

The 12 Keys to SPIRITUAL VITALITY

Powerful Lessons
on Living Agelessly

RICHARD P. JOHNSON, PH.D.



Liguori

LIGUORI, MISSOURI

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri
www.liguori.org

Copyright © 1998 by Richard P. Johnson

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a 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.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Johnson, Richard P.

The 12 keys to spiritual vitality : powerful lessons on living agelessly / Richard P. Johnson. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7648-0230-0

1. Aging—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4580.J64 1998

98-26655

248.8'5—dc21

Scriptural citations are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists. To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit *Redemptorists.com*.

Printed in the United States of America
15 14 13 12 / 13 12 11 10

Contents

Introduction: The 12 Keys of Agelessness	ix
Key 1: Transform Your Attitudes about Maturation	1
Key 2: Seek Love Everywhere	13
Key 3: Delight in Connectedness	27
Key 4: Live in the Now	43
Key 5: Accept Your True Self	59
Key 6: Forgive Others and Self	71
Key 7: Let Go of Anger and Other Inner Turmoil	89
Key 8: Give of Yourself to Others	103
Key 9: Celebrate Your Faith	117
Key 10: Discover the Deep Meaning in Your Life	127
Key 11: Make Your Feelings Work for You	137
Key 12: Achieve Balance in Your Life	153

Epilogue 163

How to Personalize This Book 165

Index 167

Introduction

The 12 Keys of Agelessness

This is a book on how to become ageless, or spiritually vital. Actually, the main tenet of this book is that you already are ageless, yet most of us don't know what that means, nor how to tap into this agelessness that lives deep within us. Some people say that aging is only an attitude. If this is true at any level, then we could conclude that youthfulness—or what I prefer to call agelessness—is also an attitude.

This book is a short course on spiritual vitality and the attitudes of agelessness, and how to make them work for you in your aging process. To do this, you must discard what you already believe about aging and the process we call maturation and take on an entirely new mind-set.

As you read the next paragraph, develop an image in your mind's eye of the person it describes.

There She Lay

There she lay in her bed, still, as I watch her sleeping.
My thoughts turn to questions: Why, God, cannot she

speak? Why can't she think rational thoughts? Why is her mind so weak so that no meaningful cognition emerges from it? Her eyes are insensitive now, her muscles weak. She has no stamina and is now completely dependent upon her caregivers for everything. She can't feed herself; she is incontinent of urine and bowel. No fine motor skills has she, no sense of taste. Indeed, all of her senses are dim now. She drools and she whines; tears occasionally roll down her cheeks. She seems generally unable to care for herself in any way. She appears helpless. She is disoriented as to person, place, and time. She seems to have no sense of her own existential presence. She appears uncomfortable, fearful, and without purpose or personal direction.

What image emerged when you read this description? Who is this person just described? Since this book is subtitled *Powerful Lessons on Living Agelessly*, it's natural for you to have imagined a frail older woman, perhaps in a nursing-home bed, perhaps even in a semi-fetal position because of an advanced dementia, maybe even Alzheimer's disease. You probably imagined wrinkles and gray hair, dimmed eyes, and an inability to communicate, among other physical diminishments.

The feelings that you experienced as you brought this image to mind were probably feelings of compassion, fear, hopelessness, perhaps even disgust. Also feelings of pity for her, for somehow this poor woman had encountered debilitating difficulties in her life and was now enthroned, almost entombed, in this bed that will be her final resting place in this world.

Many people have such images when they read this paragraph. It is not, however, a description of an old, feeble, and demented woman; on the contrary, I wrote it to describe a two-and-a-half-*week*-old female infant. Doesn't that change your perspective and make you pause to think about how we normally conceive of this process called aging? We seem immediately to move into a thought pattern that says to us, "Isn't this too bad?" Our culture reveres youth, so we're prone to thinking that things that are young are better—and, by contrast, that things that are not so young are not quite so good, or are even "too bad."

Aging: The Thief in the Night?

I remember, while I was producing a training videotape on caring for aging parents, interviewing a woman in her eighty-third year. She was of Irish descent, and she was relating a conversation she had had with her son. She said, "I was talking to my son, Jim, the other day. I said, 'Jim, I went to church last Sunday, and you know the church was packed with old people.' My son, Jim, says to me, 'Well, Mother, what do you think you are?'"

She shot up in her chair right there on the videotape and held her hand to her forehead and said, "I never thought of that. I never thought of myself as being old." She continued, "I always thought I was...." She didn't know how to finish the sentence. She couldn't find the right words to describe her astonishment at her son's response. She tried again, "I thought I was...." Once again, she was befuddled and puzzled as to how to finish the sentence. Finally, on the third try she said, "I thought I was...all right."

I think the statement of this beautiful elder woman sums

up for us what our culture feels and thinks about this thing called aging, that aging isn't "all right." By extension, our culture feels there's something wrong with the very process of aging. That somehow we shouldn't be doing it!

Are you not doing it? Of course you are; we all are! The life process tells us that we must do it, and that we do it every day.

We know we're aging when we get up every morning and look in the mirror and say, "Something happened last night, because I don't look the same. Somewhere there was a thief that took something from me last night, and I don't like it."

Psychiatrists have a name for people who think one thing and yet profess something quite different through their behavior. They say this person has a *thought disorder*. In extreme cases, they would say, this person suffers from schizophrenia. In our culture we are all somewhat schizophrenic about aging. At the very least, we suffer from a double standard about aging. We possess confusing, confounding, and altogether puzzling ideas about what this thing called aging is all about. We don't know what it is; indeed, we are afraid of it.

A Plan for Healthy Aging

I learned a tremendous amount while pursuing my degree in gerontology at the University of Florida. I learned much more, however, in my many years of clinical experience with aging persons and their families. This book distills this knowledge and experience into a plan for healthy aging, a plan that involves your body, your mind, and your spirit.

This book actually emerged from an important question

I couldn't seem to escape. For fifteen years I worked in a large hospital where I saw many patients, a good majority of whom were "older." I stood shoulder to shoulder with their physicians every day in my professional life. I looked at and studied elder people who came in with physical ailments of all kinds. What puzzled me was that there seemed to be two distinct groups. Some of them were chronologically quite old, perhaps ninety-five years of age, but looked and acted as if they were thirty years younger. Others who came in were chronologically only forty-five or fifty years old but who looked and acted as if they had been here for ninety-five years.

Now, I don't like using these chronological demarcators called age, because age doesn't mean much; I think we overvalue our age. Your age—that number that you think is tattooed to your forehead for all to see, clicking higher like an odometer every year at your birthday—means only the number of times you've circumnavigated the sun. But as I looked at these people in the hospital, I asked myself, "What are the differences between the person who's been here for ninety-five years and acts forty-five, and the person who is forty-five yet acts ninety-five?" I felt compelled to study this phenomenon.

With my scientific cap on, I started observing personality qualities in order to gain some insight into this perplexing question. I observed many characteristics that seemed to be *keys to spiritual vitality*, or agelessness, or youthfulness. Call it what you will. Over the years my list grew longer and longer. After four years of study, I had collected forty-three different characteristics that defined for me the difference between what could be seen as ageless behavior and what was clearly "old" behavior—forty-three qualities

that separated ageless person A from aged person B. Ageless Joseph is vital, alive, but it was hard to even conceive that aged Josephine had ever been a child. You know the kind of people I mean: he's perpetually blooming, while she comes down her mother's birth canal and she's already old. I have nothing against something that's old, and I'm not trying to deny age. As a matter of fact, I like age, and I look forward to the days when I will be older. I think age is a necessary part of God's plan. We need to understand aging in that way. God brought us aging as a gift. I will define that much more clearly as we proceed. But I never want to act "old." I never want to act as though I've lost my agelessness, or my youthfulness, or my vitality.

Youthfulness

We don't want to confuse the word "youthfulness" with youth. I once attended a very large gerontology conference at which a well-known gerontologist was speaking. He opened the keynote address of the conference with a reference to Alcoholics Anonymous, announcing to the thousand people before him, "Let me introduce myself: my name is Tom; I'm a recovering youth." His quip sums up for us the truth that indeed there is something to recover from in youth, and underscores for me the fact that the maturation process, particularly in one's later years, has potential for personal, character, and most of all spiritual development far beyond what we formerly thought. I believe that more growth can take place in one's later years than in any other time of life!

I believe that to be youthful you must be very mature and that the forty-three qualities I had observed were

actually behavioral signs of maturation. But how did the maturation process turn into this thing called “aging”? I see maturation as incremental, increasing, additive; I see aging—getting “old”—as decremental, decreasing, discounting. It’s a matter of attitudes, and we have to change ours.

I decided that forty-three qualities was too many. I compacted the list of forty-three into twenty. Using these twenty, I gave several seminars in local retirement centers and hospitals. I found that twenty was still too many. Once again I compacted the list, this time into the twelve keys I present in this book.

The 12 Keys to Spiritual Vitality

Here are the twelve keys:

1. Transform your attitudes about maturation.
2. Seek love everywhere.
3. Delight in connectedness.
4. Live in the now.
5. Accept your true self.
6. Forgive others and self.
7. Let go of anger and other inner turmoil.
8. Give of yourself to others.
9. Celebrate your faith.
10. Discover the deep meaning in your life.
11. Make your feelings work for you.
12. Achieve balance in your life.

These twelve keys are the result of much study, research, and clinical experience, and I assure you, the degree to which