

Restoring Eldership: Integrating our older population within our society

At a recent conference on social issues, a young participant, perhaps in his mid-twenties, stood up and took the microphone. He said: “I don’t understand. My grandfather is 91 years old, physically and emotionally still very fit, but he sits in his chair all day watching television. He has led such a rich life and has so much to give, so much to say.”

Something does not feel right. How is it possible that the life-long experiences and knowledge of someone that has lived over ninety years have lost their centrality in this culture, are relegated to some TV chair? What happened that his experience, his knowledge and understanding, his view of life and the world are not shared with others, are not harvested for future generations? Why is such an individual not afforded the position as an elder in this culture and society?

The thesis here is a simple one and not original: some of today’s challenges, environmental degradation, national conflicts, dehumanization of the workplace, youth violence, the absence of spirit – to name but a few of today’s more pressing issues – could be helped through the restoration of eldership within our Western societies. Eldership here means: those who have lived into their retirement age and have valued their emotional and spiritual understanding as much as their advancement on the material level are given the important place of counselors and advisors to those younger in age.

This place has been given up by today’s elders.

States [-----]: “There exists now a wound between elder and youth. The younger generations bear the responsibility of laboring physically, emotionally, and spiritually to cultivate a new world, and they are crucially in need of mature

guidance to initiate them into deeper awareness in the midst of the confusion in their lives. We expect that they somehow, without guidance, become more mature than we ourselves are. Understandably, the resulting lack of trust and contact between generations has created an environment where the youth are required to initiate themselves.”

In When I am an Old Woman I shall Wear Purple, the author writes: “Sometimes I believe I’ve waited till I got old before I *begun* to do my thinking.” [32] and “Momma was right: You do have to get old before you do some thinking about some things.” [34]

The young need the understanding of the aged, need their way of looking at life and the world. They need the aged because we witness today an ever faster acceleration of life that damages humans and their planet. The aged population is needed to balance this ever faster pace. We need the aged today because they speak from experience the younger population does not have. Often the aged are less concerned with the material plane and are more aware of the limitations of the earth resources. In addition, those who move from being aged to eldership have something else to give. They can mentor the young, can point to a life that has a sense of meaning and purpose beyond the reality of the material world, beyond titles, degrees, money, outward achievements. They can imbue the young with a concern and respect for the earth and other fellow human beings, can teach about compassion and the virtues of altruism, of giving back to the world. They can point out how much each of us young ones has already been given, can remind us how thankful we can be for all we are and have. Elders can teach us about living in the moment, appreciating life, and can give us something to look forward to in old age. Rather than dreading getting older, we younger ones can see the beauty of deepening, of slowing down, that comes with age. We learn that we are not losing anything as we age, that we only

change shape or form, that each stage of life has its own important purpose and value. We learn that the outward energy of youth and middle age are not any more productive than old age, that the transformation of mind and body with age contains its own intrinsic meaning.

The aging of the population on earth, the inversion of the customary population triangle, may not be accidental. It may be exactly what is needed now to balance the relentless desire of the economically developed countries to grow materially, to expand the utilization of natural resources, to place profits above human concerns.

The motivations of the aged are different from this. They, more often than not, are desirous of conservation of resources, of preserving life and planet, of going more slowly, taking more time for decisions to emerge, understanding the complexity of making decisions, in particular those that affect other people. Many of the aged are also challenged to look at the realm of the universal, the eternal, the realm of the spirit, the mystics. This is the realm that the great religions explore, the realm which points beyond our self with its desires and often selfish needs. Unfortunately, today's mainstream psychology has not been very helpful here. Instead of calming our minds, of centering our spirit, its ego-centered theories and practices have often contributed to further anxiety. This may have had to be our path, however. It may have had to be that by so divorcing ourselves from the great spirit, we had no choice but to realize that this is a path of error, of further destruction and hardship.

This in mind, we enter a difficult terrain. Many of today's aged have grown up within a culture that has not and does not value the aged, that has lost contact with spirit, its center. So, we need to be careful here. States [...]: "Don't expect much help from us elders. Most of us have been relegated to retirement enclosures, golf, bingo, tourism, and uncreative play-separating ourselves from

the problems of the homeless, the untaught, the unfed.” So, we may have to start again, start again to restore eldership in our culture.

To become an elder is not an automatic process that parallels one’s age. It is work. It demands learning, it demands waiting. It demands understanding that not-knowing is a deeper understanding than knowing. To become an elder requires the other, requires that someone of younger age desires our company, desires to sit with us, singles us out for questioning. The older person is asked to be an elder, does not declare herself one.

What I want to say is something like: Think about what you would like your life to be. Imagine you are eighty years plus and are looking back onto your life. What decisions would you make about your life from this perspective? Think about how you would like to be treated when you eighty years old.

States Thomas Knoblauch: “We spend our time calculating how we can be smarter, richer, and more successful, while turning away from the gold mine in our midst. We go to therapists, psychics, and hypnotists, instead of picking up the phone to call Aunt Bessie or Uncle Silas. One day we will be asked to pass our wisdom on to those who follow us in the same way that our honored forebears once passed on their values, customs, and time honored strengths to our generation. We cannot be the broken link in this chain. We must return to that light of wisdom that burns so brightly among us. We must draw on the nourishing warmth of our elders’ presence before it is lost to us.” [22]

Perhaps what you like about being thirty, forty, or fifty will inform the eighty year-old as well, can serve him or her as well. It is like being a teenager and dreaming about what you would like to be when you grow up. It is like being a professional and thinking about how you would like to move up in your career. Somehow old age is the one stage in life we don’t dream into being. Somehow

we don't imagine ourselves or seem to think beyond our retirement age. We have no images of ourselves being old. We are not prepared but take on images we see around us: the elderly sitting in nursing homes, on buses, standing in lines. How do you want to be when you are old? What is your image of being seventy, eighty, ninety, hundred? What do you want to feel, think, be when you are older?

What does mythology and literature give us in terms of images of the aged? How do contemporary media portray the aged? What images do we find in advertisement today? To what messages are we exposed?

An idea here would be to create images of old people that are beautiful, that begin to impress the younger generations with the beauty of being old. The aged will also profit from interaction with the young. Because the aged have not felt part of the culture at large, many of the elderly have adapted to this segregation and are living separate lives, away from the concerns of society.

States [.....]: The old need to return – and need to be returned by us younger in years – to their rightful position in society and culture. This helps young and old alike, as well as our planet and future being.

Beth: Clearing the fear around being old; new picture of being old.

John Wiser: Being vital and alive; lack of spirit; different learning happens;

Cliff: Identity and Inspiration; vitality;

Julia: identifying the elder I want to be; identifying with my essence;

Bogna: how the elder enriches us today;

Those who, through years of struggle and with a hard-won perspective and peace, have found, as Joseph Campbell says, "joy among the sorrows of life,

“are a precious resource in our world. We often learn that it is truly possible to love life from those who learned to love and embrace all that is involved in living.

It is incumbent upon elders to acknowledge the value and power of their blessings, to take seriously the needs of the community for their involvement, and to appreciate the challenges and responsibilities confronting younger generations.

“Perhaps there will be a day you will want to sit by my side asking my counsel. I hope I will be there, but you see I am growing old. There is no promise that life will live up to our hopes, especially to the hopes of the aged. So I write what I know and some day our hearts will meet in these words-if you let it happen.” The phrase “if you let it happen” is repeated throughout his entreaty to the younger generation.

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Being able to answer the question, “Where have we been?” before considering “Where are we going?” is basic to the extension of human existence.

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But many young people do not have the means or the mature ability to evaluate whether or not a particular piece of advise will be good for them.

Robert Bly looks at our society’s widespread self-absorption and lack of spiritual direction. He speculates that we have become people who have refused to grow up and who are neglecting the important duty of preparing the next generation to take its inevitable place in the world.

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We must actively create intergenerational dialogues if we are to move harmoniously into our collective destiny as a human race. The coming generations need to learn the intricacies of heart-mind-body-spirit integration as they have been experienced by people who have already lived into the last phase of their lives.

[28-29]

It is overwhelming at times, to engage the human experience fully and to imagine that our lives and work might largely be to embody spirit within the world of matter. Without love, it is difficult to value our lives.

But what we've done is to flatten things. We've done away with the old awe and respect for the nonhuman world, the seven heavens above us and the demons below us. It's one thing to do away with the old power hierarchies that oppressed people, but we've also done away with the longing for the divine. We've replaced that longing for spiritual transcendence with our awe of the computer...

Robert Bly also accuses many elders themselves of not growing up, of wanting to retire and settle into their own brand of self-indulgent entitlement without accountability. The message he and others give is that we need to continue growing up, even in old age. We need to press our lasting abilities into service, to put love into action. To accomplish this, we must learn how to recognize the special gifts or potential of each person and to assist each other in finding our own useful roles in life.

youth forms a social class, self-enclosed and uninitiated by its elders, and thus largely without communication outside of itself.

Hillman emphasizes that we cannot, in fact, have a proper sense of personal or social history without the young and old coming together to share in the telling and recollecting of past events. Youth needs tellers; elders need listeners. Elders may possess wisdom, yet today they are often viewed with suspicion and fear by the young.

Yes, there were caring persons around us, but there was a noticeable absence of a general loving atmosphere in which to assist people with conflicts and suffering. It was as if the dimensions of the heart, of the human spirit, were not brought into awareness as a means of helping people.

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In the broader culture, we knew that we had mentors-people such as Robert Bly, Ram Dass, Andrew Harvey, Matthew Fox, and James Hillman.

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Then, there opens up an area of pressing need for the planet. Earth (Gaia) desperately needs elders to serve her toward healing, and this is what she is hothousing us for

I think that, instead of sending young people at the beginning of their lives to hot spots, we need to send an elder corps to Bosnia. After all, what have they got to lose? In this way elders could repay the planet for the goodness of life. Imagine us doing reconciliation work and saying to the grandparents on both sides of a conflict, "Let's sit down. Doesn't it hurt?" Turning to a Bosnian, I can say, "I grieve with you for the grandchildren you lost," and turning to a Serb I can say, "I grieve with you for the grandchildren you lost. Is there a way in which we can make some sense out of that?" So we bring elder-mind into this situation of elder -mind into board rooms where, instead of thinking of the quarterly bottom line, we start thinking in terms of seven generations and all the things that we are now desperately trying to heal (because we acted without elder minds). And, clearly,

Earth needs elder minds. Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter are wonderful examples of November work-people who act out of love and meaning.

Next there is the December work, which is to make the transition not tragic and desperate, but a good completion, like at the end of a symphony where you bring the themes of love and life into a reprise, encapsulating the whole experience into a symphony. Ending life in such a way gives meaning for people. Some, very deeply religious and spiritual, may say, "When my time comes I want to dissolve in the infinite ocean." Or for another person it might be, "I want to just fly to the heart of God." Someone else might express such sentiments as, "What a wonderful experience to live on earth!" Other molecules never had that kind of experience." [x, xi]

It is making love to the planet by wanting to "upload" experience and meaning into the working memory, if you will, of the planetary computer.

[xii]

Aging will no longer remain as something where redundant population is warehoused, but, on the contrary, it will be a way in which a person can complete the life harvest and thank Earth.

This view of aging also takes the sting out of dying. I no longer see death as a dire emergency that has to be fought with all measures, but more as a crowning achievement, a sacred conclusion.

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I believe that in our American culture we have overemphasized the intellect, trusting it to guide our whole human conduct. We mistrust and devalue the intuitive wisdom of our hearts.

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Ancient wisdom informs us that through the breaking heart it becomes possible for us to enter into a state of acceptance of not knowing, what the Buddhists have referred to as “beginner’s mind.”

Much of the thinking in gerontology has to do with custodial care-or, as some would say more graphically, warehousing the redundant population until they are removed from the scene. If we start thinking of how we would want to spend our last years, and we look around at what’s mostly available today, we just don’t want that. A lot of people would choose a deliberate exit rather than to be “warehoused”.

On the other hand, we also have the dream that our harvest years might be employed for better things, the first of which is to use the extended life span for transforming oneself from being merely old into becoming an elder ...

This involves life review and re-contextualizing experiences from the past.

Society at large has abdicated responsibility for initiating the young. Traditional initiatory procedures have been allowed to atrophy with disuse because our “elders” have lost confidence in the values of which they are the custodians and no longer possess any certain knowledge as to what it might be that they are initiating young people for. Ultimately, it is the fault of neither teacher nor pupil, elder nor novice, but the consequences of a collective crisis of confidence in our culture.

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As an alternative to this negative “inevitable senescence,” he proposes a model of late-life development called “sageing,” whereby older people are enabled to become “spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible ‘elders of the tribe.’” His new psychology of aging would transform the notion of a downward spiral toward death into an upward “arc of expanded consciousness,” which would “crown the elders life with meaning and purpose.”

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