

Moving From Who We Have Been to Who We Can Become

By Ron Pevny

As someone who is deeply committed to supporting people who feel called to age consciously, the terms *elder* and *elderhood* are integral to my work. In the modern world, the term *elder* tends to be equated with that disempowering word *elderly*, which so often means frail, vulnerable, or just plain old. But it can mean so much more if we understand the role it has played throughout history.

Elder is a role and elderhood a life stage that has been critical for the wellbeing of the world's cultures since time immemorial, but which has been lost in today's world. It was the elders whose role was to embody the wholeness, and share the hard-won wisdom, that their communities needed to survive and thrive, especially in difficult times when the ability to see the bigger picture was critical.

It was the elders who recognized the responsibility to share the fruits of their lives and experiences with the younger generations. It was in elderhood, as physical abilities weakened and day-to-day responsibilities lessened, that people could more strongly focus on their inner lives and on allowing Spirit to shine through, so that their biggest impact came more through the wholeness of their *being* than through the amount of their *doing*.

While modern culture no longer acknowledges the role of elder, the inner call to true elderhood as we age is still there. It is an archetypal dynamic built into each of us which seeks expression as we begin to move from the stage of mid-life adulthood toward our next chapter.

Many of us are unable to hear this call because it speaks to us in a language of feelings, experiences and intuitions that is foreign to our culture and its values. Others may sense this call, especially in times of inner or outer crisis when we are potentially most open to our inner guidance, but try to ignore it. In either case, by not responding to the call to elderhood we run the risk of stagnation and depression. The nature of life is growth through stages, and when the growth that enables life transitions is prevented, all living things, including us humans, wither.

Each new stage presents us with challenges and opportunities for growth. As one stage is nearing its natural completion, we have a choice: to either try to hold on to what has been (risking withering and loss of our aliveness in doing so) or to embrace the challenging but renewing process of transition. Healthy transition between life stages is a three-phase process, with all these critical phases interweaving as we move toward the new life chapter that calls us.

The first phase is *severance*, the time of inner autumn, harvest and endings. We are called to review and take stock of our lives and who we have become—with our mix of strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows—seeking to learn and distill wisdom from our many experiences. We become aware of and begin to release or heal attitudes, fears, beliefs, behaviors, attachments and self-identifications that may (or may not) have served us in the past but will certainly not serve us in the future we envision for ourselves.

As we do the work of this phase, we find ourselves more and more aware of being in what is often called *the neutral zone*. This is time of being betwixt and between life stages, often feeling lost and confused with no map to follow into the future, knowing that who we have been doesn't feel alive anymore and may not even be possible to continue, but not knowing who we have the potential to grow into.

While the neutral zone is difficult, it is through allowing ourselves to experience this discomfort and disorientation, without grasping for the certainty of clear goals and direction, that we move forward. This is a time for giving oneself the gifts of silence; solitude; reflective time in nature; deepening of our spiritual connection; inspiring images, poetry and ideas; and exploration of possibilities, without making long-term commitments, to see what feels truly alive for us. If we embrace and support this winter time in our journey of transition, we can trust that the vision, creativity and strength that will define our elderhood will begin to emerge according to a timing that comes from layers of us deeper than ego.

As we emerge from the neutral zone, we find ourselves entering the phase known as *reincorporation*, or *new beginnings*. This is spring for us, when we experience the emergence of a new life stage, with seeds of possibility sprouting and emerging into the light of a new life stage. We experience gradually increasing clarity about who we can become, what brings us meaning and purpose and how we can best serve life in the new chapter we are entering.

One of the most profound experiences in my 15 years of leading conscious eldering retreats involved a retreat group that shared profound awe as, over several days, we watched three caterpillars undergo transformation within a wire enclosure on a table in our meeting room in Vermont. The retreat center owner had carried them, along with bunches of the milkweed they feed on, from a verdant hillside to this enclosure. As each caterpillar clung to a small branch, it gradually turned into a chrysalis, losing all its caterpillar characteristics and becoming a green fluid contained within a translucent ovular membrane.

The caterpillars had entered their version of the neutral zone, no longer what they were but clearly not yet what they would become. That green fluid contained a pattern or image for the butterfly that would emerge from the goo when the inner process was complete. Then over a couple of days we began to see within each chrysalis vague outlines of a new form beginning to develop.

On the final day of our retreat, as we were reflecting on what we had learned about the dynamics of our own transitions, one chrysalis broke open and a magnificent, wet, fragile monarch butterfly emerged, ready to grace the world with its beauty and contribution to the web of life.

It needed an hour to dry its delicate wings in the sun, and shortly before our retreat ended we opened the enclosure and off it flew to begin its new life. Shortly thereafter we left that place to embrace new chapters in *our* journeys toward new life as conscious elders.

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