

# LIVING WITH ELDER WISDOM

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**S**PIRITUAL WISDOM FOR LATER YEARS was one of the most significant discoveries I made when researching the lives of a hundred creative elders in the United States. The people in the study were a cross-section of men and women, averaging seventy-seven years of age, from different religious, ethnic and professional backgrounds. My intention was to explore the concrete experiences of older persons as they negotiated the ups and downs of life from early childhood to their later years. I wanted the themes for the study to come out of their real experiences rather than be imposed from abstract concepts of how we 'should' age. I also was hoping to find models for creative ageing whose lives could stand against the negative stereotypes that too often accompany the old. Maggie Kuhn, the founder of the Gray Panther Movement, characterized these negative images by saying that the old were erroneously viewed as mindless, useless and sexless. In her mind, a culture driven toward productivity and profit tended to reduce the old to dependent 'wrinkled babies'. The aim of my project about the spirituality of ageing was to present a truer image of the potentials for elderhood.

The importance of developing a spirituality for ageing is underscored by the demographics of many nations where populations are greying in ever increasing numbers. In the United States and elsewhere we are being challenged to develop a whole new phase of life that I call elderhood. In the past, life expectancy for the majority of the population would not have extended much beyond sixty. Today by contrast millions of people can expect to have twenty-five or more years after retirement. For example, ninety-five per cent of persons over sixty today in developed nations are in relatively good health. What are they going to do with the rest of their lives? We are on the cusp of a great cultural challenge: how to shape this new period of elderhood in ways that are beneficial to individuals and communities. Christianity and other religions have just begun to address the vocation of elderhood in modern society.

Before we discuss themes for wise ageing, I want to relate spirituality and storytelling, since my study was based on life-review narratives. Learning to investigate one's life history, its problems and promise, becomes a springboard for shaping one's elderhood. The work of retrieving one's past calls for both revision and insight. Revision involves a reinterpretation of past events. These are always subject to new meaning in light of one's current experiences. This reinventing of our stories, this seeing of old patterns in novel ways, means 'remythologizing' one's life, building on the past for the sake of the present. The polarity of past and present can be worked on in a variety of ways, including personal journal work, autobiographical groups and other therapeutic modes.

A number of advantages accrue to elders in the storytelling process. There is the possibility of healing memories that, when suppressed or ignored, can lead to rigidity and bitterness. Some other benefits of storytelling among elders are: overcoming isolation by group work, becoming freer to share with others, finding new friends and confidants and cultivating a sense of community. In the narrative process elders recognize the skills and accomplishments from their past that can be helpful for the future. Storytelling can also aid us to become unstuck from repeating stifling 'life tapes'. It can teach us the art of empathetic listening.

But what does storytelling have to do with spirituality? All religious traditions sprang from the dreadful and wonderful stories of human existence. Written and oral religious narratives grip us in mind and emotion; they draw us to new thresholds of spiritual transformation. Religions are more significantly immersed in stories than in theological abstractions. The very telling of our stories, especially when we share vulnerabilities, is a spiritual act, a quest for personal meaning at deeper levels. The word 'spirituality' derives from 'spirit', that longing in us for wider understanding and richer experience which are hallmarks of religiousness. It is important to engender a contemplative environment in storytelling groups; this can be fostered by music and meditation.

The following themes drawn from the stories of creative elders are not expressed in traditional theological language for the most part. I will attempt to make connections to religious heritages when appropriate, but I hold that the topics discussed are intrinsically religious. To the eyes of faith, life itself, especially in its deeper experiences, is sacred. For the most part, the elders who spoke with me were talking about their spiritual journeys in what we call secular language. It is important to decipher the spiritual meaning in words that are not immediately religious-sounding.

*Inner empowerment for elderhood*

Creative elders are able to move beyond negative cultural stereotypes of being old by cultivating their inner resources. There is no one way of tapping into the talents and skills developed over a lifetime, qualities that have become part of one's core personality. But an example may illustrate. An elderly actor noted the importance of keeping one's imagination and emotions alive in later life. Not only did he exemplify this by continuing to perform, but during our interview, his wife and daughter were rehearsing a play in an adjacent room. The aesthetic and imaginative dimensions of all the arts are akin to the spiritual because they express the deeper longings of the soul for beauty and meaning. We may not sufficiently appreciate how valuable for healthy eldering is participation in art, music, film, crafts, gardening and many other aesthetic ways of experiencing the beauty and tragedy of life.

Another aspect of cultivating inner resources among creative elders is their ability to discover within themselves a serene self-esteem. They seem less driven by outward norms of personal worth. They speak about having greater self-confidence than when they were younger; they are at ease with a more authentic self. This quality appears to stem from an ability to put aside false expectations of how things ought to be for them. They have moved beyond embitterment over past disappointments and resentment over a less than ideal present. Reducing false expectations is a core element toward enlightenment in Buddhism, as well as in Christianity's call to simplify and purify one's life. This serene self-esteem is also related to living a less fear-motivated life. I was impressed by the 106-year-old woman who told me that she faces life with little or no personal fear: 'When I wake up each day,' she said, 'I look at the trees, say a little prayer and I put away fear; the doctors say I'm very peaceful and self-confident.' Moving from a fear-driven to a love-motivated life is a goal of both contemporary therapy and all religious traditions.

Another mode of cultivating inner resources among enlightened elders is the harvesting of memories. Reminiscences that merely stay in the past, as it were, are not as useful as those that can be explored for the sake of the present and future. In many ways my whole project with elders was a mining of memories. Often these stories of the past entailed hardship and suffering. For example, an older black woman talked about scenes of racial discrimination towards her share-cropper family in the South. She explained how long it took her to overcome negative feelings towards whites as she went on to become a respected

educator. There were many stories of hard beginnings. An American Indian elder described a dramatic journey from alienation and alcoholism to his present state as an altruistic and healing leader in his community.

Built into these tales is a clear spiritual *metanoia* or change of heart. To get a clearer picture of such personal transformation, I inquired into special turning points in life. The variety of such transitional moments was itself fascinating. They could include meeting a particular marriage partner, encountering an illness, or more dramatic episodes such as leaving the priesthood or experiencing a difficult divorce. A striking example of a spiritual turning point was recounted by President Jimmy Carter. A low point in his life came with his first failed attempt to be governor of Georgia. In this traumatic time, his evangelist sister urged him to let go of his ego in order to let God lead him in new ways. Carter remembers this event as a key turning point in his life.

Two themes that manifest themselves in the inward development of elders are humour and gratitude. The ability to laugh with and at oneself characterizes these people. Humour and playfulness may be neglected as religious virtues, which tend to be associated with seriousness. An older woman, who became a lay spiritual director in late life, talked about her semi-professional involvements as a clown. She contrasted these experiences to the dire soberness of her early Calvinist upbringing. Moreover, she pointed out how these ventures in playfulness coincided with her new images of God as compassionate, in contrast to those of stern judge learned in childhood. An octogenarian Catholic social justice advocate referred to his wife, who used to tell him that he would never grow up. He took this as a partial compliment, meaning that his inner child was still alive. Laughter is one of the most distinctive human traits; it can be an act of faith in the face of death and of the tragic events that surround a long life. Humour can protect us from becoming stuck in resentments, and it thus opens us to living with gratitude. A Jewish scholar-rabbi in his nineties told me that he was responsible for the care of a very disabled wife. Yet when this man looked back at a long career, he said: 'I am awash in a sea of gratitude'. This ability to be thankful, even in pain and loss, is eminently religious, when we recall that the Christian eucharist is a thanksgiving prayer inherited from the Hebrew tradition.

Another trait for inner empowerment that I found in these elders was a commitment to learning, to keeping their minds alive. Some did this by taking courses, others by reading and discussing, still others through travel-learning adventures with the Elderhostel movement. The medieval Christian tradition at its best saw a close link between the love of

learning and the quest to know God. As the mystics of that period tell us, such learning was intimately joined to knowledge and appreciation of nature. Study of Torah in Judaism was so highly regarded that it may explain in part the remarkable contributions that Jews have made to learning and education in the modern world. Maintaining a vibrant mind through education may also be related to preserving relatively good health into later life. Research into longevity is increasingly showing the salutary effects on physical well-being of a lively mind with balanced emotions. Learning among elders is extending itself to the body-mind relationship. It is significant that modern theology and natural science have focused on the interpenetration of spirit and matter. An example of this is the current development of ecological spirituality in various traditions.

Encountering one's own mortality is a crucial aspect of spiritual growth; in elderhood this takes on special ramifications because of particular losses and the proximity of death. The elders I studied have in a sense rehearsed their confrontation with death by dealing with 'small deaths' on physical and emotional levels. Some of these people have debilitating chronic diseases; others have experienced heart attacks, strokes and cancer. I noted a remarkable resiliency among them, an ability to learn from their setbacks and face the future with hope. This is not a Pollyanna-like attitude. These elders know the anxieties and suffering of their physical deficiencies. They also know the 'little deaths' of an emotional nature, such as unresolved alienation from their children or the long sicknesses and deaths of loved ones. I was somewhat surprised that these elders almost universally did not fear their own deaths. They were concerned about the dying process with its potential loss of mental and physical control, but they did not fear death itself. This was true for those who believed in an afterlife and those who did not. Perhaps a reason for this equanimity about death can be attributed to the achievement of a certain integration of life meaning and experience, that is, a deepening of personal spirituality. Fear and anxiety about death are probably not relieved by mere beliefs, religious or naturalistic. There may be a kind of acceptance of death that is a result of living out the qualities or traits manifested by these elders. Some even saw their deaths as a positive culmination of life. A West Coast woman is not only preparing a liturgy for her funeral; she also wants her friends to have a party after her death to celebrate her life. Our ways of grappling with death go to the core of spirituality. Human awareness of the inevitability of death is a central element of religious traditions from the cross and the *memento mori* of Christianity to escaping the wheel of birth and death in Buddhism.

*Outward empowerment for elderhood*

Creative elders oppose the ageing stereotype of withdrawal from social involvements. They refuse to be consigned to the periphery of life by the images of being 'over the hill' or being 'out to pasture'. They want to balance the inward aspects of spirituality with its outward responsibilities. The moment of contemplation or enlightenment impels one toward compassion and service as part of the rhythm or polarity of spiritual withdrawal for the sake of re-entry into the world's needs. The following are some themes for outward empowerment revealed by the elders in my study.

To develop purposes in elderhood was an often-repeated motif for wise ageing. Our culture propagates the image of elders floating blissfully on a 'golden pond' or of playing leisurely on the outskirts of society, away from its central responsibilities. Such stereotypes render the old as passive and dependent. Another statement from Maggie Kuhn stands against such withdrawal visions: 'My aches and pains are less important than my agenda'. As I was interviewing this frail lady in her late eighties, one of her younger assistants (Kuhn lived in an intergenerational household) interrupted us to have her review a telegram she was sending to President Bush on a social issue. To develop purposes or social goals can also be done in quieter ways. An elder in San Francisco, partially blinded by small strokes, finds her purposes in visiting grammar-school children to talk about being older; she also campaigns to keep local libraries open when they are threatened by budget-cutting politicians. Another woman in her late eighties has become an ecumenical lay minister in her retirement community. Still another elder continued her human rights activities almost to the day of her death. In pursuing social purposes these elders were frequently responding to a sense of vocation from their Christian or Jewish heritages. They understood that one's religious calling does not end with retirement from a job.

Creative elders seem especially able to welcome possibilities, be they gentle or difficult opportunities. An evangelical minister in the Mid-West found himself responsible for his wife who suffered from a debilitating muscular disease. As he cared for her and wheeled her chair in public, he went through an inner spiritual transformation that he recorded in a book that inspired others in similar circumstances. An elderly black woman in California was disappointed some years ago with the poor educational opportunities for her own children. To address this situation, she began a rather famous alternative school for children. Upon retirement, a navy admiral started the Center for

Defense Information in Washington to act as an independent source of information on political and military activities. He accessed possibilities, building on his military career. He also carried with him a striking change of heart from military patriot to advocate for non-violence. These examples underline the spiritual lesson of reading the signs of the times in one's own life and allowing the Spirit to lead one from given circumstances toward further opportunities.

Another theme among creative elders is the ability to foster freedom in their lives. Instead of viewing the last phase of life as a restricting of freedom, they look upon it as a period of greater freedom from past problems and for new expression. The 'freedom from' relates more to inward development discussed above, as elders move beyond their bondage to past addictions and to old mental scripts. 'Freedom for' has an outward thrust, as when elders find themselves freer to speak out on issues, overcoming their fears and inhibitions. A classic example of such elder freedom to speak out is the case of a well-known nun who signed a statement in *The New York Times* calling for dialogue among Catholics on abortion. Her action got her into trouble with the Vatican, but she told me that she was no longer afraid to express her conscientious convictions. She discovered in late life a sense of freedom to speak out to what she saw as a closed clerical patriarchy with its monopoly on determining important moral issues. In the words of Tillie Olsen, a highly respected writer, such elders were overcoming silences imposed by self, family and cultural milieu. They were taking the risks of freedom in prophetic ways.

As elders reach outward, family and friendship assume important roles. When I asked two elderly women who had achieved significant notoriety in their professions what was their most important achievement, both pointed to their families. They spoke of sustaining relationships with their adult children and of their own mentoring roles in the wider family of their students and associates. Later life can be an occasion for healing rifts that occurred in earlier family relations. Others spoke of the role of grandparenting in their families. Although family remains a vital unit for elders, sometimes friendships beyond family members can be even more important. Some older people have lost most family members or they live at a distance from family or they have become alienated from their own kin. For example, studies in recent years document a shocking amount of elder abuse within families: physical, psychological and financial. In such cases, friends can be much more supportive than personal family. The theme of cultivating friendships in later life was very important in my study.

This is especially vital for men, who tend to make work such a supreme life goal, and who narrow themselves to emotional dependence on a spouse.

A number of creative elders have expanded friendship and service through intentional communities. The latter are relatively small groups of people who meet regularly for social and service-oriented goals; sometimes there is a directly religious aspect to these groups. One example is a group of women in Chicago who meet in the home of an elderly member to dine, socialize, worship and plan their involvements for the benefit of shelters for abused women and ministry to women in prisons. The elder host spoke of how meaningful the group is to her, because it fosters an awareness of feminist issues, helps her find a vibrant small community for worship and gives her a sense of valuable outreach in the world. This woman also noted that this intentional community has become more important to her spiritually than routine parish involvement. Another example is a Jesuit priest in his eighties who works as part of a small social justice advocacy community; the friendships with men and women and the group's enlivening purposes greatly enhance his old age. An older resigned priest in California has formed a mostly Hispanic intentional community that performs home liturgies, offers mutual support to participants and performs outreach services in the region. These intentional communities are particularly significant in our era of isolated elders amid a mass culture driven by commercialism that denigrates close human groupings. Intentional communities may be contemporary ways of reviving traditions pioneered by western religious orders and Buddhist *sanghas*.

Many creative elders work against cultural expectations by embracing great human causes. They see their elder vocations as calling for the application of skills and talents so as to leave the world a better place for future generations. We have already mentioned President Carter, who has used his position since losing the White House to resolve international conflicts and contribute to major health improvements in Third World nations. Carter speaks freely about his motivations being connected to gospel values in his Baptist heritage. Eugene Odum, who is referred to as the father of modern ecological studies in academic circles, sees his role in retirement to be that of a preacher of environmental responsibility, as he shifts his writing and speaking style to reach a wider audience. In a similar way, Thomas Berry, the octogenarian Catholic 'geologist', maintains that a principal task for elders as mentors for future generations is to take up ecological causes. As an old man, Berry has been an inspiring leader for many younger



thinkers who are revising or 'remythologizing' Christianity in ecological directions. In speaking with these men, I realized how deeply great causes for humanity and for the earth had permeated their spirituality, and I also believe that the heartfelt pursuit of such causes profoundly enriches their later years. I have mentioned some well-known names above, but many lesser-known elders in my study have attached themselves to causes great and small, far and near.

In concluding these reflections on elder wisdom, I would like to discuss an overall theme of developing a personal spirituality in later life. As I said above, all of the themes elaborated are dimensions of elder spirituality. But I also asked these elders about specific religious traditions in which they were formed. It became clear that these elders are crafting their own spirituality as they age. This means that they are willing to say 'yes' and 'no' to teachings received from their traditions. I did not find a 'cookie-cutter' religiosity in these persons, contrary to the notion that the old simply repeat patterns learned in their churches and synagogues. This point is emphasized in a remark by a late-life woman playwright: 'I wish no one had told me about Jesus until I was sixty'. This vivid overstatement sums up her personal religious journey from a rule-bound Catholicism of childhood to a more flexible spirituality which seeks wisdom wherever it can be found.

Another aspect of shaping a personal spirituality in elderhood was how images of God or of the divine changed for these older persons over the years. In general, these divine images moved from those of a severe or at least sober father figure, with fixed regulations and sanctions mediated through religious institutions, to a compassionate entity or spirit that is increasingly shrouded in mystery. It may be that a fuller experience of life with its beauty and its tragedy brings such elderly persons to a more compassionate vision towards the world. Such experience may attune them to the compassionate divine. These elders also report that they have become more tolerant of diversity and ambiguity in religious expressions. When they speak of a greater appreciation of mystery, this does not mean that humans are unable to communicate with God. Rather, it seems to indicate the need for a more contemplative style in relating to the transcendent.

Some elders spoke of the importance of opening contemplative spaces in life, especially from midlife onward. It seems to me that they were calling for a greater place for mysticism in the lives of religious institutions. It is particularly unfortunate that Christian churches neglect the cultivation of contemplative and mystical traditions, western and eastern, for both laity and clergy. These institutions seem

satisfied with participation in religious services such as mass or sermon-oriented worship. But Catholic and Protestant churches do not teach people how to meditate, how to use silence contemplatively. Services are filled with sound and motion. They do not help the faithful to develop a meditative life able to experience the spiritual presence of mystery, whether it be called God or Tao. Our typical western Christian religiosity of observance and performance is very inadequate for the second half of life which calls for a personalized deepening of spirituality. If our churches focused on educating for deeper prayer, meditation and contemplation, they would equip people to form their own spirituality, a religiousness that in the last seasons of life would help elders weave the strands of their years into an integrated tapestry.

This study of elders from various religious backgrounds underscores some common themes concerning wise ageing. As these older people tell their stories, they emphasize the development of inward empowerment to sustain their minds and hearts. They speak for the most part in secular language about emotions, memories, humour, learning and gratitude. They try to live in the face of their own mortality. Yet the stories swirling around these human touchstones are spirit-filled, because the narratives engage the deeper reaches of life. Life at this level is especially sacred. For these elders, the inward moment moves in reciprocity with the outward dimension, just as the contemplative life leads toward compassion and service. This dialogue between interior and exterior helps them shape renewed purposes, welcome possibilities, foster freedoms and embrace widening circles of human needs. Even their inherited religious traditions become areas for retrieval and rejection, as they mould distinctive spiritualities out of their life experiences. Such elders can be role models and mentors for all of us at whatever stage of the ageing process. They give us hope for an integrated and spirit-filled elderhood.