

The Center for Conscious Eldering

Support for realizing your potential in the elder third of life.

Creating the Legacy of Your Elderhood

By Ron Pevny

“Please don’t let me die or lose my health before I have had the opportunity to fulfill what I feel called to do.” Lying in that hospital bed, assaulted by waves of fear and bouts of irregular heartbeat, this is the prayer that most frequently arose from the depths of my being. Nothing is more likely to provide insight into what we deem most important than facing one’s mortality, and that early-May week in 2007 brought me face-to-face with my mortality for the first time.

“Be careful what you pray for, because you may get it” is an adage that became a reality for me that Springtime. I had been deeply yearning for experiences that would serve for me as an initiation into my elderhood and help me gain a gut and heart-level understanding of the conscious eldering I had been teaching and promoting. The many gifts from this health crisis have been precious and powerful responses to my yearning. My experiential understanding of the importance of legacy is one of those gifts.

For several years before this health crisis, which my highly intuitive naturopath called a “healing crisis,” I lived my life torn between seeking “regular” work to earn income I felt obligated to produce for my wife and myself, and making a total commitment to the work my heart has known as my calling for most of my adult life—supporting people in moving through life transitions. It is no wonder that this ongoing inner conflict resulted in a physical health crisis, with my heart literally beating to two different rhythms.

One night toward the end of this big initiation, as I tried to fall asleep I was filled with despair as I felt my heart again beating irregularly. As I drifted into some kind of a dream state I saw and felt a darkness that felt like death approach and began to envelop me. Knowing there was nothing I could do to fight off this darkness, in an act of total surrender, I cried out to what I call the Great Spirit to save me if there was indeed a purpose I had yet to fulfill. And at that instant I felt the darkness explode out of me and I awoke knowing a healing had happened. That was the end of my irregular heart rhythm, and the catalyst for my making the commitment to follow the calling of my heart without reservation, without equivocation, a commitment that resulted in my founding of the Center for Conscious Eldering.

“Calling” and “Legacy”—I see these as two very related words for those committed to a conscious elderhood. In a modern culture which has no honored role for older adults, a great

many people view their legacy as a body of work that is complete by retirement age (whether one is able to retire or not), leaving the years or in many cases decades that remain as a lengthy period of diminished relevance to the world around them. Conscious elderhood offers an empowering vision of relevance and meaning for these years and decades by reminding us that we will indeed create a legacy in our later chapters, and have a choice as to what that legacy will be. We have the opportunity to serve others by claiming the role of elder, which has been critical to the wellbeing of humanity for most of known human history, and to claim it in a way that has never before been possible in human history. Or we can choose to grow old with our primary focus on ourselves, the dominant paradigm for aging in today's world.

Elders have always been the ones whose wisdom and big-picture perspective, forged in the fires of experience, have been critical to remind their societies of the importance of making decisions with the wellbeing of descendants the foremost consideration. Elders have channeled the voices of future generations calling for a healthy world and society in which to live and thrive. With life expectancies being much shorter, people who lived to elderhood throughout most of human history were a relative rarity. In contrast, millions of us around the world are entering our 60s at a unique time in history. By and large we are living long lives; the world needs the wisdom and gifts of all its citizens as we stand on a narrow edge between transformation and collapse; and the inner elder in each of us is seeking expression in a society that provides few structured means for this. This expression is the powerful positive legacy we have the opportunity to leave in our elderhood. And the fullness of this expression is very much related to "calling."

I believe that at the core we are spiritual beings living within bodies and personalities. Each of us has a gift to give to life, a gift that is grounded in both our outer talents and wisdom, and in the spirit or soul within. This gift is our calling. Some of us, for whatever reason, have a strong sense of connection to the calling from that deepest, most authentic voice within us. Many of us, however, especially in a society that doesn't recognize this dimension of human experience, are not aware of this inner compass or have difficulty accessing it. Uncovering this source of vision for our later chapters is the opportunity and the work of those committed to aging consciously. The more we are able to do so, the more likely we are to tap into the sense of purpose and passion that can make all the difference in how we age, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Passion and purpose are the stuff of which elder legacy is made.

There is a common misperception that legacy, purpose, and calling are necessarily equated with large visible projects, actions, commitments. For some of us that is the case. For others, our elderhood calls us to less visible ways of being and serving. What is most important are those qualities of presence, open-heartedness, authenticity, trust and peace that we bring to whatever we choose to do, to however we offer our gifts. It is true that the impact we have upon others and what they will remember about us—a good definition for legacy—has much more to do with the kind of person we are than the deeds we do. When we bring these life-enhancing qualities to our days, we are shining a critical light in the darkness. This light can directly touch many, as in social and environmental action. Or it may directly touch fewer, as in offering our love, wisdom and presence to grandchildren or young people who look to us as mentors, helping them to let their own light shine. What's most important is that we are shining our elder light, and the combined elder light of ever increasing numbers of us is absolutely necessary to pierce the darkness of unconsciousness in which our world is mired.

A useful way to get in touch with the importance of the legacy you create in your later chapters is engage in an imaginary conversation with those who will be your descendants one hundred years hence, or with a group of children from that era if you will not be a biological ancestor. Imagine them asking you how you are choosing to age during a time when the world is so full of both danger and opportunity. Imagine them asking you what legacy you are creating with the unprecedented longevity and resources you are blessed with. And perhaps, hoping you don't need an encounter with mortality to provide the answer, ask yourself how you truly want to live the elder chapters of your one, precious life.

Ron Pevny is Director of the Center for Conscious Eldering and author of "Conscious Living, Conscious Aging" published by Beyond Words/Atria Books