

Embracing

Age

*How Catholic Nuns Became
Models of Aging Well*

ANNA I. CORWIN

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INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

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Thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship Open Book Program, *Embracing Age: How Catholic Nuns Became Models of Aging Well* is available for free as a PDF at the [Rutgers University Press website](#). If you do assign the book, I would love to hear from you!

AUDIENCE(S)

The book is designed to speak to a number of audiences including both academic and non-academic audiences. The introduction includes a section titled *The Audience(s)* that addresses what each audience may gain from the book. For instructors, I have included a key above each chapter in this instructor guide identifying which chapters might align best with classes on: **research methods**, **linguistic anthropology**, **aging studies**, **medical anthropology** and **religious studies / anthropology of religion**.

BOOK DESCRIPTION:

Embracing Age: How Catholic Nuns Became Models of Aging Well examines a community of individuals whose aging trajectories contrast with mainstream American experiences. In mainstream American society, aging is presented as a “problem,” a state to be avoided as long as possible, a state that threatens one’s ability to maintain independence, autonomy, control over one’s surroundings. Aging “well” (or avoiding aging) has become a 21st century American preoccupation. *Embracing Age* provides a window into the everyday lives of American Catholic nuns who experience longevity and remarkable health and well-being at the end of life. Catholic nuns aren’t only healthier in older age, they are healthier because they practice a culture of acceptance and grace in aging. *Embracing Age* demonstrates how aging in the convent is understood by the nuns to be a natural part of the life course, not one to be feared or avoided. Anna I. Corwin shows readers how Catholic nuns create a cultural community that provides a model for how to grow old, decline, and die that is both embedded in American culture and quite distinct from other American models.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is ideal to assign for classes focusing on **research methods**, **linguistic anthropology**, **aging studies**, **medical anthropology** and **religious studies / anthropology of religion**.

Summary: *The introduction to Embracing Age presents to the reader to the question that the book seeks to answer, namely, how did American Catholic sisters become models of healthy aging? The chapter introduces the field of linguistic anthropology for readers who might be unfamiliar with this approach and outlines the ways in which language and cultural practices are interwoven in the nuns' aging trajectory.*

Questions:

1. On the second page of the book, Corwin writes “the values that my grandmother held dear were the same ones that rendered her relatively isolated.”
 - a. What are the mainstream American values that the author describes her grandmother holding?
 - b. How do these values contribute to isolation?
 - c. What values surrounding aging do you observe in your own family or community/ies?
 - d. How might the values you name above contribute to (or possibly alleviate) the social isolation of older adults and/or individuals with chronic conditions and/or disability?
 - e. Where and when do you see these values in your everyday life or in the everyday lives of your family and community members? Can you describe a particular example in detail?

2. On the third page, Corwin writes that cultural norms in the U.S. “teach us to avoid aging.”
 - a. How do people speak about aging in your cultural community/ies?
 - b. Under what circumstances and in which contexts is aging is spoken about?
 - c. Extracting from the themes you wrote about in a and b, what cultural norms about aging seem to be at work in your family and/or community/ies?
 - d. What moral values are implied in the interactions and cultural norms you named above?

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3. Group exercise: In a freewrite (inspired by Jamaica Kincaid’s famous essay [*Girl*](#)) Without stopping, write all the messages you heard about aging as a child and the ones you hear now. *If students are instructed not to identify themselves in their writing, the instructor can compile the writings and lead a reading of the various messages. The exercise could continue as the class discusses themes they hear emerging. Instructors may wish to point out how themes students identify align or do not with Corwin’s observations about aging ideologies in wider American society or in the convent.*
4. In the section “Language: The Words We Speak” Corwin describes her theoretical approach to language.
 - a. How does the author approach language?
 - b. According to this model, what role does language play in human experience, behavior, culture, and learning?
5. Corwin approaches her research as an anthropologist.
 - a. What methods for studying aging did she use?
 - b. What methods for studying aging did she not use?
 - c. What do each of these methods reveal and what remains hidden or unanalyzed in each?
 - d. If you were designing a study of aging and well-being, what methods would you use?

CHAPTER ONE

LIFE IN THE CONVENT

This chapter is ideal to assign for classes focusing on **research methods**, **aging studies**, **medical anthropology** and **religious studies / anthropology of religion**.

Summary: *Chapter One introduces the reader to the convent and provides an experientially focused description of what it means for the sisters to live as members of a monastic community. As an ethnographically rich account of life in the convent, the first chapter paints a picture of the community, the sisters' daily lives, and the author's introduction to the convent as a researcher.*

Questions:

1. This chapter begins with stories from some of the sisters' lives. What was one that stood out to you and why?
2. What do you learn from this chapter about some of the challenges of starting ethnographic research?
3. What do we learn about the researcher in this chapter? Why do you think the author shared details about herself as an individual and her process?
4. In the section "Inside the Convent", the author draws on philosopher Giorgio Agamben's writing to describe how time in a monastic institution takes on distinct cultural and symbolic meanings.
 - a. What are these new meanings of time?
 - b. How does this happen? What practices are involved in temporal meaning-making here?
5. The author suggests that time held different cultural meanings in the homes the nuns came from (for example as work is divided from rest) and that these distinctions take on moral meanings as well.
 - a. How is time divided in your own family and community/ies?
 - b. What moral or symbolic meanings do you see tied to this way of dividing time in your family or cultural community/ies?

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6. Corwin describes the Franciscan sisters' lively sociality. Building from Agamben's notion of the sanctification of time in the monastery, Corwin suggests that the Franciscan sisters' sociality could be understood as a *sanctification through presence*.
 - a. In your own words, having read the section, how would you define sanctification through presence?
 - b. How does sanctification through presence relate to the theological history of the convent?
 - c. Corwin suggests that activities that might appear unremarkable can hold important cultural meanings in a particular communities, for example, St Francis's walk or the sister's chatting at lunch might look unremarkable, but in the context of the monastery or convent hold sacred meaning for the community. What practices in your family or community might hold cultural meanings that would not be initially be apparent to an outsider? What are these meanings and how are they conveyed?
7. In the final section, Corwin describes the convent infirmary, writing "the only similarities between this infirmary and other medical institutions I had seen were physical, not social or interactional."
 - a. What differences does Corwin note between the convent infirmary and other American medical institutions?
 - b. What does she mean when she distinguishes between "physical" and "interactional" similarities or differences?
 - c. Drawing on your own experiences in doctor's offices, hospitals, or other medical spaces, how does Corwin's description of life in the convent compare or contrast to what you have observed in other medical spaces? How might the institutional organization, the language and interactional practices or other elements compare?

CHAPTER TWO

BEING IS HARDER THAN DOING

This chapter is ideal to assign for classes focusing on **research methods**, **linguistic anthropology**, **aging studies**, and **medical anthropology**.

Summary: *The second chapter unpacks the notions of “well-being” and “successful aging” that underpin the central questions of the book. The chapter explores how “successful aging” has been used in the gerontological literature and demonstrates how the nuns’ cultural practices contrast with the cultural values promoted in the successful aging paradigm. The chapter ends by suggesting that the nuns experience positive health outcomes at the end of life precisely because their cultural practices around aging do not embrace the “successful aging” paradigm.*

Questions:

1. Corwin argues that well-being is shaped by cultural and historical factors. This is an argument that contradicts the notion that there could be a single, universal definition of well-being.
 - a. What evidence does the author provide for this argument?
 - b. What does it mean to take cultural and historical context into account when evaluating well-being?
 - c. Imagine a counter example: Can you fabricate a definition of well-being that does *not* take cultural and/or historical factors into consideration, in other words a universal definition of well-being? What might Corwin find problematic about such a definition?
2. Corwin goes on to define well-being in the convent.
 - a. How does the author describe well-being in the convent?
 - b. How does this definition rely on cultural and/or historical context?
 - c. What kind of data supports this definition of well-being?
 - d. If you were exploring well-being in a particular cultural community, how would you go about it? What methods would you use in order to identify how members of the community define well-being?

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3. In this chapter, Corwin suggests that the “successful aging” model is inaccurate and problematic.
 - a. What is the “successful aging” model? What are the main features of the model?
 - b. Why does Corwin take issue with the “successful aging” model?
 - c. What is her argument? Is it convincing? Why or why not?
4. In this chapter, Corwin makes what might look at first to be a contradictory argument: She argues that American nuns age well because their cultural practices differ from the cultural ideals presented in the “successful aging” model.
 - a. What are the cultural values in the mainstream model of “successful aging”?
 - b. How do the nuns’ cultural values and practices contrast with the “successful aging” model?
5. How is aging spoken about in the cultural communities you are a member of?
 - a. What cultural practices around aging have you observed in the communities you are a member of?
 - b. What cultural values are present in these ideals and practices?

CHAPTER THREE

TALKING TO GOD

This chapter is ideal to assign for classes focusing on **linguistic anthropology**, **aging studies**, **medical anthropology** and **religious studies / anthropology of religion**.

Summary: *The third chapter explores the pragmatic aspects of prayer, analyzing what prayer achieves linguistically and socially in the convent. The chapter attends to how prayer can serve as a form of social support in the convent as well as how nuns use prayer as a mode of socialization into attitudes towards aging, pain, and illness. Prayer is found to be a channel through which the sisters socialize each other into culturally specific aging practices and meaningful decline.*

Questions:

1. In the introduction to the chapter, Corwin writes that linguistic anthropologists see language as doing more than simply describing the world. Drawing on J.L. Austin and Greg Urban, Corwin writes that language also functions *performatively*, meaning that language *does things in the world*.
 - a. What does the author mean when she writes that language “does” things in the world? Provide examples from the text. Can you think of other examples that you have witnessed?
 - b. How does prayer function in the convent? The author outlines four functions. What are they? What does each of these functions of prayer “do” in the world?
 - c. What data does the author present to demonstrate each of these performative functions? Discuss the details of one example and how it demonstrates one (or more) of the performative functions of prayer.
2. In this chapter, Corwin suggests that prayer functions as a form of *socialization*.
 - a. How does Corwin define socialization: What is socialization?
 - b. How does prayer function as a form of socialization among the sisters?
3. Corwin points out that much of the literature on socialization focuses on children. In this chapter, Corwin argues that socialization happens at every stage of life including as individuals transition from adults into older adulthood and old age.
 - a. What cultural practices does Corwin describe the sisters learning as they become socialized into aging in the convent?

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4. What socialization practices around aging have you noticed in the cultural communities you are part of?
 - a. How and where do community members in these communities learn about aging?
 - b. What do community members learn about how to approach and prepare for old age?
 - c. How are these things learned?
 - d. Is the learning explicit, or implicit?
 - e. Is it spoken about or embodied?

CHAPTER FOUR

CARE, ELDER SPEAK, AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

This chapter is ideal to assign for classes focusing on **linguistic anthropology**, **aging studies**, and **medical anthropology**.

Summary: *The fourth chapter examines the ways in which the sisters in the convent speak to their aging peers. Rather than using “elderspeak,” a linguistic genre similar to babytalk, the nuns engage their declining peers in linguistically complex and socially meaningful communication. The chapter ends by looking at how the nuns engage an older peer with pronounced physical and communication impairments in a remarkably competitive game of cards.*

Questions:

1. Corwin writes that in the United States, individuals often use *elderspeak* when communicating with older adults.
 - a. How does Corwin define elderspeak?
 - b. What linguistic features are associated with elderspeak?
 - c. Why is elderspeak problematic?
 - d. Have you observed elderspeak? What was the context, and what do you remember about the interaction?
2. Corwin suggests that when communicating with most older adults, elderspeak is not necessary. However, she notes that elderspeak is more difficult to avoid when interacting with individuals who have communication impairments.
 - a. Why is elderspeak more difficult to avoid in these situations?
 - b. Have you ever interacted with someone who has a communication disability or difficulties, or do you have a communication disability yourself? What modes of communication have you found most helpful? Most difficult? What linguistic challenges and successes have you experienced in these contexts?

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3. In this chapter, Corwin argues that it is important for individuals' cognitive health and social well-being to be engaged in meaningful linguistically rich interaction, yet in some contexts this can be challenging.
 - a. What genres of speech did the sisters use to engage their peers in meaningful, linguistically complex interactions?
 - b. What linguistic features did these genres share?
 - c. What institutional and cultural structures in the convent afforded these interactions? Could you imagine these working in other institutional and cultural settings? Why or why not?
 - d. Can you think of other genres of communication that you have experienced or that you could imagine being used in the cultural communities you are part of? Describe the genre(s) and explain why they may afford meaningful linguistically complex interactions with individuals who have communication difficulties.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHANGING GOD, CHANGING BODIES

This chapter is ideal to assign for classes focusing on **linguistic anthropology**, **medical anthropology** and **religious studies / anthropology of religion**.

Summary: Chapter five uses narrative analysis to explore how prayer practices in the convent have changed since Vatican II, a major institutional change in the Catholic church. The chapter outlines the changes the convent underwent after Vatican II and examines how the nuns' prayer practices and their understandings of God changed after Vatican II. The chapter illustrates how changes in the nuns' habitual linguistic practices shaped the nuns' understanding of God and their experience of their bodies and pain over their lifetimes.

Questions:

1. Corwin argues that Sister Theresa's *epistemology of pain*, her understanding of what pain is and what it means changed over her lifetime
 - a. Describe Sister Theresa's relationship with and understanding of pain before Vatican II and then after Vatican II. What changed?
2. In the section *Prayer and the Body* Corwin argues that prayer is not only verbal, but also *embodied*. She outlines three ways prayer involves the body. What are they? How does each function as a form of embodied communication?
3. Corwin argues that the sisters' conception of God changed after Vatican II
 - a. How did their understanding of God change: How was God understood in the convent before and after Vatican II?
 - b. What data does Corwin draw on to document these changes?
4. In this chapter, Corwin compares two of Sister Rita's narratives.
 - a. What linguistic features does Corwin identify as she compares the two narratives?
 - b. Corwin draws connections between the linguistic features of each narrative and cultural meaning. What are the cultural meanings related to how Sister Rita saw the divine and her relationship with the divine? How do these cultural meanings appear in the linguistic features in each narrative?

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5. In this chapter, Corwin argues that there is an intimate connection between language and experience. Following Elinor Ochs, Corwin shows that the narratives in the convent do more than describe the nuns' experiences, they are also a mode through which individuals experience the world and a mode through which to create shared experiences.
 - a. In your own words, explain what it means that language is a mode through which humans experience the world.
 - b. Describe examples from your own daily life in which you've seen language function as a mode of experience. What is language doing in these settings? What is the context of these examples? What linguistic features are relevant in these examples? Why are these examples of language as a mode of experience?

CHAPTER SIX

SPIRITUAL HEALING, MEANINGFUL DECLINE, AND SISTER DEATH

This chapter is ideal to assign for classes focusing on **aging studies**, **medical anthropology** and **religious studies / anthropology of religion**.

***Summary:** The sixth chapter explores historical understandings of pain in the Catholic church, finding that the meaning of pain and moral discourses concerning pain have changed over the past century. The chapter suggests that dual notions of the meaning of pain present a paradox as the nuns seek to “save” the body (alleviate pain) while accepting its decline. Pain in this context manifests as both a sacrament and an indication of medical need. This paradox offers insight into the particular historical and embodied narratives that shape the ways in which the nuns experience pain and their own aging bodies.*

Questions:

1. In the first few pages, Corwin introduces the reader to Sister Carline who is dying from cancer. Sister Carline articulates that at this point in her life, she is most interested in “spiritual healing”.
 - a. What does Sister Carline mean by spiritual healing?
 - b. How is spiritual healing distinct from physical healing?
 - c. In your own cultural communities, have you encountered other models of “healing” or goals for well-being outside of physical health? What are they? How are they spoken about or practiced?

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2. Corwin writes that the narratives and cultural histories she analyzes in this chapter are “complex and interweaving” and that while pain may be universal, the experiences and cultural meanings that pain holds varies with cultural context.
 - a. What are the cultural histories associated with the Catholic Church that play a role in the nuns’ sense of healing, pain and illness in this chapter?
 - b. How are pain and illness understood in medical settings?
 - c. How are these two cultural histories distinct in the ways that they frame the cultural meanings associated with healing, pain, and illness?
 - d. Thinking back on your own experiences of pain, can you name two different occasions that you’ve experienced pain?
 - e. What meanings did you or others associate with this pain?
 - f. How did these cultural meanings impact your experience of the pain itself?
3. In the section “Pain and Medicine,” Corwin writes “until the 19th century, nursing was not a healing-oriented project.” What were the goals of nursing in 18th century Europe?
4. In the same section, Corwin quotes Shilling and Mellor who wrote “one by-product of this medical colonization was that it became difficult to approach the experiential dimensions of pain outside the parameters of aversion and avoidance”
 - a. What do you think Shilling and Mellor mean by “medical colonization”?
 - b. Do you see elements of this phenomenon in medical encounters in your own life?
5. Corwin writes that the biomedical traditions and the Catholic theological traditions that S. Carline was exposed to held contrasting “logics” associated with pain.
 - a. What meaning did pain hold in each of these traditions?
 - b. How do we see each of these perspectives on pain emerge in S. Carline’s narratives?

CHAPTER SEVEN

KENOSIS: EMPTYING THE SELF

This chapter is ideal to assign for classes focusing on **aging studies**, **medical anthropology** and **religious studies / anthropology of religion**.

Summary: *The seventh chapter explores the theological notion of kenosis, the emptying of the self, which underpins the three vows the nuns take: commitments to poverty, chastity, and obedience. The chapter demonstrates how the kenotic practices involved in emptying the self of worldly attachments has afforded the nuns the ability to let go of attachments to the body as they age and encounter physical decline.*

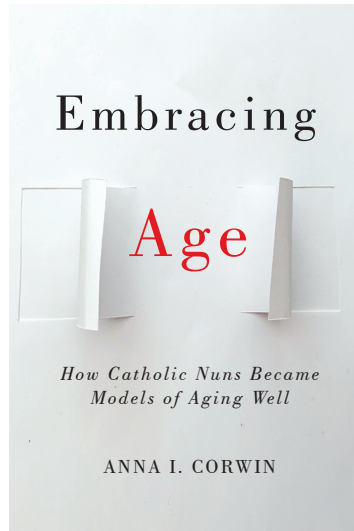
Questions:

1. This chapter begins with an explanation of the three vows taken by apostolic sisters like the Franciscan Sisters of Sacred Heart.
 - a. What are the three vows?
 - b. What meaning or cultural goal does each vow represent?
 - c. How is each enforced through institutional practices?
 - d. How is each manifested through interactional practices?
2. This chapter focuses on the theological process of *kenosis* which Corwin argues is tied to the process of embracing age in the convent.
 - a. What is *kenosis*: How does the author define it?
 - b. What is the theological origin and meaning of *kenosis* in Catholicism?
 - c. What parallel cultural processes emerge in the Buddhist and Hindu settings the author describes? How are these similar to and/or different from *kenosis*?
 - d. What cultural and institutional processes are involved in kenosis or letting go? How are these connected to the nuns' vows?
3. In this chapter, the author argues that habituated practices, including macro- and micro-interactional practices, shape the ways that the nuns experience aging, pain, and illness as they grow older.
 - a. Corwin writes about Sister Mary Bernard who had her leg amputated. How did she respond to the surgery? How did the institutional and cultural patterns in the convent shape her response?
 - b. Corwin describes how institutional practices changed in the convent following Vatican II. How did these changes impact the nuns' practices of kenosis? Of aging?

CONCLUSION

In the conclusion, Corwin offers seven lessons from her ethnographic work.

- a. What are these lessons?
- b. Which of these lessons could you imagine integrating into your life and the cultural context in which you live? What would this look like?
- c. Imagine you worked in public policy. Which of these lessons might you choose to integrate into policy? How would you do so? Which would be most impactful? Which would be hardest to implement? Why?
- d. Now that you've finished reading the book, how have your thoughts about aging changed?
- e. What new questions or curiosities do you have concerning aging?
- f. If you were to meet the author, what would you ask her?
- g. If you were to meet one of the sisters from the Franciscan Sisters of the Heart convent, what would you ask her?



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