

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.

William Wordsworth

## Shifting Values: Aging, Elders, and the Long View of Life

Throughout the millennia, we humans have been asking ourselves what makes life worth living. How can we know a life that completes us and achieves what we want to become? Wise elders, mystics, sages, seers, scholars: all have been sought to answer this question. In the last century, with increased secularization and the rise of the modern scientific attitude, the discipline of psychotherapy emerged as a new way to explore the worthwhile life.

With what has been termed “the talking cure”, psychotherapy tries to bring awareness to our individual self and whether we are living in accordance with it. As individuals, we develop within a culture and social setting that overlie our unique self. More often than not, we remain unaware of this overlay until we begin the arduous journey, whether with the help of a psychotherapist or someone else, of differentiating between who we are and who culture and society expect us to be. This dialectic between our authentic self—if there is such a thing—and the self-dictated by social and cultural norms constitutes a lifelong labour of differentiation and choice making.

My conceptual understanding of this dialectic took on a new dimension and greater depth when I entered the world of elders living in community. I did not make a conscious choice to enter this world, yet it turned my perspective around. I began to look at life backwards.

### The World of Elders

I have had the good fortune to be with and work with elders for over twenty years. Having just completed my doctorate in the humanities and literature at Stanford, I was filled with ideals about human nature and driven by a zest to make a difference in the world, however and wherever that might be. Now in my mid-thirties, I entered the world of eldercare by what seemed like pure happenstance. I was not prepared for how my daily contact with elders and their many expressions and ways of being would make such a difference in me as a person.

I had always held elders in high esteem. My German grandparents helped raise me at their farm in northern Germany. Grandpa would have me sit on his lap while he told me stories; he would take me early mornings to milk the cows, feed the pigs, collect potatoes, or walk the fields to assess the ripeness of wheat and corn. I became his assistant and apprentice, so I felt, and I was proud to learn from this kind, strong man. Grandma was equally beloved. She would greet Grandpa and me with a big smile, and second breakfast, lunch, snack, or dinner was always ready. Every Sunday morning, despite my protests, she would slip me a few coins of pocket money.

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When I first walked into my friend's small eldercare home close to Ocean Beach in San Francisco, I was greeted by the many friendly smiles of the elders resident there. The faces looked as familiar as those of my grandparents. Nevertheless, being familiar with elders and feeling comfortable with them was only a minor if important part of my journey into the world of elders. It would take another two decades before I came to know how profoundly elders had influenced my perception of the world and of myself; that is, how they had changed me.

The depth of this impact dawned on me while working with my therapist on the pressures of relationships and the daily demands of business. She noticed that whenever I discussed my so-called adult life I became increasingly tense, but when I talked about my contact and experiences with elders I lightened up and my body relaxed. I got curious about the difference between my adult self and this self that emerged in the company of elders. I wanted to know about the qualities connected to my mainstream adult life, intent on earning a living, and contrast those with the qualities that surfaced when I was in the company of elders.

## Elder values

How does such a comparison enter a discussion of psychotherapy and why does it deserve a prominent place in deepening our understanding of the practice of psychotherapy? Two reasons come to mind.

First, more and more, our clients will be adults over sixty who come with different mind-sets and expectations from those of "younger" adults from twenty to fifty. Life expectancy in the Western world has nearly doubled in the last hundred years; a new cohort of mature elders will wield increased educational and economic power, and they will be psychologically astute. It makes a difference if your life horizon is fifty years, as it was at the end of the nineteenth century, versus a hundred years, as the newly born cohort today is estimated to live.

Second, as therapists we are continually evolving in our understanding and perceptions of life. In the current state of our thinking and approach to psychotherapy, we are beginning to rethink aging and to re-envision our latter years. Our new understanding influences how we view adult life, and life as a whole.

## A New View: Adult Life Seen from the Perspective of Elderhood

As many a philosopher and sage have pointed out, what is nearest is often the hardest to see. Particularly in our so-called adult life, it is seldom a simple matter to take a step back and evaluate how we are living. How often do we reflect on whether our ways of living are really our choice or are instead heaped on us by external influences, ranging between mainstream values, education, family, social, and cultural norms? Do these resonate with our own inner inklings and desires? Are we simply following the herd?

These questions make sense when we can see available alternatives. Moreover, new alternatives seem to be emerging. As our society ages demographically, we begin to re-evaluate the arc of life from the point of view of the mature elder. Many life philosophies and thought traditions are

available to us. In a sense, we start taking a rear view perspective of our lives, looking at the values we have followed as adults mirrored by those who have long life experience.

## The Dominant Values of Our Adult Life

Watching any news or informational program on television will give one a good idea of the values held by a given culture. Throughout the global north, and increasingly in the south, a common set of adult values is quite well known to us. Yet these values are seldom questioned unless something happens in our lives, perhaps a tragedy, heartbreak, or misfortune. At such a crisis, we may come to a stop, wonder about our approach to life and our attitude to people, review our direction, and even change course.

Psychotherapists—as much ordinary citizens as they are professionals—subscribe to these values like anybody else. Adult values influence and even guide how therapists work with their clients and supervisees, and how they direct their concern. More often than not, therapists are sought when clients have clashed with the dominant value set and feel they do not measure up. As therapists, we may subtly and unwittingly keep our clients within the constraints of dominant values. We need to enhance our awareness whenever it happens, particularly when clients want to liberate themselves from the burden those values have created for them.

This is not the place to enter a longer discussion of dominant adult values; instead, in the following, I give a brief synopsis of dominant values in order to contrast them with a different, elder-informed set of values, described in subsequent sections. The order of importance in which these values may be placed is of course debatable, and is not significant here. Each person will have his or her own personal list and ordering.

## Material Wealth

High on any list of current mainstream values appears money or material wealth. For some reason, the idea of material wealth—and more is always better—constitutes a central driving force behind much of human activity today, overshadowing other ideals. Many value wealth in terms of material goods above all. Tabulations of who is richest, who has the biggest houses, and how many, are commonplace, and they are barely questioned as measures of human achievement. Because the pursuit of material wealth is so ingrained in Western culture, few people question any longer if they should spend their lives pursuing such a goal.

## Time: A Commodity

Closely related to material wealth, as a core value is time, specifically the use of time. Because time is understood linearly, that is in quantifiable terms, it is perceived as a commodity, and seen as limited. The equation that time is scarce has placed a tremendous pressure on the use of time. Such a belief has given rise to the thought that putting as much effort as possible into each unit of time will maximize its use. Time is placed in the service of creating material wealth, and

maximizing the use of time is thought to maximize the returns on that pursuit. Time is money. The fascination with speed, with moving ever faster as the better way to get through life, is now firmly anchored in Western culture. Consequently, we speed through life, rushing from one project, job, or partner to another. Arriving would mean we have slowed down, perhaps even come to a stop. However, stillness is not acceptable, so we continue moving.

## The Use of Work

Certainly, in the United States but increasingly in other countries and cultures as well, work is seen in the light of making money. Work is the means to earn a living and get ahead through the acquisition of things. The equation here is that I work to make money; the more I work, the more I “acquire”. Since I can never have enough money, especially when I compare myself to others who are wealthier, I fill my days with work. Work here is not so much about meaningful activity, which leads to feelings such as fulfillment, gratification, and joy. Rather, work is mostly understood as a means to an end: the accumulation of wealth.

## An Enchantment with Looks and Image

Along with the fascination for all things material comes the lure of glamour and looks. Foremost, we idealize the look of youth, of taut and slender bodies, which we are told constitutes beauty. The appeal of youth has led to an apprehension of aging and an industry of anti-aging products, as well as a booming cosmetic surgery industry. The quest for outer beauty equates a certain narrowly defined image—ever updated by the fashion industry, the popular media, and the press—to success and achievement. An attainment of beauty as defined by the popular culture signifies status and rank. Its achievement is considered an end in itself. Our culture no longer questions whether our lives are well spent in this pursuit.

## A Belief in Progress

Our Western culture believes that tomorrow will be better than today. We live in a state of possibility. We understand today to be a preparation for tomorrow, a step toward building a future that will be more advanced, more improved than where we are at present. This means that the present serves tomorrow; it is a means to the future, insufficient unto itself. Emphasizing the hegemony of the future over the present, we become less concerned about this moment than the next one. A belief in relentless progress implies that this day is of lesser importance than the next day. Progress also means “more”—more information, more answers, and more belongings. By implication, today means “less”. With this mind-set, more relentlessly concerned about what we can make of the next moment, we are never here in this moment.

## Looking Out for Number One

One hallmark of Western culture is the idea that we are individuals in charge of our own destiny. We create our lives and are responsible for our own successes and failures. This philosophy is called “individualism” and it might be opposed to “communalism”, the idea that the good of the community takes precedence over the good of the individual. Alongside this belief in the power of the individual to construct his or her life, we find a belief in independence, that each person lives independently of others. Individualism and independence go hand in hand. In its extreme form, individualism does not want any form of dependency and even denies any dependency on anyone or anything. Certainly, we all need and wish to experience individualism and independence. They have a rightful place in our lives, as do their counterparts. In Western culture, however, they are seen as exclusively desirable over communalism and interdependency. Looking out for number one trumps looking out for the other person. Dependency is judged as a lesser state.

## Productivity and Efficiency: More Is Better

Closely linked to the pursuit of material wealth, and to the value of time in making money, lies the idea of productivity. Alongside productivity we find its cousin, efficiency. The mainstream definition of productivity is measurable and quantifiable. Higher efficiency is understood to help create better productivity. Both ideas are intrinsically connected to the view of time as quantifiable and linear, and to the centrality of things. Productivity and efficiency thrive on speed, on the equation that faster is better; and on quantity, that more is better. These ideas are not directly concerned with what is being produced. They are not concerned about the human costs, as long as higher quantities and higher profits can be made in as little time as possible.

## Competition

The very foundation of the market economy is competition and achievement. Competition is based on the idea that I want to be better than others in the main measures of success within my culture. For our list of core values, it means that I will accumulate the most material wealth in the quickest time, have the highest possible status at work, and be the best-looking and best-known person. Competition—comparing myself to others in terms of given performance measures—is the means by which I intend to excel, to be better than the other. To compete, I have to know the standards against which I will perform. Competition thus thrives on public perception and visibility, and builds ever-larger arenas to stage its contests.

## Freedom

The idea of freedom is firmly anchored in most Western cultures. It implies foremost the right to choose, to do what one is inclined to do. Today choice is restricted only by what is legally permissible and less and less by moral, ethical, or behavioural codes. Freedom expresses itself through the individual’s desires and will. It asks, do I like this? Do I like that? Freedom can

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carefully discriminate or carelessly disregard. Within the context of today's Western cultures freedom seems to imply a freedom to accumulate as much material goods as possible.

## Conformity

Although conformity goes against the idea of freedom of choice, it nevertheless reigns the land under the many, often narrow norms and standards for what constitutes success and achievement. Those norms make conformity important lest one risk being ostracized or marginalized. We witness marginalization when we look at what happens as a person deviates from the norms of behaviour, education, age, gender, sexuality, race, economics, religion, politics, health, and so on. We further see conformity at work in fashion, architecture, and design, even though a debatable diversity of expressions might suggest freedom of choice.

## Adult Values versus Elder Values: The Need for a Change

The large, on-going shift in demographics to an older population in the West could bring about a shift in our perception of these dominant adult values. We may come to an increasing awareness that our adult lives are often governed by values that are not strictly of our own choosing. The amassment of material wealth has contributed to a view of the earth as an exploitable commodity. The speed at which we live does not give us the time to take into account the complexity of ecological and social systems. Individualism has created large suburban enclaves isolating us from one another, and the devaluation of dependency as well as our enchantment with youth and image have made the aging process a frightening prospect. If we are to have a sustainable world and society, a new set of ideals are required.

On a personal level, our emphasis on material growth and achievement has reduced our time for human relations, while our manic speeds have made it difficult for us to be genuinely present with each other or with ourselves. From a therapeutic point of view, we might ask whether many of the adult values described above have not contributed to what W. H. Auden in the late 1940s termed the "Age of Anxiety".

In the following sections, I outline a different set of cultural ideals. They are not meant to supplant existing adult values but to complement and augment them. These ideals, which I call "elder values", are informed by the things that become more meaningful and important in our later years—which in the Indian tradition are called the second half of life, beginning at sixty years.

## Slowing Down

When I first entered the world of elders inside an eldercare community, the most noticeable difference from my own world was my experience of time. My business life was fast and filled with appointments. Rushing from one "urgent" meeting to another, I would not know by the day's end what I had accomplished, for one thing blurred into the next. In contrast to this stood my experiences of sitting with elders. As I entered the various elder communities I managed during

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the day, I was naturally drawn to sit with elders hanging out in lobbies or other common areas. Though these encounters were never long, lasting perhaps five to ten minutes, they had an almost timeless quality as we sat, often quietly.

I especially noticed myself slowing down when I was walking with elders. This experience influenced my everyday walking style. Whereas I was used to rushing fast from one place to another, being with elders and walking alongside them taught me a different pace. These walks, often arm in arm, were touching and personal; they were unwitting lessons in paying attention to my surroundings and to the people we meet. It is amazing what you see when your pace slows down.

When my pace slackened, I noticed myself. I began to pay attention to my inner stirrings—when I just wanted to sit and take a moment to relax, when I felt like enjoying a cup of tea or having a conversation or sitting silently with an elder.

## Being Here with You

For elders, contact with other people is precious. Elders often give their full attention to each moment and are more intent to listen deeply to others, to really know about their world, than to speak themselves. I have observed how grateful elders are when someone spends time with them, irrespective of the length of the visit.

How often am I aware that my attention in the moment is being compromised by a steady stream of thinking, planning, and organizing? Being in no rush, elders are present with what is in front of them. The quality of presence an elder brings to an encounter is a deep abiding, in which focus and attention are single-minded. Visits with elders are a welcome signal for me to stop rushing, to take time just to be, and to fully encounter the other.

## I Am Because of You

We live in an interdependent world. As we mature into our older years, we notice this interdependence more. Living in a place of frequent earthquakes and fires, I am aware of my vulnerability to external forces and my dependency on others. However, if we stop and think how intertwined we really are with one another and with forces outside our control, we cannot longer believe in our independence. The list ranges from the delivery of food to the stores in our neighbourhood, to water and energy for our home, from communication systems and medical care, to our own health, which is contingent and unpredictable.

What I see in our eldercare communities shows how the aging process allows us to become more comfortable with our interdependency. Actual assistance with activities of daily living, such as dressing and grooming, is a more visible manifestation of a dependency that is always present in life but that we attempt to remain unaware of. Though it may take time to adjust to receiving assistance, I see elders delighting in their need for help and support from others. And why should it be otherwise? What is this sense of pride in those who claim to be fiercely autonomous? Why not feel good about the help we receive? And enjoy it?

## My Face Is My Life

Few places of our bodies get as much attention as our faces. The youthful ideal of the wrinkleless face smiling with immaculate teeth and framed in flowing thick hair is seen on almost any magazine cover and visible on most television programs and social media. However, this is only one view. For a wrinkle-free face is an unformed, un-lived face. It has yet to experience most of the uncanny spread and variety of life. Though there are always exceptions, the sufferings which form who we are and who we need to become are yet to be experienced in the unformed face. With few exceptions, the elders I have met in our community, most in their eighties and nineties do not have an issue with their face. Asking them to use a cream to enhance their looks would be met with puzzlement—"But why?" Each wrinkle represents a story or two, tells ourselves and others who we are and what we have survived. A desire to have our face stay unformed like that of a twenty-year-old would mean we preferred to stay undeveloped, to remain unaware rather than grow.

The body and face of an elder has its own beauty, if we decide to see it. In my years with elders, I have learned to see the beauty in a face that reveals a long and unique human journey. Elders can rightly feel a sense of pride in having endured all things, and they can show their "lived" face with delight. It is a sign of self-respect and dignity to do so.

## Being Me

In our Western culture much emphasis is placed on "being oneself". As those who are in their later years realise, it is not an easy task being oneself, let alone knowing who this "self" is. Spending time with elders, however, provides a glimpse, even a window into what an authentic self might be and look like. I remember 96-year-old Bill, who always sat in his wheelchair in the lobby of our community. He was content sitting there, observing. Occasionally I would stop and ask him how he was doing, and he invariably answered, "Never better". A man of few words, Bill could easily be mistaken as an elder who had "checked out". But he was sharp as a whistle. At a resident council meeting I asked him, "Bill, you are always so quiet; why is that?" Bill answered, with uncanny brevity, "I like to listen!" Alternatively, Nancy, during a similar council meeting, would say to the group facilitator, not mincing words, "I feel like I am in prison here". There are countless examples of elders sharing thoughts many of us might think privately but not dare speak publicly.

It is disarming to see an elder simply express him- or herself without any filter. Here we have a real-life example of being who we are in an honest and open way that harms no one. Little or no room is left for pretension, for being nice, for holding back in fear that someone will be made uncomfortable. As Jenny Joseph writes in her poem *Warning*, it is time now "to run my stick along the public railings, and make up for the sobriety of my youth, and go out in my slippers in the rain".

## All Is Just Good Enough

Perhaps few states of mind give us more fulfillment than contentment. In such a state, sometimes referred to as “inner peace”, our mind is still, looking at itself and the world with eyes of gratitude simply for what is present. Such appreciation is grounded in an acceptance of the world as it is and of all the phenomena we encounter. Eyes of appreciation look at the world without judgment and do not divide it into desirable and undesirable, good and bad. There is no attachment to the world, to people, or to a way of being. Rather, eyes of gratitude try to see the meaning behind what arises and to follow where it will go. Not being attached to what is present, they are open to what is emergent. If this sounds like an articulation of the wisdom of Eastern traditions, it is. Seng-ts’an, a Chinese sage who died in 609, left us the Hsin Hsin Ming, translated as “Inscribed on the Believing Mind”. He writes:

The great Way has no impediments; it does not pick and choose. When you abandon attachment and aversion you see it plainly. Make a thousandth of an inch distinction, heaven and earth swing apart. If you want it to appear before your eyes, cherish neither for nor against. To compare what you like with what you dislike, that is the disease of the mind. You pass over the hidden meaning; peace of mind is needlessly troubled.

This statement speaks eloquently of what Seng-ts’an calls the “disease of the mind”, namely our habit of dividing the world into what we cherish and what we do not. Being with elders in our care communities, I often witness such an attitude of calm acceptance of what is. This attitude of “all is just good enough” feels in complete opposition to our adult value of continual progress, in which we strongly desire to improve and advance all that is in and around us.

## The New Significance of Elder Values

These brief outlines of adult values and elder values highlight the stark contrast between two sets of guiding values. We see one set governed by a busy mind incessantly striving and moving, the other governed by a quiet mind content to remain still. Of course, our states of mind range across a continuum, but for the sake of argument I would like to focus on the two polar opposites. Further, we could speak of other values held by adults and elders, but again my intention here is to emphasize fundamental contrasts.

When viewed in such quick succession, these two sets of values speak not only to a difference in age groups but also to a difference in attitude. Whereas the adult values of continual striving have been dominating Western culture for the last few hundred years, the elder values are now gaining in influence as our last phase of life has become as long as our young and adult phases. Indeed, we may speak now of three life trimesters: young, adult, and elder. Today more and more people are reflecting on the importance of this late phase in their own life journey. This in turn shines more light on the core values of this phase, values we have called elder values.

## Expanding Our Perspective

The question I would like us to ponder—before the backdrop of our current environmental and psychosocial situations—is what we can learn by expanding our perspective to include elder values in our approach to life. As psychotherapists, we have a special responsibility to broaden our viewpoint, because we are guided by our own ideas and values in the ways we encounter a person seeking help. Our definitions of success and achievement, of a life worth living, influence not only how we live our own lives but also how we direct and lead our therapeutic work with clients. In enlarging our perspective to include that which matters to people in their later lives, we gain a more complete picture of life itself. We conclude that next to the continual striving and achievement, next to our status in the outside world, there exist deep human needs of connection and relationship, of care and concern, which take on an even greater weight as we age and mature. This bigger perspective should play a major role in making meaningful choices in our younger years.

## Toward a Sustainable World and Self

Given our interconnected world, the pursuit of happiness has consequences beyond the personal sphere. Our actions and behaviours affect other people, our surroundings, and our global environment. If we consider the consequences for people and planet in following adult values, we may surmise one set of outcomes; in following elder values, we can expect a different set. It is the assumption here that if people were to follow the adult values less and the elder values more, a kinder people and healthier planet might be possible. The adult values of incessant achievement, of more is better, of progress for the sake of progress, of growth for the sake of growth, of looking out for number one: all of these behaviours and goals run counter to a sustainable planet. We cannot continue to develop and use earth's resources without limit. We cannot continue to ignore the wellbeing of the world's population in focusing on our individual wellbeing. Through our interconnectedness, we are more and more influenced by those who are not as privileged as we are, who do not enjoy sufficient access to resources. We cannot pretend that their suffering does not affect us.

Elder values—with their emphasis on personal encounter, on slowing down, on paying attention to our authentic selves, on being rather than doing, on following the voices of our hearts—have less detrimental impact on people and planet than adult values do. We need to attend to elder values if we are to live in a sustainable society and world.

## Learning from Our Wisdomkeepers

Though a familiar concept, wisdom is not talked about much within our societies. We are prone to speak more in terms of knowledge and information rather than wisdom. Wisdom may be understood as good judgment based on accumulated learning, a learning that requires time and maturation. The latter is often only possible after a long life filled with trials and experiences. Traditionally, the term “elder” described a person who possessed wisdom through having struggled with the tribulations and conundrums each life invariably brings. Continued learning

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and deepening awareness were the fruits of such struggle. Elders were said to practice “eldership”, a role that offered wise counsel and judgment to whoever sought it.

Today’s societies have suppressed this role, a loss that is evident through an emphasis on youth, an anti-aging philosophy, and a stress on technical, specialized knowledge rather than wisdom. Much research in the last few decades shows that emotional maturation continues during the aging process, as does a deepening of our awareness or wisdom. As therapists, our work with clients can help them see life as a long progression, a growth that continues all the way until our passing.

## The Purpose of Aging and Old Age

Humans are meaning-making beings. We need purpose to feel fulfilled. What is our purpose when we get older, old, and very old? How do we make sense of our accrued years within societies that have done away with the role of elders and forgotten about eldership? Clearly, the world needs elders and the values they bring to the fore. Even a cursory view of the world today and the many issues needing to be tackled shows that people and planet are not well served by our dominant adult values. Elder values can augment these adult values with a more sustainable approach to these challenges. For this to happen our aged population, our elders, need to start valuing themselves, to appreciate what their life journey has endowed them with. Psychotherapists are in a unique position to help elders take such a long view of life, where aging is valued as a maturation and deepening process. It is the very process of aging that allows a person to ripen into full humanity, to develop into the elder who is able to guide and mentor the next generation. In this way, elders are to be understood as stewards of society and the planet—as has traditionally been their role. Would we not rather have the most experienced and wise leaders guiding us, especially during troubled times?

## The Road Ahead

If we intend to restore the role of eldership in our societies, then much psychological work lies ahead. Notably, as therapists, we will need to address an ageism that many younger, but especially older, adults have internalized. Many decades of messages about the undesirability, even disease, of aging must be countered and repaired in our therapeutic work with clients. Many of our elders have retreated into adults-only communities, hiding in their homes or, if they can afford it, at elder vacation spots. Furthermore, the script for retirement in which the elder ceases engagement in “productive” work has to be rewritten. Civil involvement by our wiser, more mature citizens is needed now more than ever. As therapists, we may regard the last phase of life as perhaps the most important, as the peak of the human crescendo, when a long life of experience and learning may find a most singular focus and purpose.

## Implications for Health Professionals and Therapists

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Whether we encounter thirty-year-old adults struggling with relationships and job satisfaction, with symptoms of anxiety and depression, or seventy- and eighty-year-olds wondering what is next in their life, therapists are in a unique position to help shape the client's future. Taking to heart the concept of elder values in our therapeutic work will allow us to

- Look at our clients from a long view of life which anticipates the last decades of our life span
- Keep in mind that clients do not all conform to the achievement orientation of today's societies and might like to be shown an alternative style of life
- Encourage our clients to consider what will really matter to them over a long life
- Support our clients to slow down, to take more time for relating and connecting, which may be seen as equally important to achievement and getting ahead
- Facilitate a deeper intergenerational exchange and a different view of the aging process, including one's own
- Remind our clients that the wisdom of the elder is available to them at any point in their lives
- Introduce to our clients the role of eldership, which may inspire a renewed sense of meaning in the last years of life

Looking at aging as maturation, as a deepening, can give the journey of life a richer meaning. To understand the latter years of life as the pinnacle of this journey is to see "elder values" as a set of guidelines for living our entire life. As therapists we are privileged to present our clients with such far-reaching gifts.

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