

Claiming Your Elderhood

By Ron Pevny

Listen carefully and you will hear a rumbling, as the first of the baby-boom generation cross the threshold into our sixties. This rumbling will soon become a demographic earthquake. In an America that worships youth, the proportion of the population over sixty will reach unprecedented heights, and the resulting impact up on every aspect of American life will be profound. Each day, we need look no further than the media and the internet to find predictions of the demographic sea change that is nearly upon us.

Listen even more carefully and you will detect another rumbling at a different frequency. This is the sound of a rapidly increasing number of seniors and baby-boomers questioning the mainstream contemporary models for aging. These are people having a sense—sometimes a vague yearning tinged with frustration and fear, sometimes a persistent deep feeling of inner calling -- that there are more possibilities for their senior years than are generally recognized and supported. They feel a call to elderhood, and sense that there is a difference between being old or senior, and being an elder. But, they often don't know what this would look like or how to get there. And, living in a society in which there is no designated role for elders, there is no prescription. The good news is that a general shape of elderhood in America is beginning to emerge.

Throughout much of recorded history, up until the Industrial Revolution, elders have had honored roles in society that were defined and supported. This remains true among the world's remaining indigenous peoples. Elders have been the nurturers of community, the spiritual leaders, the guardians of the traditions, the teachers, mentors

and initiators of the young. They have been the storytellers who have helped their people see the enduring wisdom and deeper meanings of life that lie beneath superficial models of reality and persist through life's changes.

Elders have been the ones who, over long lives of experience and growth, have converted knowledge and experience into wisdom and whose revered role is to model this wisdom as they teach the younger generations about what it means to mature, discover one's calling and use one's gifts in service to the larger community.

So much has changed since then. The impending demographic shift is a result of societal advances that now make it possible for large numbers of people to live, often healthily, well into their seventies, eighties and even longer. Such life spans for huge numbers of people are unprecedented in human history. It is no longer just the rare few who live long lives.

At the same time, for the last century at least, modern culture has adopted the machine as the new metaphor for how human life is viewed. We are assembled and programmed during the years of youth. We efficiently produce material goods and new ideas and information during the years of adulthood, and our value is directly tied to what we contribute to the economy. We go to therapy if we are unable to continue to be efficient. In the senior years we slow or break down, no longer able to compete with those younger, and we are taken out of service or make that choice ourselves. In a world of ever-accelerating change, most of what older people have learned about work and technology—about contributing to the economy—is considered out-of-date and no longer useful.

In dismissing the elderly for these reasons, modern society also dismisses its prime potential source of deep wisdom and enduring values, informed by long experience, about how to live in balance and harmony with fellow human beings and with the earth. So, we shuffle off, at an increasingly earlier age, into retirement, often leading lonely, isolated existences or segregating ourselves into communities of

others like us. We have made our contribution. It is time for us to get out of the way so younger, more energetic people can have the jobs. And society races on, worshipping youth, discounting the lessons of the past, and continually looking to what is new for its “vision” of what the good life looks like.

So, we live in an America that will soon be composed of record numbers of seniors facing the prospect of many years, even decades, of life. What are the contemporary models for aging that shape our visions for how we will live these years?

Many seniors and baby-boomers, especially those with financial security and good health, see our senior years as a time of well-deserved rest from responsibility and plentiful opportunities for recreation, travel, adventure and learning. As early a retirement as possible is the ideal for many, and moving to leisure-oriented communities of people like ourselves may well be part of this vision.

For those not so economically fortunate and healthy, the prospects for our senior years can appear much less appealing. They envision years of living alone, with our children or in elder care facilities, with few opportunities for contribution to the community and quite possibly the prospect of having to take low-paying service jobs to keep body and soul together.

Of course, this categorization is too simple. More and more seniors in both categories are volunteering in our communities. Many retirees are choosing to work part-time as consultants in their former professions or to pursue entirely different careers for reasons that may or may not include economic necessity. The models are not nearly as clear-cut as they were ten or twenty years ago. The cultural landscape is being redefined, and will be so even more profoundly as the baby-boomers, who have led so much cultural change since the 60s, reach sixty. The distinction between being elder and being old is becoming blurred. But what is this distinction?

We human beings seem to be genetically wired with a need for living passionate lives of purpose, meaning and service to the greater good, a good which is larger than the state of the economy. Throughout the last century, the mainstream visions of aging have largely seen the senior years as a time for withdrawing from contribution to the larger community, a time for winding down. At the same time, as life expectancy has dramatically increased, for many the years after retirement can be a significant portion of one's life. Can we find fulfillment and passion by "winding down" for twenty or thirty years? By devoting our lives to golf or other recreation? By "puttering" around the house? And what about the urgent need for elder wisdom in a complex and threatened world where true wisdom seems to be in short supply?

The emerging definition of what elderhood can be in today's world is very much linked to the crucial question of how, as a senior, to meet this need for purpose, meaning and service to the larger community. The challenge for those feeling these needs is to envision, create and claim elder roles for ourselves in a society greatly in need of elder wisdom but offering few such roles or models to its seniors. Meeting this challenge is not something that is easily done alone. And it requires conscious preparation at all levels—physical, psychological and spiritual.

This is where meaningful rites of passage, in critically short supply, can play such an important role. Throughout most of known human history, significant changes in life status have been marked by rites of passage or initiation into the next stage of life. The intent has been to provide extensive psychological and spiritual preparation for the transition, followed by a significant ceremony to mark the life passage, with the goal being to help the initiate to consciously and fully move into his/her next role. Through such powerful processes, people were assisted in letting go of attitudes, behaviors and self concepts that would not fit their new life roles.

Concurrently they were guided in identifying and strengthening the wisdom, the psychological resources and the spiritual connection necessary for claiming and effectively filling their new statuses.

Contrast this with today's world, where meaningful, empowering rites of passage are rare, and people are expected to move from one stage to another largely on their own, with little psychological and spiritual preparation. Teens graduate and are assumed and expected to be adults. Adults retire and are assumed and expected to be—what? Old? In decline? No longer able to significantly serve the community? Out of the way so the young can make the contributions? Drains on the budget?

This is a call for meaningful rites of passage for those feeling the call to elderhood. It is a call to the leaders of the many spiritual traditions in our country, as well as those others who, through various means have stepped into and owned the wisdom of their own eldering, to develop inspiring programs of preparation for elderhood, culminating in ceremonies of passage. It is also a call to seniors and soon-to-be-seniors who feel called to serve their communities as elders to request and seek out such support. A few programs already exist and are having a dramatic impact upon those who utilize them. As burgeoning numbers of people stand on or near the threshold to their senior years and feel a call to an elderhood of passion and engagement, the need for rites of passage for elders will greatly increase.

Whatever form they take, effective rites of passage into elderhood will not prescribe a particular form or role for emerging elders. The ways in which these elders will share their wisdom and skills with the larger community will be as unique as each individual and as diverse as the American population.

What we new elders will have in common, however, is a commitment to continual growth, deepening spiritual connection, passion, discovery of purpose and service. We will realize that our wholeness, our wisdom and gifts, and the well-being of the larger society and our planet itself, cannot be separated.

Current and soon-to-be seniors can play a critical role in shaping a positive future if we choose to not withdraw as we age, but rather to nurture ourselves and our communities by claiming our roles as conscious elders.

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