

The Wisdom Years with Dr Barbara Boyd - Embracing Intentional Aging

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Introduction and Greetings

David Lowry: Hello, everyone. This is David Lowry and my good friend, Don Drew, for Peaceful Life Radio, your place on the internet where we focus on intentional aging. Hi, Don. "How you doing?"

I'm doing great, David. How are you doing today?

Introducing Dr. Barbara Boyd

David Lowry: I'm excited about our guest . It's a longtime friend of mine, 15 years, I believe. Dr. Barbara Boyd is a retired professor from the University of Oklahoma, where she was the director of outreach and a faculty member in the religious studies program. Barbara, I think of you as a spiritual advisor, a wise person, a woman who has thought deeply about life and the meaning of life. You've been a pastor, you have extensive religious training, not just Christian, but all of them. And one of the reasons that we invited Barbara on our program was that she's written a book called the Wisdom Years, a Guide to Intentional Aging.

I think my wife had to get approval from Dr. [00:01:00] Boyd before she could marry me. And I'm glad that Barbara said yes.

Barbara, welcome to our program today. We're so glad to have you.

Barbara Boyd: Thank you so much. And you had to have Tom's approval too, because Cary was his special person.

David Lowry: I know, Tom wasn't gonna let just anybody marry Cary.

Barbara let's begin our program.

The Motivation Behind 'The Wisdom Years'

David Lowry: How did you come to write this book? What was your motivation?

Barbara Boyd: I turned 70 years old, that's what did it. I left the university when I was age 67 and Tom and I retired and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico and set

up housekeeping and began backpacking and hiking and doing all those things you know, your bucket list. Went to New Zealand and Alaska. Did a lot of travels. But then I was about to turn 70 and I suddenly realized I was bored.

Don Drew: Yeah, Barbara, I want to read [00:02:00] this one paragraph from the start of your book. It says, After a year of play, which is what you're talking about, I quickly became mired in boredom and began to explore a variety of activities and experiences to help define and claim my senior years as valuable years. But none of those choices I made inspired me or urged me to move into my own sense of calling in the wisdom years, though I was unfettered, I love this, I was ungrounded.

David Lowry: I think that describes a lot of people.

Barbara Boyd: Yes. In other words, being unfettered, I could do whatever I wanted, go wherever I wanted and make any choice I was capable of making within my physical world and budget. I felt utterly free.

Exploring the Concept of Intentional Aging

Barbara Boyd: But what I learned, of course, is that kind of freedom can lead to boredom if there's not depth given to it.

And so like most retirees, I plunged into doing all the fun stuff on my bucket list. And [00:03:00] then one day it just came up short. It's like *you can do this forever*. It's like being in a candy store. Eventually you eat enough candy that you're sick of the sugar. They're sick of the sweets. It's not fun anymore. And that's what had happened to me.

Tom and I had adventures and I was ready for depth again in my life. And the play was good. I needed it. It restored me. It refreshed me. Gave me a new sense of what my body would do at that age. But, there wasn't a lot of depth to it. It was all play.

So, I was about to turn 70 and that sounded ominous to me.

The Pilgrimage Year

Barbara Boyd: I said to Tom, *I am going to create a pilgrimage year for myself, and I'm not going to invite you on all of my pilgrimages. I will invite you on one of them, but I'm going to do four. And, I'm headed out. I'm going to ask [00:04:00] friends on some, go by myself on some, and take you on one. Can you handle that?* And Tom was a delightfully supportive spouse. And he said, *sure, honey, go for it, you know, have fun.*

And that's what the book is about. I took four pilgrimages and came back at the end of that year. I turned 70 in England walking the Cotswolds. At the end of the year, I came back and wrote the book about my lessons and my learning and life has been very different since I wrote this book.

Don Drew: One of the things I noticed about in your book is that you talk about each of the pilgrimages describing the pilgrimage, but then that's followed by a chapter about what's happening to you internally. We can see you going through this growth throughout the year and all the lessons that you learn.

Barbara Boyd: Yes.

Internal Growth and Soul Building

Barbara Boyd: That model dropped into my head when I started trying to organize the book because I didn't want to write a travelogue. That's not interesting. [00:05:00] Because anyone can do what I did. Thousands and thousands of people every year take pilgrimages. So I wasn't interested in recording that. It dawned on me that the real journey had taken place inside. *What had I learned? How had I grown? Where had I struggled? What had I failed? What had I excelled at? What gave me a new sense of purpose and meaning? What challenged me? What was my unfinished business? What was left over? What was completed?* All of those kinds of existential questions that reside deep in our souls.

I've come up with a word that I didn't use in the book. I wish I had known this phrase. But I've realized recently that I've been on a journey. I'm 78 now, and this happened at age 70. So, in these eight years, my seventies have been a journey of *soul building*. Isn't that a gorgeous [00:06:00] term?

David Lowry: Soul building. Yes. Yes. I love that term. Barbara, when you're going at the speed of life at a very prestigious university meeting with thousands of students, going to meetings and doing all the things. It's a very rigorous life. You don't have all this time to process what's happened to me those 70 years!

Challenges of Transitioning to Retirement

Don Drew: Yeah, she talks about coming out of the institutional life, a phrase used by Father Richard Rohr, a favorite author of mine, and moving into what she calls an intentional life, which is what I think you're talking about here, Barbara. Don't you find that intentionality is somewhat hard to grasp at first.

Barbara Boyd: It's very difficult to grasp. That's a terrific comment because it doesn't just drop in. It's not automatic. It doesn't even occur to one for a while right after you've retired. I was tired of the institutional world as any other person

at retirement. I was ready to be done with that. Suddenly, I'm on my own where I [00:07:00] can do whatever I want to do, which I did. But trying to locate one's self in a brand new stage of life, that's hard work. In fact, I think I likened it to being a teenager at puberty. I think the same thing applies between career and the freedom years-- that become the wisdom years, if you intend them. Now, I know people that are playing the whole time, all the way to the grave. They don't ever go through what I went through. But I see that transition in life as huge between what David was describing, the meetings and the intensity of one's career to sudden autonomy and freedom. In my last chapters where I wrote about being anonymous, your status goes out the window, your title out the window, you're not important anymore. All of those [00:08:00] accolades that you get, that goes away. For a while, that feels good. And then suddenly it doesn't feel so good.

Don Drew: Yeah You use the phrase fear can completely absorb the aging years. And I think that's really what we're talking about. I mean, if there is not some plans, some intentionalities about it then fear can overtake us during this time. And so many people seem to be prey to that. And that's one of the reasons why I love your book is because it wrestles, it kicks against the slats, if you will. It's saying it doesn't have to be that way. There are still lessons to be learned.

Barbara Boyd: You know what that fear turns into now, you're going to hear my prejudice here and I will step on some toes of your listeners. I'm aware of this and this statement I'm about to make. So the disclaimer is you all are not responsible for the statement. But I've come to believe Don, that cruising, of cruise ships, is precisely what you're talking about because it is nothing but play on a boat in the [00:09:00] ocean where you can do anything you want to do as long as you don't jump overboard. And Tom and I took a couple of cruises because we wanted to know what all the fuss was about, but I've never been so bored in my life. And I think cruising has become the new senior thing to replace depth, intentionality, adventure, pursuing one's inner journey. I mean, if you make it to 70, there's a wealth of experience and information just living inside of us, waiting to be mined, to be shared, to be explored. And to cover that up with a cruise?

David Lowry: Barbara. I love that. And I think that there's a lot of things that we do in life to keep from facing ourselves, whether it's an addictive behavior of some sort or you spend all your time reading, going to one thing or another, exercising or [00:10:00] whatever it is. And those are important parts of our lives. We need pleasure but this drive for *what did my life mean to me?* seemed to be a driver for you.

So, let's talk about some of the things that you discovered about yourself that you think are universal for all of us. And you mentioned one of them is we are a treasure trove of information. What are some of the lessons you learned from reflection and looking back and the pilgrimage?

The Importance of Sharing Wisdom

Barbara Boyd: In light of that question, David, the secret to being that treasure trove is being willing at this stage of life, precisely like the two of you are doing right here, you are an example of what I'm talking about. You gotta be willing to give it away at this stage. Our knowledge, our wisdom belongs to the world at this stage. It's not ours any longer, and to hang on to it, to stifle it, to suffocate it, not to share it, is to have wasted, in a way, all of the previous [00:11:00] years.

We are the household, the harbingers, the home of the planet's wisdom at this stage. And we owe it, it's our responsibility, I use that word in my last paragraph in the book. It's our responsibility to hand what it is that we know and experience back to the world as gift without being attached to it, without seeking reward, it's unconditional. It's time for the cosmic giveaway. It's time to give it away.

The decision that has to be made is where is that appropriate? When is the time appropriate? It's like the student, just this morning that reached out to me saying, *please help, please give me your wisdom*. Those moments come if we make ourselves available. People know that we're not trying to be, oh, here's the biggest mistake seniors make. Tom [00:12:00] Boyd taught me this. We must stop being the experts as you give away your wisdom and your knowledge. It's a gift, a releasing. It's an allowing. It's handing it over without strings on it, saying, *do with it what you will. This is my story, my experience. I hope this might help you*. And you walk away and you leave the results to the person. You don't try to control it, be the expert with it, manhandle it, come back and yank it away.

David Lowry: Yes. I love that. There's no control in wisdom. Wisdom is there. It's shared. If it helps, great. If it doesn't, it's like, *I am not invested in this, right? You are the boss of you*.

Barbara Boyd: Barbara, moving to this life of intentionality is something that many of us haven't experienced before because frankly, our intentionality was already decided for us. I have to be at work at [00:13:00] nine. Or I have this project that's due. Or I have these people coming over. Your intentions are pretty much set for you. Now you are setting your intentionality and you have to do a weighing of which one is more important than the other, so what intentionalities you would challenge us to start moving towards?

Adapting to Physical and Mental Changes

Barbara Boyd: I find that I'm searching for a word here is our ability to adapt. Because if nothing else changes, and by the way, everything else will change. But just to say the sentence like this, if nothing else changes, your body will

change.

Don Drew: That's happening, right?

Barbara Boyd: Glasses, teeth, hip replacements, hearing aids, heart valves, whatever it is, something's going to happen that's going to change your physicality, period. It's just going to. And so we either do that with pleasure and with yes, or we're cranky and crotchety and [00:14:00] we ruin our old age, our senior years, and we run it for everybody else. So I think adaptation becomes very important.

So part of it is body, but part of it is mindset. It goes back to that word Don was using a while ago, the fear word, our resistance to change. Seniors are notorious for saying *back in my day*, X. Well, I'm sorry, but your day is gone. So, are we going to adapt to today? To today's world? To what's required of us to live in today's world?

Our needs for security. I see so many seniors becoming more and more insecure and you cannot death proof anyone.

Don Drew: Yeah.

Barbara Boyd: We're all finite. We're all mortal. We can't death proof ourselves.

The Cosmic Yes and Taking Risks

Barbara Boyd: So, this is the time, believe it or not, for risk, [00:15:00] not security. This is a stage of life where we take risks. We can risk in the ways of thinking that we didn't dare think when we were in our careers or we were younger and didn't know. We can take risks with our friendships and step outside our comfort zones. Try a group that you wouldn't ordinarily want to attend. Go to a church you might not know anything about. Take a vacation that would be the exact opposite of what you might ordinarily want to do. This is the time to risk, not become secure.

David Lowry: My wife has a saying that has meant something to me. She says David, let's say yes until we have to say no. Whether it's a trip across the country to see our grandkids or getting in our car and driving which is becoming more and more an adventure, right? We have narrow time bands that we drive now because we don't like nighttime and super early in the morning [00:16:00] and take a lot of right hand turns instead of crossing 17 lanes of traffic like I might have done as a teenager. But say yes. As much as you can and don't pull the covers over your head.

Barbara Boyd: I want to add another gift from my precious spouse. Tom in the seventies, was 40 years old, stumbled into a phrase that he used until he died.

And it was what he called *The Cosmic Yes*. No matter what life throws at us, no matter what we want to do and choose to do, the answer to it, even to our own death, is yes.

David Lowry: That is something to think about. This is something that gets a little dicey, but we've already crossed that line, haven't we? So, the dicey thing is, Barbara in her book, and keep in mind, Barbara has been a religious woman all of her life, and pastored many of those years, is a retired [00:17:00] minister.

Reevaluating Religious Connections

David Lowry: Barbara says, sometimes in the senior years, maybe we need to reconsider those religious connections to the point of walking away from some of them. So, I'd like to hear your thinking on that, because you've been there and done that. What are your thoughts on that?

Barbara Boyd: Such a tricky question. There really are two answers to it. And so I'm going to speak first to the yes. And that is, I believe that religious affiliation for many people is a type of salvation. And I do not mean that in a theological sense. I mean it in a communal sense. Seniors and lonely, and they're isolated and church or synagogue or mosque or, spiritual community, those gatherings are critical for many seniors for community. Not theology, but community. So, I would never speak against church [00:18:00] per- se for that group of seniors because I believe it satisfies something that's very human and very important as we age.

With that set aside, if you're a person more like me, I've spent my life in a church building and so part of my journey has been to withdraw from that institutional world and find a new place of worship, a new place for my spiritual growth, and to let go of most of my religious connections. I'm making a very clear distinction here.

Nature became for me, my church. I tend to walk a lot and take walks and put myself on hikes. I love being out in nature and wilderness parks. So, Sunday morning, I'll get up and when my friends are headed off into the church building, I'm headed into the woods. God [00:19:00] and I have a whole lot of talks. It's not like God's not talking to me and I'm not talking to God. It's not like I'm not praying and worshiping. And sometimes I'm even singing hymns under my breath. So, I'm having church. I'm just doing it in the woods by myself because my communal needs are many other places.

So that would be the first piece of it. The second piece of it is, as we age, for some of us, there's a kind of graduation process. I feel graduated from church. It felt like a very important part of my life but this stage of my life I don't need the buildings, I don't need the rituals, the structures, the form. Tom's word for it was form. I don't need the forms of religion. What I need are the blessings of religion. For me, that's my spiritual journey, my prayer life, my meditation, my yoga, my

walks in nature. I'm doing all the same stuff. I'm just doing it myself.

David Lowry: So, in some ways you've never [00:20:00] been more religious. You're not hanging out in the same way that you were but you really feel it more intensely. I suspect you spend more time thinking about the place of the divine in your life and how all of that shapes up for you and I find that fascinating. Because as you become more senior in your thinking, it's like the forms are not as necessary in the way they once were.

Don Drew: Barbara, I would love to talk about each of the four pilgrimages but we don't have time for that. So, I'd like to zero in on the third one. And you're with, I believe it's Joanne and you're in the Cotswolds in England.

Barbara Boyd: Yes.

Don Drew: And you're doing a pilgrimage from various historical churches. And at some point you find yourself utterly by yourself. I guess you got ahead of Joanne or something. But you're by yourself, and you make a statement about anonymity and ego.

The Liberating Experience of Anonymity

Barbara Boyd: My favorite moment was when that happened to me. And it's the one moment that has stuck with me most graphically through these eight years. I was in a wheat [00:21:00] field and the tops of the wheat were already yellow. Joanne had fallen way behind me. It was blistering hot. And I suddenly just stopped and decided to call Tom. I don't know why I did that, but I yanked out my phone, tried to call and there was no tower. So, I couldn't get through. And what swept over me was this feeling that I was utterly alone, that nobody on the planet knew where I was and what I was doing or who I was. I was not important. I'm standing in this wheat field and I'm not Dr. Boyd, or Reverend Boyd, or Mrs. Boyd, or Sister Boyd, or Friend Boyd. I have no titles, no status. I'm completely unnecessary to the functioning of the universe. I'm taking up space and time. It swept over me, and it wasn't negative feeling, by the way.

Don Drew: Yeah, it seems like it was a liberating is the way it came across [00:22:00] to me.

Barbara Boyd: it was a liberation from the ego of all of my years of gathering titles and gathering accolades and status and power and the system of life. Suddenly, all of that swept away. It was not important anymore. And then I was suddenly just liberated from worrying about how important I was or what my status was or who I was. I was simply one of God's children there in the middle of the garden being allowed to simply be. The previous years of all my doing, which had been good and positive, was over with. And suddenly I was called into being

a being. So, that particular trip began to define who I am now, what I've been working on every day. Even while [00:23:00] I'm doing a lot of doing, I'm doing something right now. But how do I represent my being self? How am I called into the fullness of the creation that I am? And how do I live into and through that and not worry about the rest of it? That's what I've been working on these eight years. And Tom's death has really brought this home because there's nothing I can do about it. I'm not in charge. He's gone. And so all I've got left is me. And I've got to create a being that can be me without him.

David Lowry: Ram Dass said *you have to be somebody before you can be nobody*. And you've been somebody and now you're experiencing the nobody. I think you're sort of liking it. What are some tips or secrets you've learned along the way about becoming that being person?

Barbara Boyd: It goes [00:24:00] back to something we talked about at the very beginning of this. You two, Don and David, need to talk about this. The difference, frankly, is I find a distinction between the male journey and the female journey. Males in our society are defined by what they do and if you don't let the other males know what you do, then you're not important and have no status or power or authority. That's the male journey.

Female journey is quite different from that. Our definition is our children, our relationships and so on and so forth. Now that's been very stereotypical. I understand that. I have as many titles in the male journey as I do in my female journey. But , still there's a kind of resonance there in the way that males, because of societal norms, have to face retirement and the way females face retirement. And I think that distinction is important in how we talk [00:25:00] about. As a woman, I am going to experience it all quite differently. It's easier for me to give up titles than probably a male. That's easier for me to do, if I'm honest about it. I found anyway, and I have all kinds of titles, but I found those easier to give up than I think Tom did, frankly.

Reflections on Retirement and Future Plans

David Lowry: By the way, Barbara, when my wife, Cary, was facing her retirement, she read Barbara's book. She chose the book, the wisdom years, and I was talking with her about it today before the podcast. And she was telling me how meaningful that had been to her. And I think the reason it was is-- first of all, it was written by a woman. She didn't have to be mansplained about retirement. But she also felt like you guided her thinking about retirement in a different way. She was leaving her job she'd had for many, many years and she'd had a long career and was weary of it. At the same time, wasn't sure, what's [00:26:00] next? So, I really want to recommend this book, *The Wisdom Years, A Guide to Intentional Aging* by Dr. Barbara Boyd, it has so much to offer women facing retirement too. If my wife is any Indicator of that. I know how meaningful it was to

her.

Don has read the book several times. This is your first full year of retirement?

Don Drew: This first full year. Yeah. And if it wasn't for this podcast, I wouldn't know what to do. It's actually been a very good year, but i've had a lot of help. Doing these podcasts talking to the kinds of people that we're talking to, like Barbara and others has made this a real joy. Barbara Christy and I, got back from the Camino de Santiago, which is something we had wanted to do for years. So, we're in the pilgrimage stuff right now. And actually after I read your book, I turned to her and I said, we need to give a cosmic yes to virtually everything that we want to do now while we can. We already can see there's things we used to do that we can't or don't want to and [00:27:00] Yeah, I really appreciate you, appreciate Tom, I've known Tom since 1983, I think it was. And miss him, and, so I was so thankful for you being with us today on Peaceful Life Radio, you've given a great contribution to our listeners.

David Lowry: I also think we should give our listeners a peek that a new book will be coming out soon from Dr. Boyd as she's telling us more about her experiences with her beloved Tom Boyd, her husband of many years. They were such a wonderful couple and it's such an inspiration to so many of us. Barbara, when that book comes out, you're coming back on the show. Okay. We're going to talk about those years.

Barbara Boyd: That book, little different. It's our love story, so it's very intimate and personal.

David Lowry: Hmm. Oh just because we're seniors doesn't mean we don't want to hear about intimate and personal love stories.

Barbara Boyd: That what I'm hearing from people.

David Lowry: All right. So, we'll get our PG flag up on that particular podcast and we'll have you talk to us about all of that. Thank you for being with [00:28:00] us today.