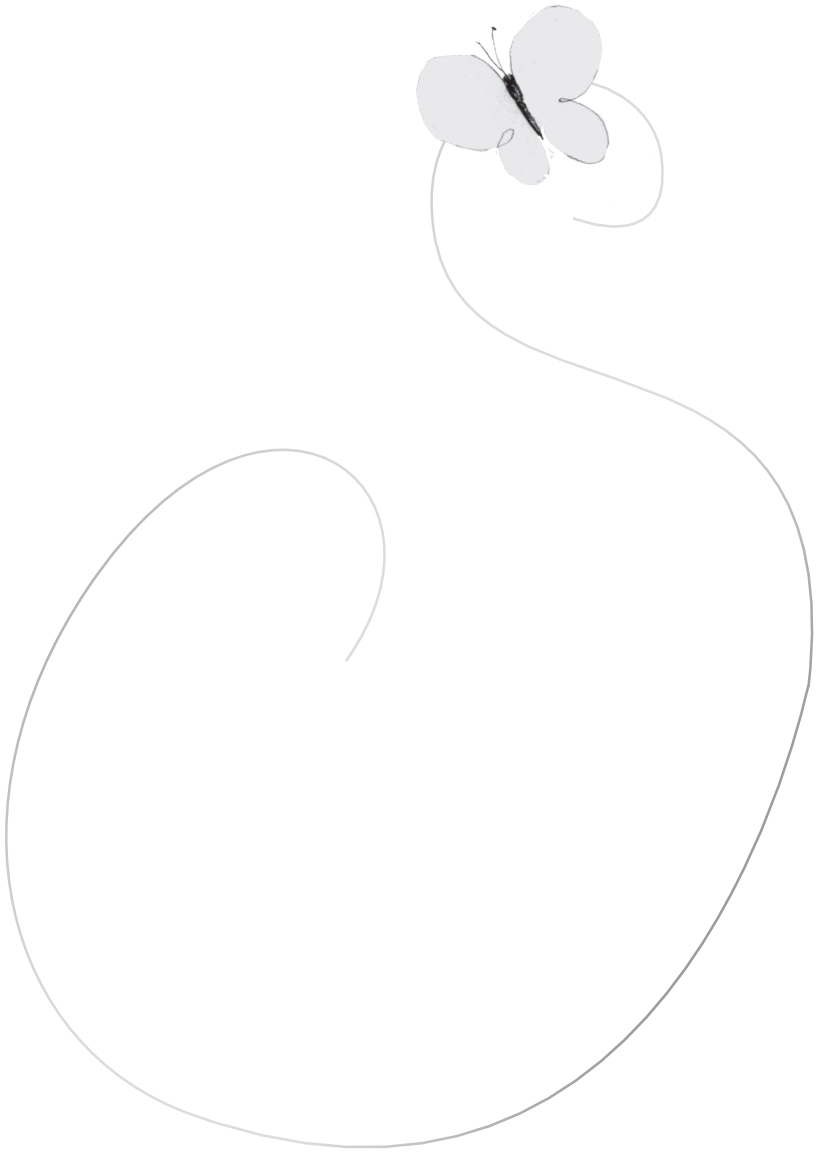
REFLECTION

If I am to live creatively in the present, I need to reflect on my temperament and outlook, and ask myself some questions:

How can I become more like Bill and less like Mr. Grumpy?

What are the risks I need to take? What can I offer others?

How can I ensure that I am “always green” and “full of sap”?



God grant me the senility
to forget the people I never liked anyway,
the good fortune to run into the ones I do,
and the eyesight to tell the difference.

ANONYMOUS



2

Retirement

Retirement has become a moveable feast in the Western world. Increased life expectancy and better health, combined with the escalating pension crisis, are pushing the boundaries. Some countries have already abolished a compulsory retirement age. Governments are actively encouraging their citizens to work well into their sixties and sometimes even into their seventies. And why not? Work can be a huge source of energy, creativity, and self-esteem. It provides income, intellectual stimulus, and challenge. It gives routine and structure to the week. How old is too old to work? "The days of our life are seventy years," says the Bible, "or perhaps eighty, if we are strong" (Psalm 90:10). With the advances of medical science even this is under review.

The new flexibility in the workplace is welcome because it means that the transition to our later

years can be a relatively gentle affair. For those who can choose when to retire, retirement is no longer a threat. Many move first to working part-time, and then to working on an ad hoc basis before stopping altogether. The workplace remains attractive for a variety of reasons. Negatively, some still associate retirement with loneliness and boredom, and are determined to fend it off at all costs. Others, faced with the financial challenge of living longer on a fixed income, simply cannot afford to retire, or find themselves having to support not only their adult children but aged parents as well.

Failing health or stress can force some to seek early retirement. For them, it comes not a moment too soon, a blessed relief from commuting, from the pressure to perform and meet deadlines, or from having to maintain the fiction that everything is going swimmingly well. For those confronted with compulsory early retirement, there is neither choice nor flexibility. Being laid off can be a bitter blow, generating financial hardship and a collapse of self-esteem. Restructuring and downsizing are

often euphemisms for disposing of those at the top end of the workforce. Finding a new job in your late fifties is a huge challenge. Suddenly you find yourself with time on your hands but less money in your pocket, and having to renegotiate your life.

Getting priorities right

Work may provide intellectual stimulation and routine, but it can also overwhelm and dominate. As Philip Larkin puts it in one of his poems, "Why should I let the toad work/Squat on my life?"³ When priorities get distorted, relationships become strained and health suffers. In spite of our best intentions, it is easy to lose the plot and end up living to work instead of working to live. It is also possible to hide behind the demands of work to avoid difficult domestic situations. Work then becomes an excuse, or even an anesthetic, to blot out unhappiness. Some get sucked into a spiral of