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Centenarians

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

Growing interest in those who are 100-plus years - or perhaps in joining their ranks - has prompted studies in the United States and Europe to identify common characteristics. Much to the surprise of some, genetics is not a major factor. James Rowe, MD, president of Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York and director of the MacArthur Foundation Consortium on Successful Aging, reports that "only about 30 percent of the characteristics of aging are genetically determined. The other 70 percent are linked to lifestyle."

What constitutes a long-lasting lifestyle? A survey by the Florida Geriatric Research Program found only three notable commonalities among their respondents: 70 percent never smoked, 85 percent graduated from high school with 40 percent graduating from college, and 80 percent were married for at least 30 years with 50 percent married 50 years or more.

But searching for the ideal lifestyle is something like looking for the illusive fountain of youth. It's not to be found in physical factors. Perhaps the key is moral and spiritual rather than physical. Certainly in the Bible, long life was associated with obedience to God. As Psalm 91 says: "He shall call upon me [God], and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation" (verses 15, 16).

This verse hints at the spiritual view that God is Life and is the source of our life. While some may scoff at such a notion, others deeply believe that God is the origin of life, and more, that God sustains life as a natural expression of Himself/Herself. The centenarians I know all believe that turning to God is a major ingredient in their ability to resolve problems and in their longevity.

The Bible identifies several factors as promoting long life: (1) obeying God's commandments, (2) honoring father and mother, (3) refraining from speaking evil, and (4) resisting temptation.

Obeying God's commandments (See Prov. 3:1, 2.) The primary Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20:3-17. The first command is to have only one God or authority. To obey this command includes seeking to understand the nature of God. How can one obey what one doesn't understand? The Bible reveals God as good, perfect, merciful, as Love, Spirit, Truth, Life, and more. Every step toward understanding God and obeying His commands promotes long life and health. More than human longevity, this is the path that leads toward eternal life.

Honoring parents. One of the Ten Commandments specifically mentions "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (verse 12). Learning from those who have lived their lives in obedience to God can prevent mistakes. One can even learn from a parent's mistakes what pitfalls to avoid.

Refraining from speaking evil. Another of the ten is the command not to bear false witness or lie. And in the book of First Peter, we are advised to stop speaking maliciously or deceptively (3:10). Angry, envious, hurtful words, along with self-condemnation, rob us of the peace that promotes long life. Forgiveness, mercy, and love restore harmony.

Resisting temptation (See James 1:12.) The temptation to sin could be defined as mistaking evil for good. Resisting temptation means discerning what is good and standing for it. Avoiding self-destructive behavior and resisting immoral impulses certainly leads to a longer, more productive life.

The founder of this newspaper, Mary Baker Eddy, lived a long and productive life. She spoke from experience when she noted: "We apprehend Life in divine Science only as we live above corporeal sense and correct it. Our proportionate admission of the claims of good or of evil determines the harmony of our existence, - our health, our longevity, and our Christianity." ("Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures," pg. 167)

O God, thou hast taught me
from my youth Now also
when I am old and greyheaded,

O God, forsake me not.

Psalms 71:17, 18