

1-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Garrett, Leroy (2008) "Now that I'm Ninety," *Leaven*: Vol. 16: Iss. 3, Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol16/iss3/9>

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Now That I'm Ninety

LEROY GARRETT

When I told a friend that I was “going on ninety-one” he said, “Well, that’s better than being old.” That expresses my sentiments about being what may rightly be viewed as old-old. I have found that at whatever age life keeps getting better. My eighties proved to be better than my seventies, just as my seventies were better than my sixties and the sixties than the fifties. And those in their forties will likely agree that the forties are better than the thirties.

Those of us who have that hope that does not disappoint believe that life keeps getting better right into eternity. Scripture assures us that we move from one level of glory to another, growing in Christlikeness eternally, though never to perfection.

If Socrates was right that life is a quest for wisdom—and we are always to be on that quest—then we are to be always learning, always growing, always improving and always scrutinizing ourselves. Ourselves, not others! And we are always learning from our mistakes. Socrates also had it right when he insisted, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

This applies to every dimension of life—physical, mental, financial, social and, in view of the subject of this issue of *Leaven*, sexual. If we do no more than live by the rules of common sense, we should have health and energy on into our senior years, and with deeper appreciation for them. We can and should keep our minds active forever, always exploring new ideas. We will nurture old friendships and keep making new friends. Living frugally, we will be “comfortable” financially in old age, free of debt and able to help others. In all this we remember what William Barclay often said, “We need but little here below, nor need that little long.”

And I will be transparent enough in this essay to say that, based on my own experience, one’s sexual life need not abate in old age. Like all of life, sex can grow in joy and excitement as long as the marital relationship lasts. What may be lacking in the exuberance of youth is compensated by the deeper meaning of conjugal love in old age.

But like friendships and financial security, one’s sexual life has to be carefully guarded and nurtured. If we can say that to keep old friends and make new ones, one has to “work at it”—to have friends one has to be a friend—we can also say that those who enjoy sex into their seventies and eighties, and even into their nineties, are those who work at it. I am persuaded that this is up to the man more than the woman.

I venture that there is no such thing as an unresponsive or frigid wife, at any age. The problem is an inattentive husband, a man who doesn’t know how to treat a woman. A woman will respond to the man who treats her as royalty. The man is to demonstrate extravagant love and appreciation for his wife. Unlike the man who told his wife that he said he loved her when he married her and if he ever changed his mind he’d let her know, the husband is to shower his wife with accolades of praise, and to assure her of his love in a multitude of ways.

The man is to be alert to ways to praise his wife and to show appreciation. Wife-praising rather than wife-bashing should become habitual. An example of this is when my wife Ouida and I were recently looking through her old high school yearbook. There she was at “sweet sixteen”—three years before I was

to marry her. It gave me the opportunity to say once more how lucky I was to have been the one she married, and that God was growing a wife for me back in those days.

There will be opportunities to criticize. Pass them by. There will be opportunities to praise and show appreciation. Seize them. It will not only enhance sex but all of life together. H. Page William's book on this subject is well titled: *Do Yourself a Favor: Love Your Wife*.

Humor is an essential ingredient for ongoing sexual fulfillment. Couples who laugh together and play together will be more responsive in bed. And there can be love games. I often say to Ouida, "You know what day it is?" Now that she's long known the game, she'll respond, "What day is it?" Then I say, "It's Monday, and you know that I especially love you on Mondays." She replies, "Oh, I'm so glad it's Monday!"

Then the next day or later in the week, when I ask her if she knows what day it is, she plays the love game with delight. Every day I especially love her! And she laughs when I tell her that she is greater than Lincoln and a whole lot better looking! I joke with others—and with Ouida—that I've succeeded in sixty-four years of marriage by having learned to say three things: I goofed, I'm sorry, and I love you.

So, when I don't get something exactly right, I'll start the litany with: "I goofed." Then Ouida will say, "And you are sorry, and you love me." A bit of frivolity is in order. Solemnity is not an ingredient of a joyous marriage. Certainly one is not to take himself or herself too seriously. One may laugh at one's own foibles, but not those of others. We are to learn not to sweat the small stuff—and much, if not most, of what we let bother us is small stuff.

There will sometimes be tears and heartache over weightier matters. Ouida and I have lost two of the three children we adopted, one to AIDS at age twenty-nine, the other to multiple health problems at fifty-two. A granddaughter drowned at age four, and a great-granddaughter died of a home accident at seventeen months. Our son-in-law drowned, leaving our daughter with two young children, a responsibility we shared.

Then there was the care of Ouida's mother, whom I lovingly called Mother Pitts. A widow for fifty years, she lived with us the last decade of her life, part of which time we had to nurse her. But it was a glorious burden, given the delightful person she was—just like her daughter! She had a way of falling in the most inopportune places, such as between the commode and the bathroom wall. Ouida would call me from my study to help pry her loose.

But tragedy has a way of deepening connubial love. Together the couple learns to accept not only the complexities and difficulties of life, but its mysteries as well. We are not called on to understand or explain the heartaches of life, but to meet them with courage, faith and resolve. When we lost our great-granddaughter—she choked to death in her highchair—I told our grandson that I had no answer as to why life takes such cruel turns. But even when we are overwhelmed by life's inexplicable reverses we can and must soldier on.

Losing a son to AIDS was particularly devastating to us. We had adopted him out of Germany when he was five, and we were told that he had his problems. He made it through high school fairly well, but he was soon gone, and on the fast track. He at last wrote and told us he was gay, which did not surprise us. He loved us, he said, and wanted to be able to come home. We assured him of our love—unconditional love—and that he could always come home, no strings attached.

When one of his friends called to tell us he was in the hospital dying of AIDS, we decided that Ouida should fly to Washington, D.C., to be with him. Back in those days, 1986, we were all afraid of the "new" disease. The nurses would mask and robe Ouida when she sat with him. She was with him when he died, a peaceful passing. We did not try to bring him home, but had a private service for him. The gay community in D.C. had a service for him. His body was cremated.

While the tragedy broke my heart, it positioned me to help others who are bewildered by the discovery of a gay or lesbian child. And it revealed to me that this "problem" is with us—in our homes and congregations—as much as with others, and it is not going to go away. I urge those parents who are tempted to reject a homosexual son or daughter to show unconditional love and acceptance. We can love and accept

them without approving of the lifestyle. That is the way God loves and accepts us in our erring ways.

We are to think in terms of redemption, if and when that is possible, not condemnation. If we love our children only when they measure up to our expectations, it is not the love with which Christ loves us. I do not see the "gay debate" as all that helpful. It may inform but it will not resolve the issue. Christ—who came to save rather than to condemn—is always our answer. We can disagree on this complex and disturbing question while we love and accept each other as equals in Christ.

While it is true that whenever homosexual *acts*—to be distinguished from homosexuality as such—are mentioned in scripture they are always condemned, it may nevertheless be more effective to take a more positive approach. This would be to set forth—with longsuffering and teaching—the biblical view of God's intention for human sexuality. It is clearly postulated in the Bible that God made sexual union for a purpose—the uniting of husband and wife in holy matrimony.

God has ordained sexual intercourse to join two people, a man and his wife, in a special and unique intimate relationship. God's purpose for sex is a big order—pleasure, children, family, community, companionship. Through sex God voted against loneliness! But God's purpose for earthly marriage is even more far-reaching.

Marriage is viewed in scripture as a model here on earth of what God wants in the union between Christ and his church. Each marriage may be viewed as a kind of parable of this mystical union between Christ and church. This gives a cosmic dimension to the union between husband and wife, and yet it is practically stated in such instruction as "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it" (Eph 5.25).

The homosexual lifestyle could not be more contradictory to this model. It is nearly always grossly promiscuous, with as many as a thousand partners during a lifetime not uncommon. Lasting monogamous relationships are very rare. It does not overstate the case to say that to be homosexual is to be non-monogamous.

But this living symbol of marriage reflecting the love that Christ has for his church has found meaning in Ouida's and my sixty-four years together. The history of the church is the story of crises—one crisis after another—but Christ's faithful love is unfailing. So it is in our marriage. We have found that the crucible of seemingly impossible difficulties has strengthened our love, just as it is with Christ and the church.

In our sunset years we face still a different kind of crisis. Ouida has been seriously ill for most of this year with atrial fibrillation and attending complications, including the loss of a kidney. She was in the hospital for six weeks. The prognosis is not good. Her condition is treatable but not curable. While she enjoys some quality of life, she tires easily and is limited in what she can do.

This led us to give up housekeeping, sell our home, and move into a retirement facility that has nursing care if and when needed. We moved from six rooms and two and a half baths to two rooms and one bath. Ouida had to give up much of what she had long treasured, but I reminded her that they are but things.

We may be in but two rooms, but we have each other. She is still my sweetheart wife. I still tell her every day that I love her—each day is special—and that I am superlatively blessed to have her as my wife. And she is still as delightful to me in bed as when we were younger, if not more so. We consider our marriage a covenant relationship—to be there for each other in sickness and in health, in youth and old age. I've often told her that if she ends up in a wheelchair, I will be there for her. She will always be my loving, beautiful wife, irrespective of age and infirmities.

Isn't this what Christ says to his bride, the church? Now that I'm ninety, I can say, in view of the challenges and excitement of past decades, that I can hardly wait to see what this decade holds. And I can hardly wait for God's tomorrow. Yes, life keeps getting better.

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