
The Gift of Ages and Ages

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

I was teased and honored for my birthday to be recognized two weeks ago, at the Homecoming Ministry Fair. Thank you for your best wishes!

A week or so later, I overheard someone lamenting that they had turned 40 years old. Oh my, they said, I am no longer in my thirties; I am truly an old person. Or something like that. Most of us know how that realization goes.

But that incident gave me a chance to share my theory of aging. It is, perhaps, an ambitious and idealistic theory, but I think it has some merit. Here's how it goes. When we realize that we are one year older—say 50 years old—that birthday does not mean we are no longer 49 years old! Instead, we are still 49 years old, in addition to being 50 years old.

That is, once we are 50 and we are asked if we are 49 years old, the complete answer is, “Yes. I am 49 years old. I am also 50 years old.” My theory is that age, in numbers of years, is not static and unmoving. Rather, it is cumulative, always accumulating. So, if I am a healthy 62 years old, I ought also to be 61, and 60, and 59, and 50, and 40, and even 20 and 10 years old.

Good aging is about learning from, and having grown through, all sorts of previous ages. I hope that my age, in my sixties, reflects that I also know what it is like to be 50 and 30 and 10. That would be evidence that I have grown through those previous ages with wisdom and openness.

Of course, I realize that aging does not always work that way. Some of us who are older cannot remember youth, or we lament our youth, or we even are angry toward our youth. Further, many of us who are older criticize the younger for their inexperience or naivete or recklessness. That sort of behavior is what leads to accusations of reverse “ageism,” the claim that one’s particular age has some sort of privilege over another’s age — even though “ageism,” as a term began as an accusation of discrimination against older people: that their age, alone, no longer qualified them for certain roles. It seems to me that the term can go both ways.

Healthy aging, in my theory, means that each of us actually does grow; each of us becomes all the ages that we have previously lived through. Our inability to realize what an adolescent is going through might mean that we have not learned from our own adolescence yet.

Yes, I accept the notion that no one seems to age perfectly in this life; that is, maybe no one completely incorporates in one’s present age all the healthy things that previous ages have provided us. But that has to be the goal. A wise elder is someone who really does know her or his previous ages, and who continues to incorporate those ages into their present age.

In the last book of the Bible, The Revelation to St. John, Jesus says that he is living “into the ages of ages” (Revelation 1:18). That curious phrase is used several other times in the New Testament. It can mean “forever and ever,” for sure. But, it seems to me, it can also mean that Jesus knows all ages, and that Jesus actually appears in all ages. The phrase “living into the ages of ages” means that Jesus has something particular to offer each age of this life. If we are to grow in wisdom and in

years then, as Jesus did (Luke 2:52), we would do well to remember those gifts of our previous ages. The gift of 40 years is 30 years, and some more! Those gifts, accumulated and incorporated, make our present age all the more magnificent and full!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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