

The Inner Work of Conscious Eldering

By Ron Pevny

On one of the Choosing Conscious Elderhood retreats that I lead, a participant in her early 60's said something that had a powerful impact on all present. In reflecting on her intentions for her retreat, she spoke of two significant older people in her life. One, who was in relatively good physical health, was difficult to be around because of her seemingly constant anger, bitterness and negativity. She was old and miserable. People avoided her because she was a drain on their energy and joy. The other was a woman who, while not physically healthy, attracted people like a magnet. In her presence they felt joy, serenity, optimism, peace. People saw her as an elder whose radiance and wisdom lifted their spirits. Our retreat participant shared her intention, on this retreat and on her journey ahead, of growing into a radiant elder rather than a joyless old person; and her questions and concerns about how to accomplish this.

The aging process seems to bring out either the best or the worst in people—magnifying and emphasizing the flaws and shadow elements of some of us; amplifying the wisdom, radiance and compassion in others. The question carried by those of us committed to becoming peaceful, fulfilled elders is, “how can my aging bring out the best in me?” The inner work known by rubrics such as “conscious eldering”, “conscious aging”, “spiritual eldering” and “Sage-ing” holds important answers to this question.

The journey from late middle-age into fulfilled elderhood is facilitated by inner work that is focused and fueled by conscious intention. This journey can lead to the pinnacle of one's emotional and spiritual development. Undertaking this journey is in fact what our lives to that point have prepared us for. And as conscious elders, our service to our communities and to the community of all beings can be profound. Carl Jung succinctly expressed this potential: “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own...”

The word “conscious” is key in understanding the wide range of ways that the inner work of eldering may be done. It is also key to the distinction between being “old” and being an “elder.” Conscious means aware. Aware of who we really are, of our authentic emotions, talents, aspirations, strengths and weaknesses. Aware of a growth process unfolding in our lives through all of our experiences, positive and painful. Aware of that within us which is conditioned by the myriad of disempowering messages that surround us, as well as that which is authentic, natural and life-supporting. Aware of those shadow elements in us—our dark sides—which can block our radiance and sabotage our potential.

Life Review

If the essence of conscious eldering is increasing awareness, then its core practice is Life Review. Wisdom does not come from having experiences. Wisdom comes from reflecting on one’s life experiences. There are many ways of doing Life Review. Some entail structured exercises to focus on challenges, learning and growth during the stages of one’s life, and they use pen, computer or art materials as tools. Oral history work with a knowledgeable friend or guide can be a powerful catalyst for remembering and finding the significance in life experiences. The grandmother of a colleague of mine creatively memorialized key events in the life of her family by creating a “family quilt” over a period of many years. Whichever method most resonates with us, what is critical is doing it. The awareness we gain is what makes virtually all the other inner work possible and effective. The elder wisdom we arrive at is a precious gift to the generations who will remember us as ancestors.

Healing the Past

Much of the inner work of eldering focuses on healing and letting go of old baggage. Actualizing our unique potential as elders requires that our energy be free and clear, that our psyches be capable of embracing the possibilities and opportunities of each present moment rather than stuck in the experiences of the past. We can’t shine as radiant elders if our energy is continually sapped by old wounds, grudges, angers, hurts and feelings of victimhood. We can’t move lightly and serenely through our days when we have not forgiven others and ourselves for the slights and hurts we have experienced and perpetrated through unconscious behavior. We cannot display our wholeness when unprocessed grief keeps open wounds that sap our energy.

When we review our lives, we become aware of the immense power of story. We become aware of the mythos we have constructed for our lives as the result of our experiences—the stories we tell ourselves (and oftentimes others) about our lives that shape who we become as the years pass. We see how disempowering these stories can be when they contain strong motifs of victimhood, inadequacy, unworthiness and regret. It is liberating to know that these stories can be changed, and doing so is perhaps the most powerful inner work we can do as we age. This process is often called “recontextualizing” or “reframing.”

Recontextualizing

The essence of recontextualizing is viewing painful or difficult life experiences with the intention of finding what in those experiences has contributed—or has the potential to now contribute as we revisit it with conscious awareness—to our growth and learning. In the bigger picture of our lives, the job lost may have pushed us into a difficult search that led to a fuller expression of our gifts. The wounding inflicted on us by another may have taught us compassion or empathy for the suffering of others. The hurt we inflicted on another may have been a teacher for us about our shadow side—a critical awareness if we are to grow as human beings. A career decision we made that we regret may have been a crucial step toward our becoming who we are today, even if the mechanics of this are not obvious.

Recontextualizing of experiences that do not hold a strong emotional charge can be relatively easy. But, for emotionally charged experiences, if this practice is to truly impact our lives at the level of deep feeling and allow us to reshape the stories we live by, we must allow ourselves to feel deeply suppressed emotion, and do the inner work of grieving and forgiving. At its core recontextualizing is profoundly spiritual work. It requires a deep trust that the divine intelligence present in us has a purpose for our lives and is working through our experiences to achieve that purpose. We may not understand its workings, and they may not be what we would choose. But this wise inner guidance possesses the eagle’s eye view of our lives that eludes the narrower view of our ego selves.

Deepening Spiritual Connection

Our ability to trust in a divine intelligence with a purpose for our lives depends greatly upon the strength of our connection to a Higher Power—to Spirit, Soul,

God, the Great Mystery. The inner work of eldering is deeply spiritual work that requires us to find spiritual practices that nurture that connection. For the goal of all true spiritual practice is to help us experience ourselves and our lives in a wider context, framed in a truer story than the stories our ego selves tend to create about our lives. When we trust—with a trust grounded in the deep inner knowing that flows through spiritual connection—that our lives have prepared us to become elders with wisdom, talent and wholeness to give to our people, our unfolding stories become gifts to our communities.

Our deepening spiritual connection is intrinsically related to the shift from a life grounded in “doing” to one grounded in “being”—a shift that is a key dynamic in conscious eldering. When we make this shift we move from living and acting with the primary goal of meeting the needs of our ego selves, to living and acting so that Spirit, however we may name it, shines through us as fully as possible.

Accepting Mortality

The world’s spiritual traditions are aligned in teaching us that accepting our mortality is perhaps our biggest ally in helping us to truly embrace life and the wonder of each moment. Yet, we live amid pervasive denial of mortality. Illness and physical diminishment, realities for most of us as we age, have great power to transform denial into an acceptance that can give zest to each of our limited number of days. CREATING LEGACY We all leave a legacy—positive, negative or mixed—to the generations that follow us. Aging consciously implies becoming aware of the legacy we have created up to this point in our lives and being intentional about the legacy we want to create in our elderhood. As we review our lives and work to bring healing to the past, we help ourselves to acknowledge and build on the positives of this evolving legacy, and we free up the energy needed identify and move forward in building the legacy that is our gift to the future. Here again, a growing spiritual connection that allows us to see clearly our unique calling and gifts as an elder is key. This experience of calling (which is more powerful than a concept, an idea or a “should” alone) helps us become aware of the legacy we truly want to leave and of the path that will help us realize this goal. It opens our heart, strengthens our intention, focuses our action and taps our spiritual depths so that we bring our whole selves to the creation of legacy.

Letting Go

We cannot move fully from who we have been into the elder we can become without letting go of that which will not support us on this journey. We all have culturally instilled attitudes and beliefs about life and aging that are disempowering. Our inner work is to become conscious (aware) of these and let them go. We all have attachments to people, places, things, activities, ideologies, attitudes, old stories and self-identifications that may (or may not) have served us in the past but which will definitely not serve us in the future. Here again, our work is awareness and surrender. Life review is a valuable tool in becoming aware of what must be surrendered.

Rituals of letting go, whether conducted alone or with the support and witness of a group, can be powerful tools for transforming that awareness into willingness to let go of who we have been. Eldering rites of passage, such as those facilitated by the Center for Conscious Eldering, are powerful examples of rituals that help us to let go of outwork identifications. True, effective surrender requires cultivating deep trust that by letting go of what has come to feel familiar and safe, albeit constricting, we are supported by the wisdom and life force which is calling us into a new identity and positive new beginnings.

While the inner work of eldering is “work”—at times quite difficult work—it is also dynamic and enlivening. It can be the most important work we ever do. It may well be accompanied by tears of both sadness and joy as bound up energies are freed to reflect growing consciousness of who we are and what is possible. Its fruit can be the radiance, passion and service so needed by a world in need of conscious elders. I wish you well on your journey.

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