



From Dust to Dust : An Exploration of Elemental Integrity

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The most hopeful affirmation in Christian life occurs at the graveside. As the coffin is lowered, the minister says: “In sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our brother/sister and we commit his/her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”¹ This strange declaration stems from a confidence that the one who created all life will also renew that life, that the one who “formed man from the dust of the ground” (Gen 2:7) is not done creating.

We shall go further in embracing dust. It will be argued that achieving a balance in favor of what Erik H. Erikson calls “integrity” involves developing in later life an intensified affinity with creation. The one who ages faithfully and well learns to welcome “Brother Dust.” This is not to deny the despair delivered by the ceaseless march of time. But it is to recognize that by taking despair into trust of creation and Creator, the gift of wholeness is to be found.

To accomplish this, we shall begin by examining what theologians have seen as the basis of human integrity. Then we shall focus more closely upon Erikson’s use of the same concept. Finally, we shall listen to four masters of modern fiction—Willa Cather, Margaret Laurence, Wendell Berry, and Tillie Olsen—to hear how they have characterized this dusty wholeness.

I. A WEB OF LIFE

As he begins an essay on care of the earth, farmer-writer Wendell Berry admits: “I wish to deal directly at last with my own long held belief that Christianity, as usually presented by its organizations, is not *earthly* enough.”² Most often, theological discussions of the integrity of persons are based upon the fact that there

¹*The Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 213.

²Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981) 267.

is a God to whom each person is equally precious. But human life is obviously more than a relationship with the Creator.

Because one is related to the Creator, one is also intimately connected with the whole creation—human and non-human. Life is communion. As Joseph Sittler writes, “we have no ontological status prior to and apart from communion. Communion is our being; the being we participate in is communion, and we derive our concrete selves from communion.”³ Communion with the Creator implies a movement away from individualism and toward other concrete selves and the remainder of the earth household.⁴ To be integrated, then, is to recognize oneself as part of the “web of life.”⁵

Lack of such a concrete relationship with creation is dangerous. When a person is disconnected from life's web, he or she falls into the illusion of being the creator of life and environment. This confusion may lead to violence, violation of life and fellow humans.⁶ It may lead to disregard of the fragile ecological balance of our planet, naive confidence in weaponry, and uncontrolled hunger for power. More important for our study, it may lead to a denial of the aging process. Grecian Formula just has no place in life's web.

Another result of this refusal to acknowledge one's kinship with all creation has been the tendency to separate body and soul. In the face of aging and death, some Christians have fled to that strand of Greek and neo-Platonic thought which claims that though the body may wither, the soul survives. This flies in the face of the biblical view of human kind. As Aarne Siirala suggests: "thought and soul are a dimension of man's basic experience, which is bodily existence....Nor is a man's body a separate area of existence but an organic part of the nexus of life in which men together constitute the body of humanity."⁷

Human wholeness depends upon trust in the matrix of life and its Creator. From the perspective of Christian theology, one either says "yes" to creation, or one seeks detachment from it. One either remains in covenant with life and wonders at its delicate ecological pattern, or one tries to fabricate an artificial world. With Gary Snyder, the theologian throws his or her lot in with creation:

one ecosystem
in diversity
under the sun
with joyful interpenetration for all.⁸

This is to embrace this broken world into which "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

II. ERIKSON AND EGO INTEGRITY

There have been few more adventurous explorers of the polarity between consent to the "web of life" (integrity) and detachment (despair) than Erik H.

³Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 107.

⁴Eugene Bianchi, *Aging as a Spiritual Journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 42.

⁵Aarne Siirala, *Divine Humanness* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 60.

⁶*Ibid.*, 75.

⁷*Ibid.*, 79.

⁸Gary Snyder, "For All" in *Axe Handles* (San Francisco: North Point, 1983) 114.

Erikson. Perhaps Erikson's sensitivity to the concrete stems from his years of clinical experience and his refusal to adhere slavishly to any "school" of psychoanalytic theory. As friend and biographer, Robert Coles has written: "In spirit he was a clinician, sensitive to the particular, wary of the general, and allergic to Hegelian universals."⁹

Trained as a Freudian in Vienna, his commitment to clinical work led to rejection of that school's "originology." By talking with and observing children at play and adolescents in

turmoil, Erikson began to develop a stage theory of human growth. This theory charted developmental “crises” across the entire human life span. And it posited more than simple linear development. Erikson held negotiation of the last stage by grandparents to be of crucial importance for the grandchildren. He writes: “it seems possible to further paraphrase the relation of adult integrity and infantile trust by saying that healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death.”¹⁰

The phrase “ego integrity” was coined by Erikson as the developmental resting point in his well-known essay, “The Eight Ages of Man.” Partially because it was the endpoint in a theoretical structure focused upon childhood and youth, this was a relatively static concept; in fact, Erikson could call it a “state of mind” with specific content.¹¹ This “state of mind” called “ego integrity” includes:

1. “the ego’s accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning. It is a post-narcissistic love of the human ego—not of the self—as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense, no matter how dearly paid for.”¹² The integrated ego discovers a symmetry between the order of the cosmos and order within. This insight, as old as Plato’s *Republic*, provides a point of connection between the world and the self which strengthens resistance to despair.

2. “the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted no substitutions: it thus means a new and different love of one’s parents.”¹³ By negotiating life’s stages, one realizes that no matter how creative a person is, he/she creates within the framework of cultural tradition and natural environment. One begins to accept limits inherent in being a dusty creature.

3. “a comradeship with the ordering ways of distant times and different pursuits as expressed in the simple products and sayings of such times and pursuits.”¹⁴ One sees an important part of being human as a sense of kinship with prior generations and those yet unborn.

As Erikson himself grew older, he began to see the last stage as the arena for a more dynamic conflict between integrity and despair. Experience had shown that despair and disdain were inescapable. Disdain, writes Erikson,

⁹Robert Coles, *Erik H. Erikson: The Growth of His Work* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1970) 9.

¹⁰Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963) 269.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 268.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

“must up to a point be recognized as a natural and necessary reaction to human weakness and the deadly repetitiveness of depravity and deceit. Disdain, in fact, is altogether denied only at the danger of indirect destructiveness and more or less hidden self-disdain.”¹⁵ The integrated elder, then, must acknowledge the shadow of despair which is cast upon the web of creation.

Erikson provides important elaboration of what integrity means in an essay interpreting Ingmar Bergman’s *Wild Strawberries*. The film revolves around the aging Dr. Borg, who journeys from his home to Lund, Sweden, to receive a Jubilee Doctorate in recognition of fifty years’ service to medicine. However, the journey accomplishes more; it is a pilgrimage toward

integrity. As he travels, his life's "simple products and sayings" constantly confront Borg. These confrontations—even the despair they bring—begin to reconnect this man, who has lived a life of medical abstraction, with the nexus of life. For example, as Borg and his party stop at a summer home where Borg spent school vacations as a child, he discovers an old strawberry bed. Erikson observes: "In a dreamlike fashion, he knows where to go: to the strawberry patch. He sits down in the grass and slowly eats some strawberries one by one, almost ritually, as if they had a consciousness-expanding power."¹⁶

As the journey continues and Borg inches closer to finding his strand in the web of life, his daughter-in-law, Marianne, is moved by the natural beauty to recall an old hymn. Similarly moved, Borg continues the verse:

I see his trace of glory and power,
In an ear of grain and the fragrance of a flower.¹⁷

The elderly physician's completion of this "simple saying" from the past leads Erikson to write:

The poem, the setting, the tone seems to confirm the sense in which every human being's Integrity may be said to be religious (whether explicitly or not), namely, in an inner search for, and a wish to communicate with, that mysterious, that Ultimate Other: for there can be no "I" without an "Other," no "We" without a shared "Other."¹⁸

One can begin to see that Erikson's concept of integrity is religious in at least the sense that it depends upon a recognition of connections among culture's "simple products and sayings," the earth household, and the self. It is no accident that the very root of the word "religion," *religare*, means that which binds or connects.

But why is it that this sense of connection comes to the fore in later life? As he surveys the sensory changes accompanying aging, Erikson asks: "And what final psychosexual state can we suggest for (presenile) old age? I think it is a generalization of psychosexual modes that can foster an enriched bodily and

¹⁵Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: Norton, 1982) 64.

¹⁶Erik H. Erikson, "Reflections on Dr. Borg's Life Cycle," *Adulthood*, ed E. H. Erikson (New York: Norton, 1978) 7.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

mental experience, even as part functions weaken and genital energy diminishes."¹⁹

This "generalization of psychosexual modes" recalls a concept Robert N. Butler and Myrna I. Lewis have developed in suggesting a "second language of sex" among the aged, the concept of "elementality":

Elementality—the enjoyment of the elemental things of life—may develop late in life precisely because older people are more keenly aware that life is short. They

tell us that they find themselves adept in separating out the important from the trivial. Responsiveness to nature, human contact, children, music, beauty in any form, may be heightened. Healthy later life is frequently a time for greater enjoyment of all the senses—colors, sights, sounds, smell, touch—and less involvement with the transient drives for achievement, possessions, and power.²⁰

“Elementality” completes Erikson’s notion of “integrity.” While facing the fact that time is short and physical decline inevitable (despair), a stronger sense of unity with creation promotes generalized psychosexual response. Our task in the remainder of this essay will be to meet aging characters in fictional webs of life, employing “elementality” as a lens through which we can examine integrity.

III. FICTIONAL EXPRESSIONS OF ELEMENTAL INTEGRITY

Because achieving a balance favoring integrity removes persons from lives of alienated abstraction to reconnection with the web of life, a fitting place to search for insights into how this happens is the modern novel. Novelists have long been studying aging in “controlled experiments”—creating characters and projecting them onto fields of activity. Surprisingly, this rich vein of insight has only recently begun to be mined by students of social phenomena.²¹

We shall explore four works of modern North American fiction: Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, Tillie Olsen’s extended short story “Tell Me a Riddle” and Wendell Berry’s *The Memory of Old Jack*. What will be at stake is the dynamic balance between despair and intimations of elemental integrity. We shall search for images of integrity and puzzle over the question: how does the author explain its development?

A. Wendell Berry’s *The Memory of Old Jack*

In this fine pastoral novel, Berry follows Jack Beechum’s memory as it scans his entire life cycle, which is inseparable from the rhythms of his farmland. Berry writes:

From babyhood he had moved in the openings and foldings of the old farm as familiarly as he moved inside his clothes....Now [when as a young adult he assumes responsibility for the farm] when he walked his fields and

¹⁹Erikson, *Life Cycle*, 64.

²⁰Robert N. Butler and Myrna I. Lewis, *Sex After Sixty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 143-144.

²¹Frederika Randall, “Why Scholars Become Story Tellers,” *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 29, 1984, pp. 1, 31.

pastures and woodlands he was tramping into his mind the shape of his land, his thought becoming indistinguishable from it, so that when he came to die his intelligence would subside into it like his own spirit.²²

Even though his ninth decade finds Jack in a small-town boarding hotel, his memory still wrestles with the despair he has known. He reflects upon a frustrating marriage, the cruel death of his mistress, and his foolish attempt to become a large landowner. Somehow he has been

sustained by the words of the Psalmist: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” Reflecting on this “simple saying from a distant time,” Jack knew:

The man who first spoke the psalm had been driven to the limit, he had seen his ruin, he had felt in the weight of his own flesh the substantiality of his death and the measure of his despair....He saw that he would be distinguished not by what he was or anything that he had become but by what he served. Beyond him was the peace and rest and joy that he desired. Beyond the limits of a man’s strength or intelligence or desire or hope or faith, there is more. The cup runs over.²³

Despite his authentic despair, the companionship of the psalmist roots Jack to the earth and enables him to continue in hope. He accepts his one and only life cycle and cares for his one and only place. So connected with creation is Jack that when he comes to dying he returns in memory to a special walnut tree in a clearing.

He sits at its root and leans his back and the back of his head against the trunk. All around him is still now. And he is still, his hands lying at rest in his lap, and within himself he is still. He can think of no other place he would want to be.²⁴

Old Jack knows the result of integrity suggested by Erikson: death has lost its sting.²⁵

B. Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*

Like Berry, Margaret Laurence follows her protagonist, Hagar Shipley, through her life cycle. But it is a rocky pathway at best. If the aging process is always a struggle between despair and a sense of integrity, the balance in this fine novel is tenuous.

Laurence introduces Hagar with a solid assertion of elemental integrity. Hagar reflects: “Some people will tell you that the old live in the past—that’s nonsense. Each day, so worthless really, has a rarity for me lately. I could put it in a vase and admire it, like the first dandelion, and we would forget their weediness and marvel that they were there at all.”²⁶

Hagar’s days lose some of their rarity when she learns that her son and daughter-in-law have arranged for her to leave her home and enter Silver Threads, a nursing home. In a desperate attempt to preserve her autonomy, Hagar flees to a coastal park called Shadow Point. Although her flight is suc-

²²Wendell Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974) 38.

²³Ibid., 161-162.

²⁴Ibid., 192

²⁵Erikson, *Childhood*, 268.

²⁶Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (New York: Bantam, 1964) 3.

cessful, the physical limitations accompanying her ninety years overshadow Hagar’s victory. In her refuge she cannot escape constipation.

I won’t be dominated by this ignominy. But when you’re swollen with discomfort,

when you sweat and tremble with the effort of unsuccessful straining, it's very hard to think of anything else.²⁷

Hagar knows physical limitation, but this knowledge does not prevent her from affirming the web of life. She notices half a dozen dead June bugs on the floor of her ramshackle salmon cannery shelter. In an unconventional celebration of natural beauty, Hagar senses cosmetic possibilities.

Then with considerable care I arrange the jade and copper pieces in my hair. I glance into my purse mirror. The effect is pleasing. They [the June bugs] liven my gray, transform me. I sit quite still and straight, my hands spread languidly on my knees, queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs.²⁸

Ultimately, Hagar is discovered and taken to a hospital; but her attempted escape has strengthened her. This becomes clear from her encounter with sixteen-year-old Sandra Wong, hospitalized for appendicitis. Although their relationship prior to Sandra's surgery holds anything but promise, following the operation a bond of weakness brings them together.

The zenith of this relationship between adolescent and "grandmother" is reached when Sandra is unable to find a nurse to help her to the bathroom. Disregarding strict orders not to leave her bed, Hagar tortuously hobbles to the lavatory to carry the "shining steel grail,"²⁹ a bedpan, to Sandra. As she circumvents institutional rules by providing means for this elemental function, Hagar performs an act of what Erikson calls "grand-generativity."³⁰

As a result of her escape and her encounter with Sandra, Hagar achieves a new sense of integrity. She has ceased to be constipated in a larger sense. As she lies dying, Hagar reflects, "But even disgust won't last. It has to be relinquished, too."³¹ Hagar makes her exit in character, struggling to make sure that *she* directs her last glass of water down her gullet. As she returns to the dust, the worth of Hagar's one and only life cycle is not in doubt.

C. Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle"

Because this is a short story, Olsen is unable to give full novelistic development to her nameless, sixty-nine-year-old main character. Yet the lack of personality development and the absence of a name only serve to emphasize the roles of mother, grandmother, and wife which have consumed this woman's life. One would think that such a life would lead to an easy victory for despair.

That is not the case. Now that her children have gone she has won a "reconciled peace." "Being able at last to live within, and not move to the rhythms of others, as life had forced her to: denying; removing; isolating; taking the children one by one; then deafening, half-blinding—and at last, presenting

²⁷Ibid., 171.

²⁸Ibid., 193.

²⁹Ibid., 269.

³⁰E. H. Erikson, *Life Cycle*, 63.

³¹M. Laurence, *The Stone Angel*, 274.

her solitude.”³² But this hard-won solitude was at stake; her husband threatened to sell their home—for her a sacred space—so they could spend their retirement in his lodge’s cooperative Haven. In doing so, he endangers the limited peace and elemental rootedness the main character had achieved at such overwhelming cost.

When Dr. Phil diagnoses terminal cancer in his mother-in-law, both husband and wife find their plans disrupted. Her wish to return home where she can “live within” is jeopardized by her physician son-in-law: “Travel with her, Dad. Don’t take her home to the old associations. The other children will want to *see* her.”³³ So begins a long, final journey. Nothing could have been less sustaining. Encountering her grandchildren, who show a desperate need to know her (“tell me a riddle, Grandma”), seems only to remind her of the robbery of any possibility to live within.

Our protagonist never denies her despair; she refuses to play games. But recognition of her life’s nearing end also seems to heighten her senses.

The look of excitement. The straining to hear everything [the new hearing aid turned full]. Why are you so happy, dying woman? How the petals are, fold on fold, and the gladioli color. The autumn air.³⁴

Visiting a Southern California beach, she makes an explicit elemental gesture toward the earth.

Patting the sand so warm. Once she scooped up a handful, cradling it close to her better eye; peered and flung it back. And as they came almost to the brink and she could see the glistening wet, she sat down, pulled off her shoes and stockings, left him [her husband], and began to run.³⁵

She gathers sand in a handkerchief and lays “down with the little bag against the cheek, looking toward the shore that nurtured life as it first crawled toward consciousness the millions of years ago.”³⁶

This elemental integrity is also clearly present in Olsen’s description of her death. Although in her hospital room she is robbed of the “simple products and sayings of distant times”—the books, the records, the discarded clothing she sorts for rummage, the small garden—somehow these persist. She moans: “The music, still it is there and we do not hear; knocks and our poor human ears too weak.”³⁷

Granddaughter Jeannie, who becomes her chief comforter, reassures the husband of her continuing connectedness with the web of life even as his wife’s agony becomes seemingly unendurable.

Granddaddy, Granddaddy, don’t cry. She is not there, she promised me. On the last day, she said she would go back to when she first heard music, a little girl on the road of the village where she was born. She promised me. It is

³²Tillie Olsen, “Tell Me a Riddle” in *Tell Me A Riddle* (New York: Delta, 1961) 61.

³³*Ibid.*, 78.

³⁴Ibid., 79.

³⁵Ibid., 93.

³⁶Ibid., 93-94.

³⁷Ibid., 105.

a wedding and they dance while the flutes so joyous and vibrant tremble in the air.³⁸

Her death affirms integrity in the face of deep despair. She has maintained contact with the “ordering ways of distant times” and a relationship with the natural world. As she returns to dust, she has shown us that basic trust, faith, can persist.

D. Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*

Cather chronicles the life of Godfrey St. Peter, a careful, well-respected historian, whose major scholarly work is now behind him. What is significant for our study is the transformation which occurs in St. Peter while his wife, daughter, and parvenu son-in-law are in Europe: a movement toward elemental integrity. Relieved of the pressure from his wife to maintain an active social calendar and from his son-in-law to keep up with the latest, St. Peter settles into himself. This is more than summer relaxation. Cather writes:

When he was not at work, or being actively amused, he went to sleep...he enjoyed this half-awake loafing with his brain as if it were a new sense, arriving late, like wisdom teeth. He was cultivating a novel mental dissipation and enjoying a new friendship. Tom Outland [the adventurous student-explorer who is the novel’s other main character] had not come back again through the garden door, but another boy had: the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas, in the Solomon Valley—the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter.³⁹

The struggle to write history, teach, to become someone in the world of letters had led St. Peter to neglect *himself*. Perhaps forgetting or ignoring the “child within” had made his success all the easier. But the discontent/despair St. Peter experienced when forced to move to the new home, paid for with money from a prize awarded for his multi-volume work on Spanish settlement of North America, catalyzes a psychic inventory which awakens him to the web of life underlying all history. Cather describes this beautifully:

The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth, and woods, and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were all alike to him....He was earth, and *would return to earth*. When white clouds blew over the lake, like bellying sails, when the seven pine trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely: “That is right.” Coming upon a curly root that thrust itself across his path, he said: “That is it.” When the maple leaves along the street began to turn yellow and waxy, and were soft to the touch—like the skin on old faces—he said: “That

is true; it is time.”⁴⁰

Cather provides as clear an expression of elemental integrity as one could wish for. St. Peter’s level of despair is not so deep as that of the other fictional characters we have met; he does not face immediate death. His despair, though,

³⁸Ibid., 115-116.

³⁹Willa Cather, *The Professor’s House* (New York: Vintage, 1973) 263.

⁴⁰Ibid., 265-266.

is real. It is based upon the trap so many are blind to: making one’s career one’s life. St. Peter had become a very knowledgeable man. But Cather reminds us:

What he had not known was that, at a given time, that first nature could return to a man, unchanged by all the pursuits and passions and experiences of his life; untouched even by the tasks and intellectual activities which have been strong enough to give him distinction among his fellows and to have made for him, as they say, a name in the world.⁴¹

By immersing himself in the “ordering ways of distant times,” St. Peter had neglected the web of life which supports history. But one finishes the novel with the strong impression that St. Peter will fill the time remaining with a well-rooted effort to integrate history with its natural basis. In so doing, he will discover the gift of integrity.

IV. FROM DUST TO DUST

Later life traditionally has been thought of as a time to become more “spiritual” as one “disengages” from the world around. Following the lead of theologians who point us toward the “web of life” as the sphere of fulfillment, and Erik H. Erikson who suggests that achieving a balance in favor of integrity brings a renewed appreciation of “simple products” and a “generalization of sensual modes,” our study has suggested otherwise. We have found that healthy later life is “frequently a time for greater enjoyment of all the senses”—“elementality” in the formulation of Butler and Lewis.

People who age well do not lose touch with their surroundings, dissolving into a spiritual mist. As Jungian analyst Ann Belford Ulanov writes:

Such people go on living, reaching out for what is available, thinking new ideas, exposing themselves to *what is there*—a new book, a new bird, a new sight or sound, a new way of sensing or feeling or understanding their worlds.⁴²

Such people are able to marshal a lifetime of developmental struggle, learning, and culture to endow their current situations with value and significance. Like Berry’s Old Jack, Laurence’s Hagar, Olsen’s nameless heroine, and Cather’s St. Peter, they are masters of cathexis.⁴³

Christians have understood living in faith as a “daily dying to self” leading to daily renewal. As Luther suggested in the *Large Catechism*: “Now, when we enter Christ’s kingdom,

this corruption must daily decrease so that the longer we live the more gentle, patient, and meek we become, and the more freed from greed, hatred, envy and pride.”⁴⁴ It is the greed, hatred, envy and pride which pull us away from our elemental humanity. Conversely, gentleness, patience, and meekness bring us closer to the earth. True spirituality is earthbound; it is attentive to the “web of life.”

⁴¹Ibid., 269.

⁴²Ann Belford Ulanov, “Aging: On the Way to One’s End,” *Ministry With the Aging*, ed. William M. Clements (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) 117.

⁴³William M. Clements, *The Care and Counseling of the Aging* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 32.

⁴⁴Martin Luther, *Large Catechism, What Does This Mean?*, ed. Philip Peterson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 162.

This should not be surprising, for the goal of faith is to fashion real human beings. It is no accident that the root of the word “human” is “humus,” the Latin for “earth” or “soil.” To be human, then, is to be “bound together” (*religare*) with the soil. To be human is to recognize with the ancient Ash Wednesday liturgy, “You are dust, and to dust you will return.” As faithful elders experience the heightened connection with life’s web which is elemental integrity, dust loses its threat and comes to symbolize new life and hope. That dust symbolizes hope should come as no irony; all life depends upon a thin layer of topsoil spread so unevenly over our planet. As we age, we learn to respect, if not to love, that dust. Yeats was not so far wrong when he wrote:

Through all the lying day of youth
I waved my leaves and flowers in the sun.
Perhaps now I may wither—
Into the truth.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Quoted from E. Bianchi, *Aging as a Spiritual Journey*, 220.