



Elders and “Youngers” taking a Stand for a Healthy Future

By Ron Pevny

Elders Throughout History

For most of recorded history until relatively recent times, the role of elder was an honored one, with the wisdom, skills and personal qualities of elders understood to be critical for the wellbeing of communities. The role of elder was that of mentor to the younger generations in the enduring values that support harmony in the community. Elders initiated the young. They helped adults find and develop the gifts they were to share with the community. Because they had developed the bigger picture understanding of life that sees human wellbeing and that of the earth that supports them a inter-related and inter-dependent, it was the elders whose role it was to serve as the voice for future generations, reminding their community of the importance of making decisions with the sustainability of the culture and the earth in mind.

Unlike the situation in industrialized societies today in which there is no defined and honored role for its older adults, and most seniors live in their own homes or retirement communities, in “traditional” societies throughout history all the generations lived together in family groups. The roles and responsibilities of elders were integrated into the daily life of the community. The elders lived with children and adults in a web of mutual respect for the important roles all had in supporting the life of the family and the community.

Collaboration is Key to Survival

A growing body of research is pointing to a new (to the modern world) understanding of a key dynamic in the survival of both human and non-human communities. The Darwinian model of competition in which the “fittest” survive is being recognized as being a distorted and only partially true depiction of life’s dynamics. ¹ This broader understanding shows that all members of communities, whether human or non, must contribute to the health of the larger systems in which they are imbedded if they are to remain healthy. They must continually balance independence with interdependence, cooperating in win-win dynamics that support the wellbeing of all. ⁱ

In contemporary culture, where older adults are largely seen as having made their contribution to society before retirement, a critical element is missing from this dynamic of cooperation. Seniors are not expected to continue cultivating elder qualities in themselves and to use these in service to the community. A great many seniors have little regular contact with young people, aside from occasional visits with grandchildren. By and large, young people and seniors have little in common, live in vastly different subcultures, cannot understand each other, and find it difficult to bridge the gaps if doing so does feel important to them.

Crisis Can Bring Out the Elder in Us

However, I believe this can change. Already, a rapidly increasing number of people are embracing an empowering vision for their aging. Rather than drifting into a disempowered old age, they are focusing on continual personal growth work to strengthen those qualities and commitments to service that have traditionally defined the role of elder. They recognize the importance of using their passion and talents in service to their communities and the ecosystems that support life. It seems to take crisis to galvanize people into action, and the imminent danger of human-induced climate change may well be the crisis that can bring out the elder in millions more of us as we age, impelling us to begin looking at the legacy we will leave our descendants. The magnitude of this crisis is such that we cannot afford to have millions of older adults and young people standing on the sideline, not interested or not believing they can make a difference. Collaboration between elders and “youngers” can be key to success in dealing with climate change and other crises that loom before us.

Elder-Younger Partnerships Create Synergy

Elders can bring to the table time, money, experience creating change (e.g., the environmental, anti-war and civil rights movements). They can contribute long-term perspective, political and financial clout, and a sense of urgency that time is limited for them to make a difference. Many elders have an experiential understanding of the importance of healthy ecosystems for human physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Elders can also bring an awareness, often not yet reached by younger people, that environmental and social action grounded in hatred and demonization of opponents most likely will only increase polarization, whereas willingness to truly listen to opposing viewpoints and act with an open heart (characteristics of true elders) can bring healing.

Youngers bring energy, idealism, and a wealth of experience with social media and technology in general. They bring concern about their futures and the problems they are inheriting, and anger at the generations ahead of them that created these problems. Elders can show them how to transform this justified anger into passionate commitment and engagement.

As the viewpoints, ideas and skills of different generations are brought together in service to the wellbeing of all, a synergy is created that expands the vision, creativity and effectiveness of any one group. But just as important, such collaboration can result in a long overdue cultural change, in which elders are again honored and needed, and younger people have models for healthy aging whom they can aspire to emulate. Besides helping to create environmental balance, such elder-younger partnerships can help restore social balance within our human community.

1 Sidney Liebes, Elizabet Sahtouris, and Brian Swimme, *A Walk Through Time: The Evolution of Life on Earth* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), 164 and 166.