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PRESENTS

EARTH ELDERevolution

***An Interactive Discussion Course to Re-Vision
The Role of Elder as Earth-Keeper.***

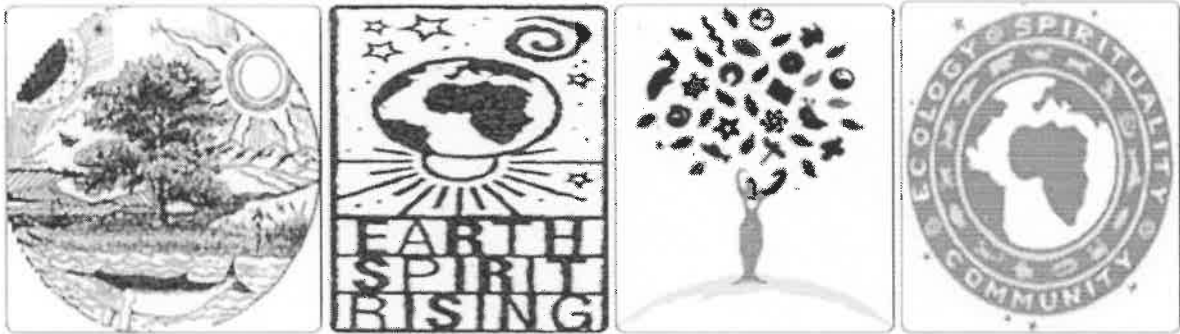
- five sessions -

Imago

For the Earth

The obligation of each generation of beings is to attend to the creativity inherent in the moment. There is no more central question a human can ask than, "What time is it?" What time is it in the Universe? What time is it in the unfolding dynamics of the biophysical Earth? What time is it in the adventure of the human story?

- Thomas Berry



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INTRODUCTION

Elders In Limbo

By Emily Kimball, The Aging Adventurer

"There isn't any normal way to act seventy-five years old... People are supposed to be dead and buried at our age. That's normal. Up till just lately, the Civil War or something, they didn't even know about germs. If you got sick, they slapped leeches on you and measured you for a coffin. I wouldn't doubt but hardly anybody even made it to fifty...but then along comes somebody inventing six thousand ways to cure everything, and here we are, old, wondering what to do with ourselves."

—Barbara Kingsolver, Prodigal Summer

I would like to reflect on what I find as I speak at aging conferences around the country and to senior citizens groups. I definitely see a sense of confusion in the field. It is like a new era is being ushered in regarding older people, their capabilities and their place in society.

We are at a time in our civilization where we have a large group of healthy, active seniors living 30 more years than they did in 1900. Our culture has not caught up with this change. We are still oriented towards youth and youthfulness, even though soon the majority of Americans will be over 50. Our culture is no longer dominated by youth. It will soon be top heavy with older folks.

So far, society has not taken advantage of this emerging group. A lot of ageism still remains. We think of seniors in the old fashioned terms of getting their gold watch and going home to sit in the rocking chair on the front porch, waiting to die. Simply not true. Not happening. We are vibrant. We are excited about life. We are looking for meaningful ways to relate to today's society and we are looking to form meaningful community.

Older seniors are confused about how to behave, what to expect from life, how others see them. They confront ageism in their own lives and in the institutions they depend on. Some are able to let it roll off; others are stunted by it. Elders are often tentative about their life and what direction they want to go in. Life is wide open with lots of freedom. Many falter with all that freedom. It blows their mind. They can't handle it. Others go full steam ahead making the very most of this third stage of life.

I see healthy elders looking for ways to find community outside of "sun city" type communities. I find many of us wanting not to be segregated off in one-age groups but to be integrated into the life of the community, which means people of all ages.

I see us searching for meaningful ways to relate to the community. We are looking for volunteer opportunities where we can best apply our skills to help out with society's

troubles. I find institutions not used to the level of skilled volunteers that are now available and instead putting people into volunteer jobs that do not fit their advanced skill level.

Elderhood is a new stage of life, but in reality we have not differentiated it from adulthood and given it a place and a definition in our society that has meaning and respect. Dr. William Thomas says that adulthood has stretched down deep into childhood and also continues into old age—the idea of doing and always being productive reigns supreme. It does not encourage the values of being, and thinking, and resting and playing.

From this context of cultural confusion, the idea of creating community in our later years becomes particularly relevant and important. No one is working on elderhood. We must. There is a need for new and creative ways of coming together with this new group of older people to use their talents, to learn from their wisdom, and to appreciate them and to integrate them meaningfully in our society.

May this manual offer helpful guidelines for living to the fullest in our third stage of life and move us further ahead in probing the many dimensions of elderhood.

*-Emily Kimball is a motivational
speaker and consultant on subjects
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Session 1

Elders Today: Obstacles and Opportunities

“We follow the teachings of the Elders and our ancestors. In our Way, the Elders give spiritual direction to the people. The wisdom of thousands of years flows through their lips. In our Way, when we grow old we become Elders. In White Man’s way, when you grow old you just grow old.”

Mathew King, Lakota Wisdom keeper

“Look behind you. See your sons and daughters. They are your future. Look farther, and see your sons’ and your daughters’ children and their children’s children even unto the Seventh Generation. That’s the way we were taught. Think about it: you yourself are a Seventh Generation!”

Tadodaho Leon Shenandoah

“We need to reclaim the notion of the elder, that person empowered by life experience, cultural traditions, long-term perspectives, and spiritual discernment.... TV and golf won’t do it. We need environments for older adults that support inner contemplation as well as outward service. We need to redefine the very meaning of late life.”

Drew Leder

Introduction

In our youth-oriented culture being old is not easy. The prevailing public perception of seniors often is of people who are failing physically and mentally and who will be a burden on society sooner or later. Any elder who is healthy, keen and active is considered an exception. There is no public policy aimed at empowering senior citizens and encouraging their participation in community affairs.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the sociological study by Cuddy and Fiske focuses on the stereotyping of older persons in our society. This is in stark contrast to the respect the elders enjoy in traditional cultures. As Malidoma Some (author of *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*) describes it, elders are considered “grounded and full of wisdom,” thus holding the key to the meaning of human existence. Judith Blackburn proposes new roles and possibilities for the elderly in our culture, taking into account recent changes in technology and medical research that refute the outdated stereotypical notions of what the elderly are and aren’t capable of doing. Finally, in his wide-ranging perspective, Thomas Berry outlines the role of the elderly in the western world as witnesses to the historical, scientific and ecological development of the last hundred years.

Circle Question

How do you feel about retirement? Is it a time to look forward to, to make plans for, or a change that causes uncertainty, perhaps even fear? How could it be rewarding for you?

Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel old? Are you consciously aware of your age? Do you keep it a secret or do you announce it with pride?
2. Have you experienced age discrimination or lack of respect, for example, in the health care field or in employment situations?
3. Considering the position of the “elder” as described by Malidoma Some, do you think it desirable to attain in our contemporary culture? What would it mean in practical terms?
4. What do you think of Malidoma Some’s analysis of the status of the elderly in our western culture and what is needed to improve that?
5. Does the role of “guardian of the next generation” (Blackburn) appeal to you, and what would it entail?
6. Why do you think Blackburn included “community building” in her suggestions? How important is this to you?
7. Which other “new roles” would appeal to you? Explain why.
8. According to Thomas Berry, the present generation of senior has a unique historical position in society. Do you see yourself in his grand vision? Explain.
9. When you were a child, in which ways was your upbringing different from that of today’s children?
10. Do you cherish your life experiences? Which ones would you like to share with the young people in your life?

Doddering but Dear: Process, Content, and Function In Stereotyping of Older Persons (Excerpt)

By Amy J.C. Cuddy and Susan T. Fiske

In first encounters, age is one of the earliest characteristics we notice about other people. Conscious or not, noticing age drives our interactions with others. Age seems to answer: How should I address them? What are their political views? What do they know about popular culture? Will they be competent? Socially aware? How slowly should I talk? How loudly? From an individual's perceived age, we infer social and cognitive competencies, political and religious beliefs, and physical abilities. These inferences guide how we behave and what information we seek, heed, and remember.

Age is far from the only social marker that shapes our attitudes toward other people. We form opinions based on sex, race, and religion, among other social categories. But unlike other categories, old age is one that most of us eventually join. ... Moreover, stereotyping people based on their age ... goes largely unchallenged and even unnoticed in the United States. We disparage elderly people without fear of censure. Indeed, noticing a person's age early in a social encounter is not surprising or inherently offensive. It is what we do with that information that can be destructive. ... ageism, like racism and sexism, becomes institutionalized, affecting hiring decision, medical care, and social policy.

Many people approach old age with dread. What was once viewed as a natural process is now seen as a social problem. Television portrays only 1.5 percent of its characters as elderly, and most of them in minor roles. Older adults are also more likely than any other group to appear in television and film as conduits for comic relief, exploiting stereotypes of physical, cognitive, and sexual ineffectiveness. Today in America we no longer see our elders as sources of wisdom but as feeble yet lovable, doddering but dear.

...Amid the clamor of the 2000 presidential election vote-counting debacle, we were struck by media portrayals of older Palm Beach County voters who inadvertently voted for the wrong candidate as incompetent and harebrained. "If there's a county in the world that would have a population that would struggle with the ballot, it would be that one," said one political science professor, citing demographics as the culprit. Another interviewer added that elderly voters are "not as sharp as they used to be." The nightly news even showed one Florida demonstrator carrying a sign that read, "Stupid people shouldn't vote."

We propose that today in the United States, elderly people are stereotyped as incompetent but also as warm. People view them ambivalently as physically and cognitively inept but socially sensitive. Preliminary data suggest that elderly people are subject to a paternalistic breed of prejudice; they are pitied but not respected. Because of historical and cultural changes, today's elders are seen as low status, which elicits perceptions of incompetence and passivity, leading to perceptions of warmth. Transformations in the content of elderly stereotypes stem from social structural changes, resulting from historical and cultural transformations. In particular, they result from the diminished social status of older adults and the absence of older adults from competitive social roles.

... Believing older people are incompetent leads others to treat them as if they are incompetent. Young people use baby talk—higher voices and simpler words—and sound more unpleasant when communicating with older people. People are less willing to engage in challenging conversations with elderly people by asking them difficult questions.

Our stereotypes of elderly ineptitude also come to life in the workplace. Older job applicants are less likely to be hired, are viewed as more difficult to train, harder to place into jobs, more resistant to change, less suitable for promotion, and expected to have lower job performances.

Older people are victims of discrimination in medical settings as well. Sometimes we deny older people services afforded to younger people. For instance, when reporting the same symptoms as young people, older people are less likely to be referred for psychiatric assessments. When reporting psychiatric symptoms commonly associated with aging, older patients are treated less thoroughly than young people reporting the same symptoms. Medical doctors condescend to and patronize older patients by providing oversimplified information and presenting it in less engaging ways.

By keeping older people at a social distance, we deny ourselves exposure to stereotype-incongruent information, which could force us to see older people as a more viable group. Under certain conditions, inter-age contact and the presentation of stereotype-inconsistent information curtail discrimination against elderly people. When presented with individuating information, young adults are less likely to make age-stereotype-consistent attributions and, in some cases, even likely to assign more positive ratings to older people than to younger counterparts.

Attributing the errors of older Palm Beach voters to intellectual incompetence perpetuates the worst of our cultural stereotypes. Stereotyping of elderly people goes largely unchallenged and even unnoticed in the United States. Nevertheless, inter-group contact among age groups and interdependence among young, middle-aged, and old people may restore a sense of respect, as well as liking for all age groups in their glorious human variety.

References: Butler 1975; Caporael and Culbertson 1986; Caspi 1984; Erber, Szuchman, and Etheart 1993; Fiske 1998; Gordon 2000; Grant 1996; Greene et al. 1989; Hillerbrand and Shaw 1990; Hummert et al. 1998; Jackson and Sullivan 1988; Kite, Deaux, and Micle 1991; Montepare, Steinberg, and Rosenberg 1992; Schwartz and Simmons in press; Thimm, Rademacher, and Kruse 1998; Zebrowitz and Montepare 2000.

A Different Perspective On Aging

An Interview With Malidoma Some,
Author of The Healing Wisdom of Africa

What is your experience of how elders are treated in Western culture?

MS The first baffling thing is that old age is so unappreciated in this culture. Old people are pretty much seen as useless. People no longer have the capacity for appreciating the old, so they end up in retirement homes. Somehow they have to get out of the culture and relegate themselves to waiting to be taken to another place. This is really sad to me, and I notice that the same is being done with youth; the youth are not being heard. A culture that rejects the old also rejects the young. As a result, people living in the midst of this must be living in a kind of crisis.

The healing of such a culture can only occur when the old are reinstated to visibility, allowing them to become elders—to be able to hold that space that allows the culture to lose its fear of the “other” world. Without that shift there will be fear of the other world. The old now even fear not being in this world in a secure fashion. So my current view of the elderly is that they are turned into old-age people, not elders, mostly because of the perception that old age is a kind of decay associated with what is not viable anymore. As a result, we lose something very important about what it means to grow old, what it means to hold this space for the good of the community.

In contrast, what is the view in the tribal setting of your African culture?

MS To become old is perceived primarily as embracing something permanent; old means grounded and full of wisdom. Other people look to the old for a sense of direction. Old means one has traveled a complete journey, come to a clear destination, and they know the road of life. The old represent a possibility to youth and adults, saying to them that they have reached a destination that the younger ones are going toward. They hold out the hope that the others can go that far; they hold the key to that which the others will face. The elder becomes the key to that which the young need for a sense of belonging. Without the old, there is confusion about where we are going, what human existence is for. Old comes to be a hopeful frame of reference, one that gives an individual a renewed confidence in the daily hurdle of life, in the recharging of life. It offers the capacity to confront everyday life with a renewed sense of confidence, something that makes African indigenous culture rely very heavily on the condition of elders. The elder is an elder because he has gone through all that is part of the human condition, and therefore is standing there as a testimony to the beauty of all that is in the community and the village.

How do the people view growing old in African culture?

MS The people who are in the younger bracket are actually looking forward to being old because they can then become the recipient of the attention that one only has access to when one has become old. The old people view the rest of the village as their social

security. Everyone is pleased and honored to take care of our elders, to respond to all their needs because this is part of the culture. Taking care of the old actually assures us that we will be taken care of when we reach that age. In return to giving attention to the elder, the youth get the advice and direction that make it possible in their life to face challenges, to undergo hardship, to face the responsibility of family, of medicine and healing in a manner that is less confusing.

It sounds like there is a special relationship between the elder and the youth.

MS Oh yes. And that is also something that goes even beyond the youth. In the culture the grandparents and the grandchildren have a special relationship. That relationship makes them call each other brothers and sisters. Why? Because they say the grandparents are going to the place that the grandchildren just arrived from. As a result, they have something to communicate to the old. So it is the responsibility of the old to maintain the memory of the wondrous place that the grandchildren left to come into this world. In return the grandchildren, the young ones, will court the old in order to get as much advice as possible for their direction in life.

How might this translate for western culture?

MS One of the first things would be to come up with ways of gathering old people who are feeling ostracized in society because of their age, and give them a sufficient amount of attention, to give them a real sense of value, worth and importance. Somehow the culture needs to want the wisdom embedded in the old in order for old people to become elders. I believe when the old are not looked at with interest, the old cannot be elders. So we are talking about designing a situation, creating a space—whatever can highlight old people sufficiently—to make them transform into elders. How can that be done? It has to start with convincing them that they still have a place and a role in our culture, and it is that role that we want to empower them to fulfill. And in doing that, all of a sudden a new vitality is going to come into their mind, allowing them to feel like they are barely retired. This is something that I see over and over in ritual. One yearly ritual that I perform between a young one and the old one is to give the old one a sense of viability. When the young one gives praise to the ancestors, gives praise to our old, it forms a bond between the old and the young for the benefit of all those who are in the middle. I write about this in my book, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*.

How does it affect you personally to spend time in Western culture?

MS I really appreciate that question. When I go home or return from home, what I have is the realization that every day while in my village I see myself surrounded by elders. They come to me not because I have something to give to them but because my presence is the assurance that everyone else begins to value them. In the face of the big changes that are going on with youth, with so many from the village going to the city, my return to the village is an occasion for the elders to stand tall. The young begin to appreciate them because that's what I do—appreciate them.

Possibilities for Eldering

By Judith Blackburn

It has been said that ours is a youth culture. We are daily bombarded with images of young and slender bodies. Millions, perhaps billions, of dollars are spent each year on diet supplements, creams, hair dyes, and plastic surgery to prolong the look of youth. The flip side of this denial of natural cycles is that the elderly themselves come to believe they are ugly and obsolete. They internalize the culture's low estimation of their value.

The process of devaluing senior citizens is exacerbated by the fast pace of today's technological and social changes. For example, if the elderly don't use the internet or have cell phones, that makes them seem irrelevant. On the other hand, people are living longer today. If they have worked hard and been lucky in their choice of family to be born into, career choice, and health, they may be retired with an adequate income. They also may have enough years to make a real difference in the life of their communities—if they are inclined in that direction.

The only meaningful role readily allotted to the elderly is the role of grandparents. With today's rate of broken homes grandparents represent the stability that children need—even if their grandparents, too, are divorced. Grandparents of either gender can be expected to tell their grandchildren stories of the family heritage and to do such activities with them as their parents do not have time for.

If the grandparent role could be expanded so that it is adopted by seniors without offspring and beyond the confines of biological families, we might have the kernel of a new role for elders in contemporary society. When young children can be seen as the grandchildren of all, then we have the basis for the role elders need to play as guardians of the next generation, both in a physical, face-to-face kind of way and in more abstract and indirect ways as well. With their story-telling the elders could share their important life experiences, taking care of what is needed for future generations, taking time for deep relationships, and having fun, too.

Several developments have paved the way for a new appreciation of elders. The first is the advances in medicine that make comfortable old age a possibility. Another is new studies in medicine that show that adults are not done developing just because they age. Jung posited that people develop the shadow side of their personalities during the second half of their lives. If they have been extroverted they look inward, and vice versa. Gail Sheehy discovered that women often develop their professional selves after the children are raised, while men will often develop an interest in relationships once their responsibilities as breadwinners have subsided. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross established set stages in a dying person's acceptance of his or her mortality. All of these studies release elders from the long-held view that they were finished growing.

Because more women are working than ever before, fewer women are available in the pool of volunteers a community can draw on. Nonprofit organizations have a hard time filling their ranks. The public schools are badly in need of mentors and tutors. Young

people who have not finished high school are in desperate need of skills and a financial plan. And, of course, the environmental organizations, like all nonprofits, are much in need of help. There is no lack of opportunities for volunteers.

The elderly whose imaginations we need to pick at this time in our history are those who are conscious of the needs of the culture and who also have the skills to do something about them. These elders need to find each other. They may need the kind of consciousness-raising that women experienced during the early stages of the women's movement. As they share their individual stories, they can see similar patterns in the stories of others. They begin to see that they have been victimized by the way the culture sees them. This realization will help them to change their own notions about themselves. Then they may be ready to take action to address what is oppressive to them.

Think of Maggie Kuhn who started the Gray Panther movement in her old age, lived in a household with others looking for an alternative to loneliness, and spoke out on the many opportunities open to older people.

Wherever they find themselves, older people can help sustain the culture by contributing to the building of community. People of all ages need each other. Neighbors need to know their neighbors. Small things, such as reaching out by phone, having people over for a cup of coffee, stopping for a conversation with a storekeeper, help keep relationships alive and communities healthy.

For those middle aged and older people who are interested in their spiritual development, there are the possibilities of prayer circles, study groups, self-development seminars, and counseling. The internet, too, opens many opportunities for elders willing to learn how to use it. I know a ninety-year-old who spends several hours a day sending e-mails and faxes to government officials on behalf of this or that concern. She can't go to demonstrations any more but she is making her contribution the best way she can.

A new development is the creation of Earth Elder groups. These are older people committed to maintaining their relationship with the community of all beings, improving the ecological conditions around them, and spreading the word so that others will be aware of what needs to be done.

Since being happily old in contemporary culture is already to be outside the mainstream, why not go a step further and oppose the mainstream when the culture is doing harm. I think of Holly Near's song, "A Thousand Grandmothers," in which she suggests gray-haired women show up en masse in war-torn areas, or of Maurice McCrackin's witness against militarism to the point that he was willing to be arrested for civil disobedience as an old man. With no boss to please or no professional reputation to hold onto, elders can do all kinds of outrageous things in the name of social justice.

Elders can take results from the steadiness and centeredness that comes from a long life and many experiences. The presence of seniors can be invaluable in mixed-age groups. People in crisis will consult those who are open and accepting. The traits of openness and acceptance, therefore, are something for people of all ages to develop so that as they age they will have those resources available.

And finally, there is prayer and meditation. An elder's participation in the affairs of the world is never more vital than when she or he is radiating positive energy. I believe in due course even science will acknowledge that awakened consciousness influences what happens in the world. In the end there is only kindness, and the one thing the new elders, even the chronically ill, can do is to send out love.

*--Judith Blackburn is a retired English professor
from Northern Kentucky University.*

The Elderly: Our Creative Role In The Human Community

By Thomas Berry

As we twirl our way on our vast journey through space aboard the planet Earth everyone is needed. An idle traveler is not permitted. The captain without the cook cannot long guide the ship. So with professor and craftsman, farmer and city dweller, governor and sanitation worker. So, too, with the elderly and the youthful. As Rachel Carson says, every child needs an older person in her discovery of the natural world. So too every older person needs a child to awaken the primordial experience of the world around us. Everyone is joined in the single human venture. What is done by each is different. That is why everyone is needed. Activities that differ most from each other are most needed by each other.

In this context I present the following observations on the creative role of ourselves as the elderly in our times. Our contribution is of unique importance. What makes these reflections especially significant is the extraordinary sequence of transformations in the entire earth process that has taken place in the recent past and which is presently entering onto a new and dangerous if also an entrancing phase of development.

The real order of magnitude in the changes we face cannot, however, be understood simply by consideration of human security. Even beyond the human is the security of the planet itself and of all living beings on the planet. The changes wrought in the past century are not simply changes in cultural adaptation, in economic institutions, or in political regime. Nor are these changes simply in religious or moral orientation. The changes in the past hundred years of science, technology and industry are changes of a geological and biological magnitude. The planet itself in its physical being as well as in its biological functioning has been extensively altered by human activities. While many benefits for humans have been derived, these benefits themselves have become questionable when we consider what they have cost in terms of the deterioration of the planet and the uncertain future of all life upon the planet.

If the high benefits of this period, to humans, have been experienced by relatively few persons, life has been profoundly affected for every living being on earth. A long listing would be required to identify those living forms that have benefited most and those that have suffered most. What can be said is that the cost has been enormous. Many living species have disappeared forever. Tens of thousands of species could disappear before the end of the century. Since the lives of all the living from the one-celled bacterium to the human community are woven in a single fabric we cannot but feel the loss and ourselves experience the deteriorating effects of an industrial establishment that is bringing about such consequences.

The ambivalence of the industrial age becomes increasingly manifest. A significant price must be paid for every advantage gained, a price that is seldom adverted to by the defenders of "progress" and mechanization as the ultimate norms of human value. The grime that has settled over our cities is invisible to those entranced with the power of the

new technologies. The future itself is uncertain in the blessings it promises and the demands it makes.

But, however the ambivalence of the industrial age is viewed by those of differing economic and social status, the present elderly of the world carry within their being the blessings and the burdens of the twentieth century. Our lives coincide with the century. Our earliest memories go back to the beginning of the century when the automobile was just appearing on the dusty roads of the world, when rural villages were being electrified, when the first planes rose into the sky, when the entertainment industry took on its present forms in radio and later in television, when farms reached a new level of mechanization and the vast machines for planting and harvesting and processing began to move over the plains of Kansas and Nebraska.

This was also the period when the great modern corporations were taking control of the economic life of the world and assuming charge of earth's resources. Scientific research centers were being set up in the universities and industrial establishments, centers that eventually would make nuclear power available. Above all, perhaps, we, the present elderly of much of the world have lived in the petroleum age, the age not only of oil heating and gasoline motors, but the age of plastics and artificial fibers, of pharmaceuticals and fertilizers, all made of petroleum; an age, however, that already begins to see its own decline and even its termination.

Much else could be written in describing this twentieth century as it verges toward its conclusion, as we who lived through this period pass on into the last two or three decades of our lives. Socially the most significant development for the elderly has been the urbanization of the human community. The great cities of the century were attracting their huge populations in Shanghai and Mexico City as well as in Cairo, Calcutta, Tokyo and Rio de Janeiro, New York, London and Leningrad. While tribal and village life have continued, the centers of vital transformation in all parts of the planet shifted toward the urban centers. Whereas in the early 19th century less than five percent of the world was living in these large population centers, a change of enormous significance is determining the quality of life that we are living.

Without judging its human benefits or its human cost, its earth benefits or its earth cost, the century just passed has been an exciting century, a century that has given both the context and the content of life for us older folk. We have participated in its achievements and in its tragedies, in its wars and in its efforts to achieve peace, in the rise and fall of its economic prosperity. Mainly we have been caught in the swirl of forces beyond our control, forces that are only partially under any control. Once initiated, science and technology have produced a sequence of changes far different from those anticipated.

Most significant for the future however is the new sense of reality being manifested from within the scientific tradition. The sciences are discovering inner spontaneities, organic relations, intuitive processes, immediacies beyond mechanistic calculation, and synchronistic happenings beyond explanation by simplistic causal processes. The involvement of the subject in all knowing, indeed the personal nature of human knowledge begins to be appreciated.

The total effect of all these changes cannot easily be indicated. We can, however, say that the great imperative of the present is that the human community responds creatively to the opportunities that are presenting themselves for shaping a more satisfying and sustainable world for the future. We can also say that no one is exempt from participation in this most significant task. Both the infant and the elderly are integral to this activity along with all other components of the human community. Ultimately this new orientation is something that must be brought about by the entire earthly community, by all the living and non-living beings of the planet.

For the elderly of the western industrial countries to make our full contribution to the future there is need, first of all, that we reflect on the historical role that we have fulfilled throughout this century. We, the elderly of the present, whatever the benefits our society has derived from the industrial developments of the century or whatever the difficulties our society has sustained, we are the ones who have carried through the great human vision that survives and makes possible those further adjustments that can lessen the damage and enhance the benefits for future generations.

We have carried out a unique role in earth history. Never again will a generation be assigned the historic task of sustaining the human vision at such a moment of transition, for this transition of traditional civilizations through a scientific-technological age to an ecological age will never again take place. It will be extended and developed but the inauguration period that has taken place in this century will not be repeated. Life is an irreversible process. While this sequence has been most conspicuous in the larger industrial centers, equally conspicuous events are taking place in other countries where the shock of industrial expansion has been compounded by political and economic colonization. Here the difficulty of sustaining a world of human meaning has had its own special manifestations. As elsewhere the elderly in more pastoral or agrarian societies have sustained this difficult period even as they have been forced to make urgent decisions on behalf of their peoples and their traditions.

That so much of the human quality of life has been sustained and developed within this context must, then, be attributed mainly to the present generation of older persons. Amid all the new advantages of literacy and schooling and modern medicines along with city-building and all the institutions of a modern society, there has been an almost limitless amount of suffering, turmoil, and estrangement from a former way of life filled with human meaning and human values. But here, too, the need is to establish the new patterns of existence that can be described as a new way of life integral with the ever-renewing cycles of the natural world, but intimately associated with new and sensitive technologies coherent with the technologies of the earth itself.

In this way societies generally considered as less developed can begin to consider themselves as the *avant-garde* of the new age. They can see themselves as establishing functional patterns of earth-human existence that the industrial countries themselves will need as models and as inspiration for their own future adjustment if they are not to arrive at a total impasse in their exploitation of the planet.

In achieving this goal the elderly of the entire world have a most significant role to carry out. Our total experience, whatever its span over the past sequence of changes, enables

us to envisage with special clarity this new period in our own societies and in the larger human community. More than others we should have the capacity to identify the general direction of the entire arc of changes that we have lived through.

We are called to fulfill the social role as the “wise old men” and the “old wise women” of the present generation. We must fulfill our obligation to ourselves, to our society, to our historical destiny, and to the future. This traditional wisdom of the elderly is expressed, not fundamentally in moralization or in any philosophical or even religious principles but in our life stories. This is why we tend to reminisce so much and in our later years become story-tellers of the events that have occurred in the earlier years of our lives with all those particular experiences through which we have passed. While these experiences are individual, they are also the archetypal experiences that reveal the depths of history of the human community and even of the earth process. The stories provide the perspective needed, the historical sequence whereby the human heritage has been saved from being overwhelmed by the harshness of the twentieth century.

Here, then, is our unique creative role, a role so identified with our own being and the story of our own lives that it should find spontaneous and delightful fulfillment. While only a few of our life stories will be recorded in writing or find their way into print, there exists throughout the human community verbal traditions, group memories of past events. Only when such memories exist can a reliable sense of direction be identified by a community.

*--Thomas Berry is a historian of cultures and a writer
with special concern for the foundation of cultures
in their relations with the natural world.
He has authored several books, among them
The Dream of the Earth and The Great Work.
www.ecozoicstudies.com*

Session 2

Finding Our Place In The Universe Story

“People ask me how I know what I know. I tell them, I listened to the old people, the Elders. They pass on the stories that have been handed down through the generations. When I was a boy I always sat down with the Grandfathers and the Grandmothers, and I listened. They told wonderful stories. They never lied. Maybe those stories would seem fantastic to an outsider, but they were true. From the Elders I learned about the spirit-warriors who control the air and the Universe. They gave me the names for all the stars, the Morning Star and the Evening Star, the Big Dippers and all that. They brought the stars to life. Is there any power greater than that?”

Matthew King, Lakota Wisdomkeeper

“Originating power brought forth a universe. All the energy that would ever exist in the entire course of time erupted as a single quantum -- a singular gift-existence. If in the future, stars would blaze and lizards would blink in their light, these actions would be powered by the same numinous energy that flared forth at the dawn of time.”

Brian Swimme, Physicist

“Inhale deeply and you may note the integrity underneath; the grain of the Universe.”

Dr. Evelyn Tyner, Earth Elder

Introduction

Two great thinkers and visionaries, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, among many others, are interpreting what we know of our universe through scientific and spiritual revelation to uncover a story that extends beyond the human story, one that has the power to guide us into a new age where the human and Earth might coexist in what Thomas Berry describes as a “mutually enhancing relationship”. It is from the story of the Universe that we are reminded of the interrelatedness of all things and the compassion that is required to ensure the thriving and flourishing of all life.

In “The Big Picture”, Michael Dowd, an itinerant teacher and storyteller, relates the Universe Story and explores the implications it holds for the human community. The second article features an address by Thomas Berry, a leading spokesperson for Earth, in which he eloquently illustrates the nurturing role of Earth in our lives. Along the same lines, the final article is a reflection by Gail Worcelo on the sense of wonder and purpose that our natural surroundings evoke within the human soul.

Circle Question

How has the natural world impacted your life story?

Discussion Questions

1. Describe an experience in which you felt a sense of relief and release in nature, perhaps even a grounding sense of connectedness with the universe.
2. What characteristics of the human-Earth relationship do you suppose engender this response? List some ways the Earth nurtures you physically, psychologically, and spiritually.
3. How does the universe story define our role as humans? As elders, how does it define our responsibilities towards other species and future generations?
4. What are some Western cultural and/or societal norms that are intrinsically earth-centered that we often overlook or take for granted? An example might be our consistent joys and concerns over "the weather".
5. Since children learn naturally through story, what are some ways that we can teach ideas gained through scientific and spiritual studies by way of story?
6. How can we invite children to invent and explore their own story and its place in greater stories?

The Big Picture: The Larger Context for All Human Activities

By Michael Dowd

Each of us is a story within stories. My daughter's life story is part of both my story and her mother's story. The story of our family is likewise part of other stories larger than our own: the story of our town, our state, our nation, Western civilization, humanity, planet Earth, and the story of the Universe itself. Each of us is a story within stories within stories.

When we ask the question, "Why?", we ask about the meaning or context of something. We can understand personal meaning by using the metaphor that we are each a story within stories. The meaning of some thing or event is apparent in its larger context.

In every human society, the largest of all contexts is the story of how everything began, how things came to be as they are, and where everything is going. This story, a people's cosmology, as the "big picture," gives meaning to our existence in every area of life. It helps us understand the mysteries of life and death. It is the soil out of which all of our beliefs, customs, behavior, traditions and institutions grow. A people's cosmology crystallizes into a set of unquestioned assumptions and beliefs about life in that culture. Like sunglasses with colored lenses, our cosmology colors everything we see. It determines the way we perceive things, what we perceive, what we can and can't see as possible, and what we can't see at all. Its rules and boundaries are generally transparent. It is our reality.

Recent discoveries in biology, geology, chemistry, physics and astronomy indicate that the Universe is nothing at all like the Great Machine mechanistic science assumed it was for the past three hundred years. A growing number of scientists now suggest that the Universe is more like an evolving, maturing, organism — a living system — which has been developing for 15 billion years. It has become increasingly complex and diversified, beginning with hydrogen, then forming galaxies, stars and planets, and evolving more complex life forms over time. The Universe, in us, can now consciously reflect on itself, it's meaning, what it is, and how it developed. "The human person is the sum total of 15 billion years of unbroken evolution now thinking about itself," Teilhard de Chardin noted a half century ago.

Earth is not a planet with life on it; rather it is a living planet. The physical structure of the planet — its core, mantle, and mountain ranges — acts as the skeleton or frame of its existence. The soil that covers its grasslands and forests is like a mammoth digestive system. In it all things are broken down, absorbed, and recycled into new growth. The oceans, waterways, and rain function as a circulatory system that moves life-giving "blood," purifying and revitalizing the body. The bacteria, algae, plants and trees provide the planet's lungs, constantly regenerating the entire atmosphere. The animal kingdom provides the functions of a nervous system, a finely tuned and diversified series of organisms sensitized to environmental change. Each species is a unique expression of planetary consciousness, with its own unique gifts to the body. Humanity allows the planet to exercise self-conscious awareness, or reflexive thought. That is, the human enables Earth to reflect on itself and on the divine Mystery out of which it has come and

in which it exists. We are a means by which nature can appreciate its own beauty and feel its own splendor; or destroy itself. This shift, from seeing ourselves as separate beings placed on Earth ("the world was made for us") to seeing ourselves as a self-reflexive expression of Earth ("we were made for the world"), is a major shift in our understanding of who and what we are. It is a shift at the deepest possible level: our identity, or sense of self.

The human is an expression of Earth. We are totally dependent upon the health of the community of Life for our own health. Our own healing and destiny, as individuals or as a species, depends entirely upon our relationship to the land, air, water and life of Earth. What we do to the planet, we do to our self.

It is, of course, possible that the destiny of Life may not include a human expression much longer. This will certainly be so if the destiny of the human becomes the desolation of the Earth. But whether or not our species survives, Earth will continue to evolve, eventually healing the damage done by us. The Milky Way galaxy will continue to spiral, with countless new solar systems being born, living and dying. And the Universe will continue to expand and grow more complex for billions of years after our solar system is but a distant cosmic memory. We are part of an awesome and divine Universe. We are also only a very small part of it. We must keep this perspective in mind when discussing "human destiny." Humility may be the single most important attitude of the heart we will need if we are to continue into the future. Humility and survival go hand in hand. Pride goes before a fall.

We are now at what may be the most significant turning point in the Sacred Story of Life since the 185 million year Mesozoic era, the age of the dinosaurs, came crashing to a close some 65 million years ago. That was when the dinosaurs all died out. The last 65 million years have been called the Cenozoic era, the age of the mammals and the flowering plants. As a direct result of human activity over the past two hundred years, we are now bringing to an end this 65 million year age! It is important to see things from this larger perspective.

Today, species are being eliminated at a rate faster than perhaps any other time in history. Biologist Norman Myers, a specialist in the rain forests and vegetation of the world, says that we are bringing about an "extinction spasm" that is likely to produce "the greatest setback to life's abundance and diversity since the first flickerings of life almost four billion years ago." Thanks to our addictive industrial culture, we are altering the geological structure, the chemistry, and the biological systems of the planet on a scale that would normally have taken millions of years. Yet we are accomplishing this feat in a few short decades.

As the Cenozoic era collapses around us, the logical question becomes, "What's next?" Geologist Thomas Berry suggests two possibilities. The first possibility he calls the Technozoic era. In the Technozoic, humanity would continue to understand "progress" in terms of increasing mechanistic control over the forces of nature for its own superficial, short-term benefit. Through continued scientific innovation and technological cunning, we could create delimited artificial environments to "protect" us in isolation from our despoiled and dying world. The Technozoic would be an isolated hell of existence. Humanity would become ever more alienated from the rest of Life. In the long run, of

course, it could not even hope to last. Without spirit, matter decays. The Technozoic could never be sustainable.

Another possibility, perhaps the only viable option for humans, is what Berry calls the Ecozoic era. The primary aspect of the Ecozoic would be the deep somatic awareness of the natural world as our larger body, as our larger self. All species would be granted their habitat, their freedom, and their range of life expression. The Ecozoic would further be characterized by our harmonious alignment with, rather than domination over, the biological processes of the planet. This would require abandoning many of our destructive mechanistic technologies. The natural world itself would be taken as the primary referent for all that we do, and the primary model for all our technologies. In the Ecozoic, all of our activities, professions, programs, and institutions will be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore or foster a mutually enhancing human/Earth relationship. This is the way of human destiny!

When we see things from a larger perspective, it becomes clear that something more is needed to "save the Earth" than recycling our paper and glass, not using styrofoam, and driving our cars less. Specifically, two things are absolutely necessary if the human expression of Earth is to continue into the future.

As a species, we must make a profound shift in consciousness in the direction of deep ecology if we are to survive. We must grow from seeing ourselves as discrete, separate beings that walk around on Earth, to feeling and knowing ourselves as an expression of Earth. Our thinking and behavior must align with, and flow out of, the reality of our situation: the planet is our larger body, our larger self. We are dependent upon the community of life, air, water and soil in every conceivable way. Unless we make this shift in consciousness, we will continue to be a "cancer," a parasite, consuming its own host environment. We will survive only with the spiritual guidance and awareness of the body of Life as a whole with its billions of years of evolutionary wisdom.

The second thing necessary for the human expression of Earth to survive is for human beings to live in ecologically sustainable communities. We must live our lives in deep communion with each other and with our bioregion: sharing possessions and dwelling space, growing food together in a way that enhances our lives and the soil; laughing, working, playing and celebrating together; and, in short, living in love with each other and with all of Life. We must create ecological communities where we can be most truly ourselves, where we can experience loving physical touch, where we can share our finitude and brokenness and feel loved unconditionally, and where we are both supported and challenged to be all that we can be, especially for future generations.

None of us asked to be alive at this moment in Earth's history. We did not choose to be born at this juncture in the Story. We were chosen. Each of us has been chosen by Life to be alive and to participate in the most significant geological and biological transformation in 65 million years. This is a fact! Can you feel the sense of personal destiny, or a sense of mission or purpose, that such an awareness awakens within you? (If you want to, take a few moments and allow yourself to feel your connectedness to the larger body of Life, and your place in the Sacred Story of Life.) Thomas Berry calls this awareness "the grace of the present moment."

The degree that we live the values of the Ecozoic era now will be the degree to which we participate in its inauguration. Love and Truth must be our guiding realities. As we love Life with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, we will quite naturally love our human and non-human neighbor, and our planet, as our self. That is the true state of affairs. Living the values of the Ecozoic requires being lovingly truthful and gently honest with ourselves and with each other. It means being real and open with the Life that is our Source, Body, and Destiny.

We are all stories within stories within stories, as we discussed at the start. The Great Sacred Story of Life is the biggest story. This story, the Universe Story, provides the context for, adds meaning to, and affects the destiny of every other story in existence. That is why everything in human affairs must now be seen in light of this "big picture" in order to have any lasting meaning for present and future generations.

--Reverend Michael Dowd is a teacher and storyteller, author of EarthSpirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity. He has managed municipally funded Sustainable Lifestyle Campaigns on both coasts.

www.thegreatstory.org

Evening Thoughts

By Thomas Berry

The following closing address was given on August 30, 2000, at the Thomas Berry Award and Lecture Sponsored by the Center for Respect of Life and Environment and the Forum on Religion and Ecology at the UN Millennium World Peace Summit for Religious and Spiritual Leaders, Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York City.

During these past two days much has been accomplished to advance the cause of peace by our discussions and simply by our being with each other. We learn to trust and admire each other and to share with each other the traditions we represent.

This evening I suggest that we continue this presence to each other by looking beyond ourselves to the larger universe we live in. If it were convenient I would suggest that we go outside this building, that we go beyond all the light and noise of the city and look up at the sky overarching the Earth. At this time in the evening we would see the stars begin to appear as the sun disappears over the horizon. The light of day gives way to the darkness of night. A stillness, a healing quiet, comes over the landscape.

It's a moment when some other world makes itself known, some numinous presence beyond human understanding. We experience the wonder of things as the vast realms of space overwhelm the limitations of our human minds. This moment, as the sky turns golden and the clouds reflect the blazing colors of evening, we participate for a moment in the forgiveness, the peace, the intimacy of all things with each other.

Parents hold their children more closely and tell stories to the children as they go off into dreamland, wonderful stories of times gone by, stories of the animals, of the good fairies, adventure stories of heroic wanderings through the wilderness, stories of dragons threatening to devour the people and of courageous persons who saved our world in perilous times.

These final thoughts of the day are continued in the minds of children as even in their sleep they begin to dream of their own future, dreams of the noble deeds that would give meaning to their lives. Whether awake or asleep, the world of wonder fills their minds, the world of beauty fills their imagination, the world of intimacy fills their emotions.

When we look back over our own lives we realize that whatever of significance we have achieved in our own personal lives and in the larger domain of the cultural context of our lives has been the fulfillment of thoughts and dreams that we had early in our lives, dreams that sustained us when we encountered difficulties through the years.

Beyond the dreams of our personal future, there are the shared dreams that give shape and form to each of our cultural traditions. Because this other world cannot be explained by any technical or scientific language, we present this other world by analogy and myth and story. Even beyond childhood this is the world of the human mind.

So tonight, as we look up at the evening sky with the stars emerging faintly against the fading background of the sunset, we think of the mythic foundations of our future. We need to engage in a shared dream experience.

The experiences that we have spoken of as we look up at the starry sky at night and in the morning see the landscape revealed as the sun dawns over the Earth — these reveal a physical world but also a more profound world that cannot be bought with money, cannot be manufactured with technology, cannot be listed on the stock market, cannot be made in the chemical laboratory, cannot be reproduced with all our genetic engineering, cannot be sent by email. These experiences require only that we follow the deepest feelings of the human soul.

What we look for is no longer the Pax Romana, the peace of imperial Rome, nor is it simply the Pax Humana, the peace among humans, but the Pax Gaia, the peace of Earth and every being on the Earth. This is the original and the final peace, the peace granted by whatever power it is that brings our world into being. Within the universe the planet Earth with all its wonder is the place for the meeting of the divine and the human.

As humans we are born of the Earth, nourished by the Earth, healed by the Earth. The natural world tells us: I will feed you, I will clothe you, I will shelter you, I will heal you. Only do not so devour me or use me that you destroy my capacity to mediate the divine and the human. For I offer you a communion with the divine. I offer you gifts that you can exchange with each other. I offer you flowers whereby you may express your reverence for the divine and your love for each other.

In the vastness of the sea, in the snow-covered mountains, in the rivers flowing through the valleys, in the serenity of the landscape and in the foreboding of the great storms that sweep over the land, in all these experiences I offer you inspiration for your music, for your art, your dance.

All these benefits the Earth gives to us individually, in our communities and throughout the entire Earth. Yet we cannot be fully nourished in the depths of our being if we try to isolate ourselves individually or if we seek to deprive others of their share by increasing our own; for the food that we eat nourishes us in both our souls and our bodies. To eat alone is to be starved in some part of our being.

We need to reflect that our individual delight in the song of the birds or the sound of the crickets and cicadas in the evening is enhanced not diminished when we listen together in the evening with our families and our friends. We experience an easing of the tensions that develop between us, for the songs that we hear draw us into the intimacy of the same psychic space. So with music, Beethoven draws an unlimited number of persons into the same soul space.

Perhaps our greatest resource for peace is in an awareness that we enrich ourselves when we share our possessions with other. We discover peace when we learn to esteem those goods whereby we benefit ourselves in proportion as we give them to others. The very structure and functioning of the universe and of the planet Earth reveal an indescribable diversity bound in an all-embracing unity. The heavens themselves are curved over the Earth in an encompassing embrace.

Here I would recall the experience of Henry Thoreau, an American naturalist of the mid-19th century who lived a very simple life with few personal possessions. At one time he was attracted to purchase an especially beautiful bit of land with a pasture and a wooded area. He even made a deposit. But then he realized that it was not necessary to purchase the land because, he reasoned, he already possessed the land in its wonder and its beauty as he passed by each day. This intimacy with the land could not be taken away from him no matter who owned the land in its physical reality. So indeed that same bit of land could be owned in its wonder and beauty by an unlimited number of persons, even though in its physical reality it might be owned by a single person.

Such was the argument of Mencius, the Chinese writer who taught the emperor that he should open up the royal park for others, since it would be an even greater joy to have others present with him, as at a musical concert each person enjoys the music without diminishing but increasing our own joy as we share it with others. So too for those in the Bodhisattva tradition of India there were those such as Shanti Deva, in the fifth century of our Era, who took a vow to refuse beatitude itself until all living creatures were saved. For only when they participated in his joy could he be fully caught up in the delight of paradise.

It has taken these many centuries for us to meet with each other in the comprehensive manner that is now possible. While for the many long centuries we had fragments of information concerning each other, we can now come together, speak with each other, dine with each other. Above all we can tell our stories to each other.

Tonight we might recall the ancient law of hospitality, whereby the wanderer was welcomed. So it was with Ulysses in his long voyage home after the Trojan war. When exhausted and driven ashore on occasion and surrounded by a people that he had never met before, he was consistently rested, invited to dine with the people of the place, and then in the quiet moment afterward was invited to tell his story. So it has been I trust with each of us in these past few days. To some extent we have been able to tell our stories to each other. Now a new phase in all our stories has begun as we begin to shape the Great Story of all peoples as we move into the future.

As a final reflection I would suggest that we see these early years of the 21st century as the period when we discover the great community of the earth, a comprehensive community of all the living and nonliving components of the planet. We are just discovering that the human project is itself a component of the Earth project; that our intimacy with the Earth is our way to intimacy with each other. Such are the foundations of our journey into the future.

Discovering the Divine Within the Universe By

Gail Worcelo, CP

The bell rings at 5 a.m., an early morning call to prayer. It is the beginning of our monastic day here in Vermont. It is time for Morning Vigil. At this hour, all is in darkness except for the one candle lighting our prayer space. I take my place on the cushion and join the others gathered for our hour of contemplative prayer.

This time of Vigils is the night watch hour, a time to touch the mysterious presence of God at the heart of the Universe. We discover, as the Gospel of John tells us, "the Light shines in the darkness."

This morning I experience this literally. There is a large skylight above my head and in this predawn darkness I can see the shining stars of the Milky Way Galaxy. The words of the psalmist come to mind, "Praise God, sun and moon; praise God, shining stars!"

I reflect on the fact that I am made of that same star stuff. The luminous fire that burns in those stars has burned through 15 billion years of Universe unfolding and burns in me this morning. It burns in my hunger for the Holy. It burns in every leaf, animal, stone and bird. It is the Fire within the fire of all things.

This is the same fire that ignited the burning bush that jolted Moses and made him take off his shoes and exclaim, "This place is Holy Ground." I try to absorb these words from the Old Testament: "This place is Holy Ground."

I want to situate myself within the fullness of this understanding and push my contemplation beyond old limiting notions which subscribe God to some abstract heaven. The book of Wisdom declares: "The Spirit of God fills the whole world!" I want to know this world filled with the Spirit of God and situate myself in its larger context.

Towards the end of his life Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "Less and less do I see any difference between research and adoration." For Teilhard as for other poets and mystics, prayer was a meditation on the Universe, informed by knowledge open to Mystery.

I reflect upon how technology has given us the capacity to extend our senses, to be able to see and hear what has always been there but what we were unable to know with unaided senses. We have suddenly been given a glimpse of the footprints of God embedded in the cosmos as we come to understand how the Universe works.

We come out of 15 billion years of unfolding, we are vital dust, a further development of the original fireball. In this morning prayer I try to locate myself in our galactic neighborhood. The galaxy in which I pray is 100,000 light years wide. A single light year is equal to six trillion miles. Our nearest neighbor, the Andromeda Galaxy, is 2.3 million light years away.

This takes some time to absorb. We are located in vastness, in the vast heart of God. Although I sit still and firm during this time of meditation, I reflect upon the fact that the

Earth is revolving at 900 miles an hour. It is orbiting the sun at 19 miles/second. We are moving as a solar system at 40,000 miles/hour around the center of our galaxy, and our galaxy is expanding at 12 million miles/minute.

This is the context in which I find myself as I sit down to pray. Things are anything but still. I imagine God dancing with wild abandon through the farthest reaches of the cosmos. In today's Gospel of John, the words "Abide in me as I abide in you" take on new meaning. The place where the Divine abides is much vaster than we can imagine. Abide in me means "abide in my vastness, abide in my Universe."

There is a realization taking place within me, as my eyes reach out through the skylight, that the deeper I go in prayer the farther out I go in the cosmos. Inner and outer are one. This is what the mystics of our Christian tradition understood as they went deeper into the inner experience of God. They experienced a harmonization of their lives with the greater rhythms of existence. They knew by faith what science knows empirically, that the Universe is charged with the presence and reality of the Divine.

These mystics allowed the fire of contemplation to transform them into a union of love with all of creation. They understood that Divine Radiance floods the Universe making all things holy.

I know this too in a deep intuitive way. I think we all do. The night sky begins to give way to the dawn as the Milky Way becomes a faint memory this morning. Before the bell rings to call this hour of prayer to a close I remember the words of Annie Dillard, "The world has two kinds of nuns, there are those inside and those outside of convents. Whichever kind she is, the nun's vocation is contemplation of the real."

The bell rings as the first glimmer of dawn appears in the morning sky. The hour of prayer is over. I blow out the prayer candle, extinguishing the flame. Yet I know full well that the Fire within the fire of all things still burns in every creature, galaxy and star and in every person who hungers for the Holy.

This article first appeared in EarthLight Magazine, Issue #39, Fall 2000, www.earthlight.org"

--Gail Worcelo is a member of the Community of Passionist Nuns who are starting an Ecozoic Monastery in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Along with Bernadette Bostwick, and with the help of theologian Thomas Berry, Gail hopes to found the first Catholic community of nuns in the world dedicated to the healing of the Earth.

SESSION 2: EVALUATION QUESTIONS

I: Logistics: Please rate the following, adding any comments/suggestions in the margins.

Introductory Quotes:

(Poor)

1

2

3

4

(Excellent)

5

Comments

Introduction:

1

2

3

4

5

Circle Question:

1

2

3

4

5

Discussion Questions:

1

2

3

4

5

II: Articles: Were the articles helpful? Circle "Y" article was effective in conveying concepts, thought provoking and well-written. Circle "N" if you think it should not be used and please use the margin to explain and/or provide suggestions.

"The Big Picture"

Y

N

Comments

"Evening Thoughts"

Y

N

"Discovering the Divine"

Y

N

III. Session As a Whole

Finding Our Place In The Universe Story

1

2

3

4

5

Suggestions:

Does the Title work?

Y

N

Suggestions

Session 3

The Great Work

“The more we learn about the Epic of Evolution, the more we are motivated to repay the generosity of the past by seeding hope for the future.”

Loyal Rue

“It is easy for anyone to become momentarily fascinated or titillated with the new story of the universe, but it is another thing altogether to absorb this over time into the center of one’s being. Facts by themselves are not enough; what is needed is embodiment.”

Brian Swimme

Introduction

The Great Work, a phrase given life by cultural historian Thomas Berry, indicates an epic task for humans at this phase of history. We have, to a great extent, lost touch with the understanding that we are but a unique part of a universe of connected, evolving beings. The lack of such awareness has led to grave exploitation and destruction of other forms of planetary life, thus creating a genuine crisis threatening the very life of the planet. Everyone, perhaps especially elders, is needed to deepen awareness of the situation, to discover ways of restoring our planet. There is indeed a “great work” to be done, work that calls all of us to do our part now. Every age before us had its work to accomplish; it is our turn to put in motion the transition into a new age of mutuality.

An article by Joyce Quinlan speaks to the blessing and the difficulties elders have experienced in their lives through the twentieth century and now into the new millennium. What are our responsibilities?

An excerpt from the book “Sacred Eyes” by L. Robert Keck encourages the development and use of a new vision, a sacred vision of the Earth all of her inhabitants.

The David Suzuki article reflects on the similarities between his personal life from teen to adult as an image for the society that has furthered the ecological crisis we now face.

An excerpt from an interview with Michael Meade refers to a story, “The Fire On The Mountain,” as a way for understanding the needed connection between elders and youth. He states that such “a connection is crucial for the work that must be achieved now.”

Circle Question

What is your reaction to the assumptions in this section: We have to make a transition from the beliefs and behaviors of the 19th and 20th centuries into a new culture based on renewed connection to Earth?

Discussion Questions

1. Several pieces in this chapter speak of our current culture as driven by a teenage mentality. What evidence do you see for this opinion?
2. Discuss whether or not your own experience leads you to believe that our deep predicament in the destruction of our Planet stems from the collapse and obliteration of a coterie of senior people.”
3. Are you aware of any time when elder people were an important factor in setting good direction for social issues?
4. What are some ways that our present society can provide “a group of adults to take our adolescent culture firmly in grasp”? Or is this even a good idea?
5. What about the suggestion that the American psyche holds deeply embedded qualities from our immigrant ancestors, qualities that can create obstacles to carrying out the great work?
6. Do you have any ideas about how to achieve a vital connection between youth and elders?

Caring for the Universe

By Dr. Joyce Quinlan

Those of us who are now the older generation have been blessed to be both the participants and beneficiaries of profoundly significant cultural movements. Let's look at them. Very early, before most of us, there was the successful struggle for women's suffrage rights, the world-wide battle against suppression of freedoms, the anti-war movement following Vietnam, the powerful women's movement, the blossoming of the human potential movement, the ecological movement, the phenomenon of the unrelenting search for spirituality. And now, in the last fifty years, the electronic communication explosion, and what is fast becoming a movement, the search for a new template of aging.

Here we are, today's elders, in the midst of enormous energy generated by all this pushing back of boundaries, penetrating into new ground. Moreover, we elders know all too well the dark side of our inheritance: the destruction of natural life, the addiction to consumerism, the greed for acquiring wealth, the erosion of moral principles, the narrowness of individualism and nationalism.

"To whom much is given, much is required." We can't get off that hook. It is up to us to assume our rightful place on the journey into the future. Many people have come forward with travel guidelines, among them Thomas Berry, Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi, Helen Luke, Drew Leder, Ram Dass. From them we learn we can step back from lead position to that of path-finder, motivator, maybe even triage partner, mediator and meditator. As we nourish our inner life, becoming more and more grounded, we stay connected, open, allowing the unfolding of events to call us into our unique path of action. It might be very useful, as others have suggested, to think of ourselves as a great Elder Corps (like the Peace Corps). Consider all the areas in need of experienced consultation, demonstration and aid of all kinds: In ecological projects, participation in land preservation, recycling, reverent use of materials, clean up activities, promotion of energy saving devices, clean air programs, animal rights, landscaping, gardening. In education and health care, academic as well as informal settings, publicity, support groups, mentoring. In social justice and political projects, all types of talents, skills and resources are desperately needed. In local neighborhoods, a huge need for creative, imaginative ways for mutual help, bonds of community.

The opportunities to create and embody a new model of aging await us; let us be present.

Watering the Seeds of the Future

[excerpt from an interview with Michael Meade by Lauren de Boer.
Earthlight, Winter 2002]

Lauren: Fire is an image you've used in many stories. One is an image of the elder at some distance tending the fire for a youth. Another image which seems to correlate with that is tending the fire of the inner "daimon" or genius. This seems an image of the elder who has the capacity to heal.

Michael: In the story, "The Fire On the Mountain," the young person is on the peak of the mountain, totally exposed to wind and cold, in order to find liberation or freedom. At some point, that's the condition and position of every young person. The elder is distant, on a flat rock not as high as the peak of youth, but not as low as the flatland of daily life. That tells you about the position of the elder. That a person needs to learn to build a fire in between. In sight of the peak, yet at a level where they can sustain a flame.

Youth are on fire. That's the big problem of culture. Culture has a huge problem with every generation: what do you do with them? Now, we give them electronic games so they burn off their energy. What are they doing in those games? Moving as fast as possible, hand/eye coordination, killing things, exploding things. It has to be bright and fast. That's because youth themselves are on fire.

In the story the elder keeps the fire and youth sees it. Both are burning, fire to fire, there is a connection. As the story progresses, it's no longer the heat of the fire the youth experiences, but the illumination caused by it. What I take from the story is that a person becomes an elder in their life when and where they get more of the illumination and not so much of the heat.

If you take ecology as a movement, it needs the heat of youth and the more steady illumination of elders. Anything that's going to change a culture requires this connection between youth and elders. They're the two pivotal elements in any culture. Children are beautiful, but need protection and support. They can't change a culture, but they can be changed by a culture, for better or worse. Mature people, when they're doing their mature thing, are so busy paying the mortgage and sustaining the status quo, or trying to move slightly up or down within the status quo, that they rarely change the culture essentially.

The two groups that never quite fit in, however, are the youth and the elders. Both are strangers on the threshold of a culture. Between the two of them, there is a flame, which is both heat and illumination. In that twin flame culture reinvents itself. When the old folks have something genuinely illuminating to say to youth, the future changes. When youth can aim their reckless heat in a meaningful direction, the culture changes.

We saw some of it in the 1960's. Not enough. Why? We had plenty of the fire, but not the illumination. The group that grew up in the 60s now becomes the elders, like it or not. If those of us who qualify, just by being born at a certain time, can make some illumination of our own struggles and what we see around us, meaningful change can

occur. If it occurs, it will affect nature and culture, which I think are intertwined, not separate as Western theory tries to have it.

Ecology as a movement needs the heat of youth and the more steady illumination of elders. Anything that's going to change a culture requires this connection between youth and elders.

Michael Meade is the founder and director of the Mosaic Multicultural Foundation. He has made a study of myth, ancestral legend, anthropology, religion & story telling for over 35 years. He has authored several books & is a popular lecturer.

www.mosaicvoices.org

www.menweb.org

An Invitation To View The Entire Human Journey And Your Own Life, With Sacred Eyes

- Excerpts from the Introduction to “Sacred Eyes” by L. Robert Keck, PhD.

We are living in an extraordinary time, a crucial juncture in history. It is an incredibly exciting and dangerous, and opportune time, the magnitude of which is unparalleled in the long human journey.

To be able to see what is important in a time like this, to be able to perceive the difference between the superficial and the substantive, and to be able to envision what is being born and what is dying in the womb/tomb of transformation, we must be able to look deeply into the soul-level territory.

If we look deeply into humanity’s soul we can see a new hope emerging, in spite of all the despair that so characterizes the surface. If we look deeply into our soul we can see an emerging spiritual meaning and purpose, in spite of what dominates mass culture – institutions and dogmas that are all but bankrupt for the faithful, and a spiritual malaise permeating the lives of those who have left organized religion. If we look deeply into the soul of our times we can see an epoch-sized transformation of the human psyche – a growth spurt in spiritual maturity – in spite of the chaos of clashing revolutions and counter-revolutions filling the daily newspapers. It is through the cultivation of sacred eyes that we can accomplish this depth of vision.

Everything starts with how we view the world. The cynical eyes see the evidence, and there is plenty of evidence, of how far we fall short of perfection. Cynical vision, however, is a cop-out. After all, in the chaos that inevitably accompanies a transformational time we can pick out ample illustrations to justify cynicism. But cynical eyes just don’t see the larger picture – they provide a truncated vision, bereft of hope.

In like manner pessimistic eyes see the evidence to support despair about the future. Indeed, the larger picture includes negative evidence, but it also includes much more. Pessimistic vision sees only a partial picture and offers an unrealistic and distorted view of the future.

It is with sacred eyes that we can see the larger, more realistic picture. Sacred eyes can penetrate down through the opaqueness of the materialism and the reductionism that has so characterized our recent look at scientific evidence and the historical record to perceive human evolution’s meaning and purpose. Sacred eyes can penetrate the chaos of our current time in history to see the “pattern that connects” all the seemingly disparate revolutions. Sacred eyes can penetrate the superficiality of our day-to-day activities, and gain insight into our personal integrity with the soul of humanity and the time of our lives. And sacred eyes can envision the emerging values of the 21st century, already developing in the cauldron of humanity’s soul, but just now bubbling to the visible surface.

As Teilhard de Chardin reminds us in the opening quote, everything is sacred if we but look into its soul – the entire universal context, the long evolutionary journey of humanity. With sacred eyes we can see the divinity, and the meaning and the purpose in this collective journey, as well as our own reason for being. With sacred eyes we can see the larger context without overlooking the details of the moment. With sacred eyes we can see the reasons for tough optimism and pragmatic hope within the chaos of our times.

Sacred eyes look to the big questions, and certainly our times call for living and loving the big questions. We simply can't afford to, any longer, have our vision constricted to the small questions – the questions limited to me or mine, this or that small group, narrow dogmas or doctrines of this or that religion, or even questions having to do only with the human element on this profoundly ecologically interrelated planet. It is a time wherein we have become aware of a world so comprehensive and so interrelated that the questions that concern us must be no less than global in scope and soul-level in depth and profundity – the really *big* questions.

The big questions that sacred eyes explore, having to do with the breadth and depth of life, are:

- 1) Is there meaning and purpose to the large and long journey of human evolution? Are we going somewhere, or are we just aimlessly wandering throughout history? Has evolution been strictly by chance and a “survival of the fittest”, or can we perceive a meaningful and purposeful progression?
- 2) Is there something special about this particular time in history? Experts in virtually every field, along with historians and cultural analysts, are saying that there is. If so, what is it that makes this time in history so unique?
- 3) If this is such a transformational time in history what is it that is being transformed? What is it that is dying and what it is that is being born? How do we distinguish between that which is on the way out and that which is on the way in? What is transient and what is enduring?
- 4) How do we individually fit into this time in history? Are our personal stories on the same page as humanity's story?

We are now at the crucial juncture of adding spiritual maturity to the remarkable evolutionary journey that has brought us to our current stage of physical & mental development.

Our mental development, particularly over the past three hundred years, has been considerable. The knowledge we have gained about the universe, and ourselves, is quite remarkable and the technology we have developed is awesome. Nevertheless, there is now increasing evidence that our adolescent value system has run its course. It is now counter-productive and increasingly dangerous.

If we don't grow up - soon – we may abort the human evolutionary journey. Our adolescent immaturity, with physical and mental

development out of balance with spiritual development, has us on the brink of a “teenage suicide”. The short view, and the self-centered view, of adolescent vision has brought us dangerously close to killing ourselves – either suddenly in a nuclear holocaust, or slowly by maiming our life-support system. For human evolution to continue into health and wholeness, physical and mental development must now be matched with spiritual maturity.

The process for such growth and maturation is organic. It is not that we have to create that process with our minds and through strength of will make ourselves evolve. Evolution – or, in this particular metaphor, maturation – is emerging naturally from the soul of humanity. We only have to welcome that energy, cooperate with it, and do what comes naturally – grow up.

Yes, we have the capacity to self-destruct, to be driven by the smallest and most immature part of ourselves. But we also have the capacity to welcome the evolutionary energy emerging from our soul, to respond to the highest and best in us, and to co-create the new “possible human,” as Jean Houston put it. We can choose one hell of an exit, or we can choose one heaven of an ascent. The faith inherent in this book is that Spirit is offering the latter, and we have the extraordinary privilege to be living at a time in which we can participate in such an epoch-sized transformation.

*by L.Robert Keck, PhD. from Sacred
Eyes, 1992 Synergy Associates*

We're Stuck in our Teenage Years

By David Suzuki

This month I reach my 67th birthday. Yikes. I was wondering where the first three months of 2003 went, but I should be asking what happened to my life! I vividly remember those turbulent months after I reached puberty and lost about half of my IQ. As an individual, I've grown wiser since then, but as a species we seem stuck in our teenage years.

When I was an adolescent, weeks seemed an eternity and life stretched on without end. I felt invincible and thoughts of retirement or a well-rounded life were the furthest things from my mind. As a young man, I discovered a passion for science and threw myself into research as if there was no tomorrow. As a university professor, genetics was my life - it consumed me and provided my highs and lows. Author Theodore Roszak once described this ability of scientists to be carried away with an idea as a double-edged quality, enchanting for the enthusiasm but frightening for its narrow focus.

Looking back over my life, I realize that it was the willingness to throw everything into the moment that attracted students to the lab. They loved the communal aspect of total engagement. We would work till the early morning hours, excitedly arguing over ideas and results, generating reams of data and dreaming up evermore elaborate experiments.

Today I don't torment myself with recriminations for what I did. But there were costs - a broken marriage; relationships with lovers, students and children that suffered from inattention; a narrow life. And I recognize that many of my shortcomings - that inward focus on my own passions, the excitement of the moment, the working as if there is no tomorrow - are also features of society as a whole that have created the current ecological crisis.

Humanity is a very young species. Modern humans only appeared about 150,000 years ago, and civilization less than 10,000 years ago. Most of the modern conveniences we take for granted were invented less than a century ago and many of them just a few decades ago! We are still feeling the rush of youth, and it shows.

The immigrants who created the United States began with a vast territory filled with natural resources. The qualities of those settlers - rugged individualism, search for new frontiers to conquer and pride of nation - are deeply embedded in the American psyche. The enormous economic success of the U.S. has served as a model for emulation around the world. Colloquial expressions reveal the attitudes that have come to dominate that society: "full speed ahead," "sink or swim," "the sky's the limit," "there's plenty more where that came from," or "that's the price of progress."

My children gave me the greatest gift of my life - grandchildren. When they were born, life suddenly didn't stretch ahead of me forever. I had reached a later stage of life, and I recognize it as finite and short. Death no longer haunts me, but what does is the legacy left for my grandchildren and their grandchildren. And I'm worried that we aren't going to leave them much to work with.

They say that with age comes wisdom. For individuals, that gives us 80 or so years to achieve a greater understanding of life and our place in the universe. That isn't very long. We are a young species being driven by a youth-obsessed society with the throttle wide open. With the world flying by, we haven't noticed that the fuel gauge is getting low and we'll be running on empty soon.

So here in the last part of my life, I can only hope that from an elder's perspective, I can offer a bit of clichéd advice. Slow down and smell the roses. Recognize that we live in a world where everything is connected to everything else, so whatever we do has repercussions. There is a tomorrow and what we do now will influence what tomorrow we arrive at. We owe it to future generations to think about them before leaping ahead.

Damn, if I only I knew back in my teen years, what I know now.

*--Dr. David Suzuki is an award-winning scientist,
environmentalist and broadcaster.*

SESSION 3: EVALUATION QUESTIONS

I: Logistics: Please rate the following, adding any comments/suggestions in the margins.

Introductory Quotes:

(Poor)

1

2

3

4

(Excellent)

5

Comments

Introduction:

1

2

3

4

5

Circle Question:

1

2

3

4

5

Discussion Questions:

1

2

3

4

5

II: Articles: Were the articles helpful? Circle “Y” article was effective in conveying concepts, thought provoking and well written. Circle “N” if you think it should not be used and please use the margin to explain and/or provide suggestions.

“Caring For the Universe”

Y

N

Comments

“Watering the Seeds of...”

Y

N

“Sacred Eyes”

Y

N

“Stuck in Our Teenage Years”

Y

N

IV. Session As a Whole

The Great Work

1

2

3

4

5

Suggestions:

Does the Title work?

Y

N

Suggestions

SESSION 4

ELDER INITIATIVES

We are, whether we like it or not, the dominant species and the stewards of this planet. If we can revere how things are, and can find a way to express gratitude for our existence, then we should be able to figure out, with a great deal of hard work and good will, how to share the Earth with one another and with other creatures, how to restore and preserve its elegance and grace, and how to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter and hope.

We are, whether we like it or not, the dominant species and the stewards of this planet. If we can revere how things are, and can find a way to express gratitude for our existence, then we should be able to figure out, with a great deal of hard work and good will, how to share the Earth with one another and with other creatures, how to restore and preserve its elegance and grace, and how to commit ourselves to love and joy and laughter and hope.

Ursula Goodenough

Here is the test to find whether your mission on earth is finished. If you're alive it isn't.

Richard Bach

I slept and dreamt that life was joy,
I awoke and saw that joy was service,
I acted and behold, service was joy.

Rabindranath Tagore

What grows never grows old.

Noah Benshea

[New] myths and models aren't delivered to us ready-made.
They arise out of the hearts and minds of many people
searching and dreaming together.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Mary Oliver

Our happiness is greatest when we contribute most to the happiness of others.

Harriet Shepard

We are the ones we've been waiting for!

Hopi Elder Speaks

Introduction

It's clear by now that many older people are ready to reinvent the model of retirement. After all, the word "retirement" literally means to get tired twice, to withdraw. One author/researcher, Jim Gambone, has coined a new term – ReFirement™ – for the latter years of life. Unlike retirement, where people withdraw into age-segregated communities and indulge in socially approved activities, ReFirement™ is about being released to find one's own journey, to stay involved with life on one's own terms.

To bring mid-life and older people together to make conscious decisions about new directions in their lives, several elder movements are currently sweeping the country. One of the earliest of these, Spiritual Eldering, was founded by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in Philadelphia in 1987. This program helps people harvest the wisdom they have garnered over the years and then share it with family and community. In the first article, Joyce Quinlan, who trained with the founder and brought Spiritual Eldering to the Cincinnati area, writes of her personal journey in *A New Paradigm for Eldering. Lessons from Grandma*, which follows, describes this groundbreaking elder movement in detail.

Earth Elders, an initiative for elders as keepers of the Earth, was begun by environmentalist Connie Mahoney in California in 1998. Its vision is rooted in the legacy of our ancestors. Throughout history in traditional cultures worldwide, elders have been sharing their wisdom and teaching each new generation how to care for Earth, its people, animals, plants and elements. Believing that the need to care for Earth today is greater than ever, Earth Elders has dedicated itself to honoring aging, elders, and the Earth. *Making a Difference*, a profile of Connie Mahoney, is followed by *Growing a Circle of Elders*, written by Rabon Saip, a psychologist from Santa Rosa, California, and Circle Chairperson.

The final piece in this section is an interview with Jim Schiebel, who has been involved in a number of elder movements, and speaks here about the many benefits derived – not only by the participants, but also by the communities in which they live. He describes his three most important initiatives: the Ignatius Lay Volunteer Corps, which serves low income families; Minnesota's Vital Aging Network, improving the quality of life for older people; and Vital Force, aging adults working as a team with younger students to create change in the world today.

Circle Question

Do you think that we need elder movements today; and if so, why?

Discussion Questions

1. Do you find the vision of Spiritual Eldering to be inspiring; and if so, how?
2. What are your experiences with practices such as journaling, meditation, life review, and/or values clarification?
3. According to Earth Elders, the need to care for the Earth is greater today than ever. Do you agree with this?
4. Do you think that our culture's current strategies are opposed to the survival of the human species?
5. What do you think Rabon Saip means when he talks about "pollution in the family nest"?
6. How would participation in a Circle of Elders enrich your life?
7. What resources might a Circle of Elders provide to your community?

A New Paradigm for Eldering

By Joyce Quinlan

It came as a revelation to me – not a happy one – when I heard a repeated complaint from retired persons in Florida: “There is nothing golden about the Golden Age; everything is gone that used to make us happy.”

This news came my way as I was teaching a Values Clarification class in the Continuing Education department at a community college. At the age of 65 myself, I took the comment as a challenge to research the phenomenon of growing older.

The first resource I discovered was a book, *The Ulyssean Adult*, by John McLeish. Here indeed was an entirely different attitude toward the realities of aging. It propelled me onto my personal Odyssey, part of which would certainly be spreading the good news.

McLeish describes two different routes for being a Ulyssean adult. In one, the person branches out into some previously untried adventure in life – the life-long business person turns to the pursuit of art, the stay-at-home woman begins to write. The second type Ulyssean remains engaged in the same field he has been familiar with, but enters a new area of that field, not previously explored – the teacher turns to research in the community.

But whatever choice is made, it remains true that there are losses, diminishment inherent in growing older: our physical state may be less robust, we step aside for others to take the active lead, our children no longer live near us. But it is not only in aging that we experience loss. In fact, we humans cannot readily move into any new stage of development unless we forego some good experienced in the previous one. We begin by giving up identity with our mother to start being a separate, unique person; we give up the security of home to face the challenge of school; and so it proceeds throughout our life. Each new stage entails some loss, but also opens up entirely new possibilities for growth.

For many of us, it is a time when the demands for producing, for following a tight schedule diminish; there emerges a freedom to engage in what our heart truly desires to cultivate as our soul qualities, to be hope for the young.

It was in 1983 that I began absorbing these realities about growing older. I continued pursuing, or more truly, yielding to my own evolution while developing courses, seminars, and projects to offer in informal groups. Then, in 1993, I received notice of a Conscious Aging workshop featuring, among others, Ram Dass and Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Unable to attend, I purchased the tapes. What a great experience that proved to be, especially because I learned that Reb Zalman was initiating the Institute for Spiritual Eldering and would begin training for possible facilitators of the program. I applied immediately to be in the first training group. It was a wonderful

expansion of the solitary work I had been doing. Here was a challenging vision for moving from "age-ing to sage-ing" and a fully developed, but flexible plan for nurturing growth in wisdom; further, there was a visionary spiritual elder as mentor, and other women and men eager to join the work of furthering a new paradigm for eldering. Dedicated to such life work, older adults can become a blessing and can hold out the possibility of making the transition into a new era of compassion and justice for the entire planet, with all its life forms and institutions.

Certainly this vision has inspired me to bring the Spiritual Eldering principles to the Cincinnati area. Through the sponsorship of IMAGO, I have been offering workshops, seminars, and retreats since I completed my training as a facilitator. From these activities, several small groups continue to meet regularly, encouraging themselves to grow in the way of wisdom keepers and connectors to our total environment.

I do believe that the journey from "age-ing to sage-ing" is a truly Ulyssean adventure.

--Dr. Joyce Quinlan has been working in the fields of psychology, spirituality and ageing for several decades. She currently facilitates several Spiritual Eldering groups.

Lessons From Grandma:

The wisdom of our elders may be the best life-tool available to us

By Susan Enfield and Linda Formichelli

Remember when getting older meant retiring, moving to Florida, and spending your golden years relaxing poolside, wondering how to fill up your days? Today, you're more likely to find the 65-plus crowd traveling to exotic locales, starting new and more fulfilling careers, or taking care of the grandkids as a full-time gig. Thanks to medical advancements, more Americans are living into their 80s, 90s, and beyond, shifting the public perception of retirement and "old age." According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as of 2000, life expectancy in the United States reached an all-time high average of 76.9 years. And that's just an average. (The CDC also estimates that by 2030, there will be 70 million Americans older than 65 – more than twice the current number.) As more of our elders remain vital and active, our culture is beginning to reexamine how we view aging and the role of elders.

A driving force behind this reevaluation is a concept known as spiritual eldering. Spiritual Eldering training helps older people harvest the wisdom they have gathered over the years and find ways to share this valuable resource with family and community. This knowledge-sharing bond changes not only how younger people view their elders, but also how older people regard the aging process. "There is a lot of fear that aging is going to be a negative experience," says Betty Anne Sullivan, EdD, author of *Spiritual Elders: Women of Worth in the Third Millennium* (Brockton, 1999), who boasts 62 years of life experience. Becoming a spiritual elder helped me to see aging in a positive light. I look at it as an enriching growth experience because I'm still learning and teaching others something new every day."

A Movement Is Born

In 1984, spiritual eldering's founder, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, then in his mid-60s, found himself feeling increasingly depressed, mourning his lost youth, and feeling unsure about his future. A 40-day vision-quest retreat inspired him to create resources for others who were struggling with aging. He founded the national non-profit Spiritual Eldering Institute (SEI) in 1987, and wrote a widely praised book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (Warner Books, 1995).

"In our Western, capitalist society, elders are invisible," says Schachter-Shalomi, who is now 78 and affectionately known as "Reb" Zalman ("beloved teacher" in Hebrew). "When there isn't a better model of aging—a different way to look at your life and its purpose—you get depressed, and the body breaks down more quickly," says Schachter-Shalomi. He aimed to change this antiquated view of aging.

Truly Golden Years

By becoming spiritual elders, many of those 65 and older are forming strong, nurturing bonds with their families and their communities – and in the process redefining the meaning of "old age." Now based in Boulder, Colorado, the SEI offers multi-faith workshops across the country on how to become a spiritual elder – defined as an older person who focuses on personal growth and who works to serve the community. Nearly 100 "sage-ing leaders" have completed training, more than half of whom now teach eldering seminars in their home communities. In the past few years, three SEI-sponsored Sage-ing Centers have opened in association with larger senior and community centers in South Bend, Indiana, and Winter Park and Boca Raton, Florida – and more are planned. "There are about 15,000 senior centers in the United States that would love to have a nonreligious way to address the spiritual needs of elder adults," says Lori Miller, SEI's executive director. "Elders are dealing with big issues, such as facing death, getting their legacies in place, and healing wounds from the past. Our blend of psychology and spirituality can help and most important, we have the tools and methods and training program in place, so these senior centers don't have to reinvent the wheel."

Modern Sage

So what exactly is a spiritual elder or contemporary sage? Schachter-Shalomi model draws on three sources: The traditional role of the tribal elder, modern-day psychological and "brain-mind" research, and the ecology movement.

From Native American to African to Japanese, ancient cultures have historically placed elders in honored social roles. As judges, leaders, shamans, and seers, elders helped instruct the young, guide the social order, and foster spiritual exploration. The Industrial Revolution essentially short-circuited this archetype by emphasizing technological knowledge, which elders often lacked. Schachter-Shalomi contends that today, as an unprecedented number of baby boomers near "retirement age" – at the same time that our life span has been extended to unprecedented lengths – it's more critical than ever for older adults to consider age-old questions about their role in society, and how best to live.

Citing recent neural development research that shows that older adults' brains are geared to long-term memories, SEI director Miller makes the case that the elder brain is actually adapted toward contemplative development, even though we don't generally associate old age with self-development and spiritual growth. Reflecting a similar shift in perspective, the well-known American psychologist Erik H. Erikson proposed adding a ninth stage called "transcendence" to his definition of the eight stages of life. In this last stage of life, he suggested, the essential challenge is shifting from a material, rational perspective to a more cosmic, transcendent vision as one prepares to complete this life's journey and move on.

Resolving The Past

One doesn't become a spiritual elder, however, simply by virtue of reaching a certain age. There's a lot of "self work" to be done first. "To become sages," says Schachter-Shalomi, "we must undergo an initiatory process in which we learn to lead without dominating others, to make compassion the ruling principle of our actions, and to serve the whole with a multigenerational purpose."

As Schachter-Shalomi sees it, many older adults are "living in the box of the un-lived life." Unresolved past problems, unforgiving relationships, unfulfilled intentions, as well as a fear of death, can keep us from being in the present and moving into the future. Spiritual eldering workshops introduce contemplative tools, such as meditation, life review, and journaling, which are more commonly associated with youth and middle age, but which can be profoundly transformative for elders as well. A recent study at the Winter Park Health Foundation's Sage-ing Center showed that participants overwhelmingly believe that what they've learned through sage-ing has had a positive impact on their lives, especially in improving relationships with their children and grandchildren.

Beyond the therapeutic value in their creation, journaling and oral histories (along with mentoring) are also great ways to "upload" elders' accumulated wisdom to younger generations. Schachter-Shalomi compares dying before doing this work to "typing away on your computer and forgetting to hit "save," and then there's a power outage. It's upsetting!"

Making a Difference: Connie Mahoney

By Tim Tesconi from *The Press Democrat*
Santa Rosa, California, March 19, 2001

When she reached retirement age four years ago, Connie Mahoney, a scholar and environmentalist who lives in Sebastopol, figured there had to be more to old age than bingo and an AARP card.

The result was Earth Elders, founded ... a year later to utilize the accumulated wisdom of the oldest among us while creating a new vision of aging. "Earth Elders is a way to look at retirement as a time of contribution," said Mahoney, 69. "A time when elders use their post-employment years to address critical issues, such as the health and well-being of planet Earth for future generations."

In her journey from "corporate wife and mother" to environmental and social activist, Mahoney followed a career as teacher and researcher that has spanned America's changing social panorama. She worked with women and children in the Appalachian Mountains in the 1960s. In 1981, she moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where her research and studies focused on aging and health policy. [Her] interest in age-related issues and her own aging led her to establish Earth Elders, a small loose-knit Sonoma County-based organization that has grown into an international network, its members and supporters linked by a newsletter and the Internet...

Twenty to thirty Earth Elders gather monthly for the "Circle of Elders" at New College of California in Santa Rosa. Gathering in a circle – in the tradition of native cultures – Mahoney and other elders discuss such topics as organic agriculture, preserving the California coast, and aging in the 21st century. The idea is to glean solutions for a better world from the collective experiences of people completing the final phase of life.

"Throughout history and in traditional cultures worldwide, elders have been respected as keepers of the Earth," Mahoney said. "Elders are valued as responsible members of the community, entrusted with teaching each new generation how to care for one another and for the Earth so it will continue to sustain life."

To Mahoney's way of thinking, baby boomers have it all wrong when they worry whether there will be enough money in Social Security when they retire. "Instead they should be concerned that there is clean air to breathe and nontoxic soil to grow food for our children and grandchildren," [she] said.

Growing A Circle of Elders

By Rabon Saip

Throughout the millennia of human existence, we can easily imagine that the term “Circle of Elders” has been applied many times in many languages. And, from our own instinctive experience of human gatherings, especially around a campfire, we can easily imagine that the circle was the most common form of coming together. Caretakers of traditional values, Earth-keepers, story tellers, historians, decision makers and law givers; elders were traditionally regarded as the highest cultural authority.

It appears, however, that with civilization’s political and commercial development, the role of elder authority was gradually diminished. The how and why of changes that have silenced the elder voice – the voice of compassionate wisdom – is a topic that has held my attention for some time. I believe that the rapidly growing population of older persons worldwide (the global “age wave”), and the increasing threat to Earth’s ability to sustain future generations, sets the stage for the return of a meaningful Elder Presence.

Persons who call themselves Earth Elders care about the restoration and sustainability of Earth’s ecosystems, upon which our very lives depend. Our culture’s current strategy seems so curiously opposed to our own survival, in fact, the survival of any species, that an objective view from the cosmos would have us appear to be quite suicidal. As Pogo said: “We have met the enemy and they are us.” I feel certain that if more and more elders join together, with a willingness to take on responsibility for their common wisdom, we can strengthen what I have called “a mature lust for sanity.” We must ask ourselves why it is that we have lost touch with the fundamentals of our own survival (or has this kind of sanity always been an illusive myth)?

“Persons and organizations in contemporary society almost never develop the quality of attention necessary to test whether their purposes, strategies, and actual behaviors are congruent with one another. Thus, for all the vaunted ‘rationality’ of modern bureaucratic organizing and of ‘economic’ man, it should not surprise us that we experience the twentieth century pre-eminently as an era of grotesque incongruities between espoused strategies and actual effects.” (1)

In this current vacuum of forethought, Earth Elders call upon midlife and older persons to not only care about the sustainability of Earth, and the children, but to join together as a force for change. As the global market economy and industrial technology continue to gain ascendance in all aspects of the human experience, we lose an entire world – the children’s world, which was entrusted to our safekeeping whether we believe it or not. And since we are creations of that more pristine world, we must realize that our tolerance for pollution in the family nest is an abdication of this sacred trust. At the same time, I am reminded of this statement by Martin Heidegger: “Everything works. That is precisely what is uncanny; that it works and that the working drives on ever further to a

broader functioning, and that the technology more and more rips and uproots humanity from the earth.”

On Sunday, August 1, 1999, Earth Elders called into being its first Circle of Elders. Over the course of that first afternoon gathering, at New College of California in Santa Rosa, the twenty-five or so elders (of all ages) who showed up were soon engaged in a search for new understanding. We explored definitions and meanings of traditional Eldering in different cultures. We talked about a shared sense of need for an Elder Presence in the Twenty-First Century. In retrospect, the central emerging question seemed to be: How can elders gathering in circles like this help to create a sustainable future for the children?

Since that first afternoon our circles have evolved out the interests and offerings (the *prima materia*) of those elders who have shown up. This courageous, growing membership of chronological and spiritual elders have a great deal to offer as individuals, and, as a group, are beginning to reach beyond themselves into the powerful realm of Community. Our strength stems from the life experience and wisdom, the honest, well-developed uniqueness, that each of us brings to the collective – a blend of flavors that we are learning to savor. . .

The resources that a Circle of Elders may provide the community depends upon the elders reaching out and the willingness of others to join hands. Our current projects are too numerous to mention here, but our presence in the community is definitely making a difference. I must say, however, that the greatest beneficiaries are already in the circle, sharing the affirmation and wisdom of a lifetime of learning with one another. Even though many in the circle lead busy lives, the mutual support of being seen and heard by their peers is a strong calling. Sometimes, in a brief moment of silence, the joy and power of our collective soul becomes an almost palpable experience.

1. Torbert, William, *Human Inquiry*, p. 437 (1981)

- *Rabon Saip is a psychologist, author & lecturer living and working in the Santa Rosa, CA area. He has been active in the movement to re-define the role of older people as Earth Elders.*

www.eldertimes.org

www.eartheldersofsonomacounty

Elders In Action

An Interview With Jim Schiebel,
Former Mayor of St. Paul, Minnesota

Describe for us the three most significant elder initiatives you have been a part of?

I am active and on the board of the **Ignatius Lay Volunteer Corps**. It is a corps for people age 50 and over that is connected with the Jesuits. We are in ten different communities and sponsor groups of anywhere from 10-20 people. The focus is serving the poor, so placement is with sites that address low-income people. Participants give 18-20 hours per week towards eliminating poverty. The powerful part of this experience is the spiritual component. Everyone has their own reflector, someone who they reflect with about their experience and their faith. Then they have meetings once a month where they come together to reflect as a group, using Ignatius spirituality as a tool for drawing meaning from the work. Reflection is an important part of any activity, and the Ignatius spirituality gives a common language in reflection for that group. The element of faith connects them to the community through more than just the work they are doing. I think a spiritually based model is ideal in that people, as they age, are looking to strengthen their faith. They are searching for meaning in both what they have done in their life and in what they want to do with their life.

Another key piece is the focus on poverty—from serving at an inner city school and working with students, to working in a shelter or soup kitchen, to working on issues like AIDS—there is a real social justice component. It gives a sense of empowerment to the group.

The **Vital Aging Network** is run through the school of continuing education at the University of Minnesota. It is just what it says—a network looking at vital, or positive, aging. It asks: how can people continue to live as active participants in their community as they age from 50 and beyond? It addresses issues from mental health to housing, transportation, and government policies around aging. It seeks to improve the quality of aging in place.

Out of that, you see a number of people who want to be active participants in their community in terms of making a difference, leaving a legacy. We are beginning to define retirement much differently than total leisure and relaxation. What is called “retirement” needs rather to be a time for giving back to the community, contributing. This desire for older adults to really make an impact was the motivation for creating **Vital Force**.

Vital Force is a team of people (a minimum of six and upwards through twenty) working together to strengthen their local community in regards to a particular issue. Each Vital

Force has a coach, or connector. Coaches are trained with help from the continuing education department at the University of Minnesota, the leadership program at the Humphrey Institute, and the Center for Citizenship and Democracy. We have a curriculum that trains the organization or the coach to organize the group, with the intent of having each participant in the group play a leadership role. So, the coach acts as no more than a facilitator. They are trained in being a strong citizen, in accomplishing public work.

They are in charge of recruiting their team, which can come from a number of places. Some examples might be (1) alumni groups--a way to continue to be involved with the college or community (2) a community of faith (3) a small town or neighborhood (4) or a corporation or business, particularly large businesses that have retiree groups—(like General Mills could have a General Mills Vital Force) (5) or solely based around a shared concern--like ecological degradation.

The group is then lead by the coach to decide on a pressing issue that everyone feels strongly about as a mission to improve the community. The group researches the issue to determine where they can most be helpful. They will go out and interview people—find out who in the community is already working on that issue—what’s being done and what is needed. Then they plan a project for the year, which could be increasing the number of mentors in the school, beautifying a city, or rehabilitating houses to make them more affordable and earth-friendly. It is an asset-building model, so it is important to determine what assets are available in the community as well as what assets each member, and the group as a whole, brings to the table in determining how the project will be most effective.

After each meeting there is reflection on what took place, where to go from there, and why the work is important. Part of the model is bringing in a ritual for reflection at each meeting.

The group is to complete the project in a year, evaluate, and celebrate. We bring all the groups together once a year to share their experiences and what they accomplished. Many go on to the next year. As a result, we see people continuing a project, or going on to another group, or addressing a different issue. They might decide to do Vital Force for a couple of years and then come back. The flexibility of the program is key because we find that many folks want to make a long-term commitment—for instance, in the Ignatius Lay Volunteer Corps, we have found that elders sometimes would rather commit 6-8 years rather than just 1-2.

So, why are elder initiatives important?

There are more people getting older, and more older people wanting involvement. Particularly the baby boomers have been heavily involved in issues and volunteering throughout their life and want to move on to the next stage of that. Service gives meaning to life, in terms of having a sense of accomplishment, and knowing that you have affected positive change. It is not out of the ordinary for someone from the Senior Corps to reflect and say, “This has been one of the most fulfilling times of my life.” And

that is because they really are giving back to the community and seeing change take place.

It is critical for aging adults to have participation and involvement. A significant goal of Vital Force is to get younger students and aging adults working together to strengthen their communities, and in sharing their experiences we create an inter-generational learning process.

In addition, we need to see more aging adults running for office who haven't done it before—it's an incredible way to give back to the community—it keeps them connected. And when you are 60, you don't really think in terms of building your resume—you are there for the issues and aren't so concerned about getting re-elected. If you lose, you just have more hours to put somewhere else.

Walter Mondale, who ran for senate after the Paul Wellstone tragedy, claimed that too many of his senior colleagues, ages 75 and up, were no longer connected with the life of the community and thus blind to the needs of the world today. Vital force seeks to get elders motivated through empowerment—creating change politically, socially, and environmentally. Healthy aging today is having people actively involved in the entire community.

Finally, an integral part of service for seniors is that people inherently want to continue to learn—service provides them that opportunity. You don't stop growing at 50 or 55 or 75. And a life that only looks back, in my opinion, isn't a very fulfilling life. People need to look ahead. By continuing to do the work of the community, they stay connected with the community. It's not like they are no longer a part of what is going on in the world. Due to careers or raising families, retirees may not have had much time to work toward change in the community. Now is their time to focus on legacy.

--Visit the Vital Aging Network website: <http://www.van.umn.edu>

SESSION 4: EVALUATION QUESTIONS

I: Logistics : Please rate the following, adding any comments/suggestions in the margins.

Introductory Quotes:

(Poor)

1 2 3 4 5

(Excellent)

Comments

Introduction:

1 2 3 4 5

Circle Question:

1 2 3 4 5

Discussion Questions:

1 2 3 4 5

II: Articles: Were the articles helpful? Circle "Y" if article was effective in concepts, thought provoking and well-written. Circle "N" if you think it should not be used and please use the margin to explain and/or provide suggestions.

"The New Paradigm"

Y N

Comments

"Lessons from Grandma"

Y N

"Growing A Circle of Elders"

Y N

"Elders In Action"

Y N

III. Session As a Whole

Elder Initiatives 1 2 3 4 5

Suggestions:

Does the Title work? Y N

Suggestions

SESSION 5

Legacy: Taking Action Now

I am going to venture that the man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures, and acknowledging unity with the universe of things, was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization.

Chief Luther Standing Bear, Lakota Sioux

The elders were wise. They knew that man's heart, away from nature, becomes hard; they knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans, too.

We must protect the forests for our children, grandchildren and children yet to be born. We must protect the forests for those who can't speak for themselves such as the birds, animals, fish and trees.

Qwatsinas (Hereditary Chief Edward Moody), Nuxalk Nation

Even in Western society, our deepest yearnings go far beyond a vacation or retirement. We long for a vision of our destiny, and, equally, for a way to carry that vision as a gift to others. The following lines, attributed to sources as diverse as Chief Seattle, Winston Churchill, and Anonymous, say it quite neatly:

A task without a vision is just a job.
A vision without a task is just a dream.
A vision with a task can change the world.

It is this sacred work, this "vision with a task," that we seek, individually and collectively. The rarity of finding sacred work is at the root of our Western despair and sorrow. When not acknowledged and embraced, our grief is acted out through violence, against ourselves (e.g., addictions, suicide, masochism), each other (e.g., sadism, racism, sexism, war, child abuse, ethnic cleansing), and the environment (e.g., toxic waste, resource depletion, species extinction, forest destruction, environmental degradation). Unacknowledged grief also manifests as depression, anxiety, and a growing sense of meaninglessness.

*-Bill Plotkin : from pg 40-41 – Soulcraft: Crossing
Into The Mysteries Of Nature and The Psyche*

The Peace of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Wendell Berry

Introduction

As Earth Elders we have an opportunity to make a meaningful difference by leading the world into an era that respects and cares for the Earth. The readings in this section explore ways elders can in Thomas Berry's words "befriend the Earth".

One way you can have an impact on future generations is to leave an ethical will. An article about ethical wills is included as well as a sample of one person's ethical will. Joyce Quinlan, Jane Stavoe, Bob Staggenborg and Jim Schenk share personal stories.

Circle Question

If you could be remembered for just one thing what would it be?

Discussion Questions

1. Joyce Quinlan says “There is the commitment to grow in personal awareness of the world-view, meanwhile discovering within ourselves our unique gift, that which is at the very core of our heart. Then we must put that unique gift to work in halting the violence against earth, the pillaging of resources, desecration of the rights of animals, plants, all life forms, including human. What is (are) your gifts? Do you see using them in this way?
2. Ethical will question: Has this course inspired you to make any changes in your life? Why or why not.?
3. Can you think of an environmental need that is not currently addressed in your community that you might be interested in working on?
4. Are there any programs that Imago is involved in that would be of interest to you?
5. We who are entering the new terrain of an expanded, enriched, caring lifestyle have an opportunity to lead the world into a future that will keep hope alive. Do you believe that elders will be the leaders of our future?

Scenario for the Future

By Dr. Joyce Quinlan

Every age each cycle of history has called on humanity to take up some specific “great work” so that life could flourish in that era. Surely our time is no exception. With the dawning of the 20th century, the huge growth spurt of science demanded serious exploration of the physical world in which we lived. “New” science, “new” math, “new” relationships, “new” communication required us to change many of our traditional ways of understanding and behaving. Midway in that century there came crashing into our lives a new symbol: we saw for the first time the Blue Jewel, Planet Earth, floating in space. This vision so dramatically overwhelmed the first astronauts that they could scarcely find words to describe its beauty, its fragility. For the first time they knew in their souls—these men of science—that this was indeed their beloved Home. All of them were changed forever. And, little did we know, so were we to be.

With that symbol, the great work of our time was defined. Einstein framed it clearly: “Our task must be to free ourselves from traditional categories, widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” Quickly (though it has taken time for the full story to take root in us) our scientists, poets, artists and mystics have opened up for us startling truth: our earth is a living, breathing being; every being is intimately, deeply connected to every other element in the web of life.

As we absorb this reality, we simultaneously come face to face with the hard fact that civilization has brought about widespread, careless destruction of the planet, actually jeopardizing the possibility for life to continue.

Clearly then, we who live in the 21st century, have a labor of love to which we must dedicate ourselves. For each of us the work is two-fold but not separate. There is the commitment to grow in personal awareness of the world-view, meanwhile discovering within ourselves our unique gift, that which is at the very core of our heart. Then we must put that unique gift to work in halting the violence against earth, the pillaging of resources, desecration of the rights of animals, plants, all life forms, including human. Of course, there is no one way to do the work, no field of endeavor where it cannot be practiced. The vital thing is that the work come from loving awareness and end in responsible action.

Dr. Joyce Quinlan has worked in the fields of psychology, spirituality and ageing for several decades. She currently facilitates several Spiritual Eldering groups.

Ethical Will

Legal wills are usually cold documents that do little to comfort loved ones left behind. If you want to do more, consider preparing an ethical will. Both writers and recipients of ethical wills say they are an invaluable legacy.

Ethical wills go back to Biblical times. But today, there's heightened interest in leaving heirs a testament of values and beliefs. Barry Baines, medical director of a hospice in Minneapolis and author of *Ethical Will: Putting Your Values on Paper* (Perseus Publishing) says these are some of the topics they often express:

- * Values and beliefs, what you think is most important in life.
- * Lessons learned, what life has taught you.
- * Love for survivors, what family and friends have meant to you, and what you hope for them in the future.
- * Forgiveness, what you want to forgive and be forgiven for.
- * Explanations, why you made the choices you did.
- * Anecdotes, stories about times that shaped your life or humorous events you want preserved as family lore.

There's no right way to write one. Just make sure it comes from the heart, says Baines. Don't criticize, cause guilt, or tell people how to behave.

You don't have to write, you can record it or make a videotape. Some people make one ethical will to be read by all. Others write them in the form of a letter to each child or beneficiary.

Ethical wills are not legally binding, but many attorneys encourage clients to write them as additions to their regular wills. They help with estate planning and incorporate statements that indicate motivation.

The ethical will is a way to leave something behind that lasts longer than any money you leave, and it may be much more valuable to the recipient.

An Ethical Will – Example

From website : www.ethicalwill.com

This ethical will was written by a World War II veteran. He was probably in his 70's. There isn't much background information on this author. His ethical will was found by his son as he was going through his deceased father's papers.

I leave my children the wish that they have:

Decency.

Sympathy.

Empathy.

A sense of Justice.

A respect for nature.

Outrage at man's inhumanity to man.

Assurance of the equality of all people.

Strength to oppose tyranny.

Belief that every life is invaluable.

Insight that those more blessed will share.

Tolerance for all.

Contentment in their being.

Joy in life.

Pride in each other and family.

And the summation of all these wishes is that you live a full, active Jewish life which will, by its very nature, cause all these things to come to pass.

All love,

Your father

An Earth Elder's Story

By Jane Stavoe

On Thursday, September 13, 2001, the fifth graders arrived to harvest the garden they had planted in our yard the previous spring. Although it was the sixth year that we had donated space for a student garden, a project that continues to the present time, it was on this particular day that I gained a fuller understanding of the importance and value of this project for the children.

It seems that the older I become the greater is my belief that children need to be outside much more than their school schedules permit...especially in good weather. On this particular Thursday, the weather was absolutely beautiful. However, we were all feeling shock and horror over the tragic hijackings of two days before as we began the process of digging for potatoes. It turned out that this year we had raised a bumper crop and the children became gleeful as more and more potatoes appeared beneath the hills. My husband and I became aware of the transformation in the mood of the children as we joined in the spirit of celebration. In retrospect I understand that the children had desperately needed a release from the fears brought on by the seemingly unexplainable violence our country had just experienced. On one sunny afternoon, two classes of fifth graders were able to enjoy a respite from those fears, as well as receive a glimpse of hopefulness, both provided by the simple act of harvesting a garden.

I used to teach at the school those students attend, less than two blocks from my home. Although my energy level no longer allows for full-time teaching, I continue to look for ways to stay connected to the children there. One of the most satisfying ways my husband, Ron, and I have both been able to interact with the students of St. Raymond School is by inviting the fourth graders to plant a garden in our yard. Both Ron and I grew up in families that depended on home gardens for most of the fruits and vegetables we ate throughout the year. As adults, we became aware that many children today had no idea where their food comes from and we believe that this is important information that we can impart to the students experientially. When I first approached the school principal with the idea of a student garden, she thought perhaps an after school garden club might be nice. However, I considered the idea of a garden important enough to be part of the basic curriculum, and I strongly believe that children today are already overscheduled with organized after school activities. After some persuasion the principal passed along the idea to one of the more innovative teachers and the school garden project began.

Even though Ron and I had grown up with gardens, we have done a great deal of learning through this project right along with the students. Our original idea was to grow pumpkins. It seemed a good crop to plant in the spring that would not be harvested until the students returned to school after summer vacation. During the very first year we learned the hard way that pumpkins take a lot of space and not all the seeds sown make it to maturity. As it turned out we were able to harvest only enough for a couple of loaves of pumpkin bread that the students sampled. In subsequent years we have had much better luck with potatoes and herbs. This past year each of the 60 children from the two fifth grades went home with at least one potato and a bag of various herbs. Some years,

when time allows, the students also plant crops that need to be picked during the summer such as lettuce, onions, and beans. When this occurs they have an open invitation to visit the garden during the summer and pick these vegetables for their families, or we donate them to the community food pantry, which distributes produce to the village's senior citizens once a week during the summer. The group that runs the pantry acknowledges the gift in writing so the students are aware of their contribution when they return to school in the Fall.

While we do not have enough space in our yard for more school student gardens, we have on occasion had other school visitors thanks to some of our grandsons. These visits evoke stories worthy of mention. When one grandson's preschool class visited the yard the reaction of one tiny girl was unforgettable. She walked passed a garden where many petunias and columbines were in full bloom and joyfully squealed, "How did they get to be purple!" I recall giving her an inadequate, "I don't know" kind of response. The following Fall I was attending a conference in North Carolina and just before lunch one morning found myself seated across from Thomas Berry, the man many of us consider to be the ideal Earth Elder. I decided to tell him about the incident and I asked him how I should have answered the little girl, believing that he would give me the scientific explanation I had been unable to provide. He instead told me that I had missed a wonderful opportunity for story and that I should have made one up about the fairies painting the lovely blooms.

Another of my grandsons attends a public school which is not within walking distance of our home. He knew of visits by the St. Raymond classes and talked his first grade teacher into planning a field trip to visit our yard to plant some flower seeds. The neighbors have let us know that they were quite surprised when a large school bus pulled up and they saw the children pile out and run into our back yard.

In "Enlightened Agriculture," an article appearing in the November December 2003 Resurgence Magazine, Colin Tudge states that, "Agriculture is the most important material endeavor of humankind." From my experiences of gardening with the students from St Raymond School, I know the truth of that statement.

Our garden is now fully accepted by the school administration and the challenge becomes finding other people willing to duplicate the project. In fact in many areas of the country the school garden is an idea whose time has come and many teachers welcome the opportunity for their classes to participate. Some schools are now providing space right on the school grounds for gardens. I believe from our personal experience that school gardens, whether on school grounds or in private yards, are a wonderful opportunity for children and elders to learn from one another. It seems to me that those of us old enough to remember a time when home gardens were necessary and numerous are just the people to keep the concept alive. By garden projects with school children we can help prepare them for a sustainable future: one that may well sustain them spiritually as well as physically.

One Elder's Story

By Bob Staggenborg

At age 46 I sold my accounting business so that I could take some time to carefully consider what I wanted to do next in my life. Accounting only provided me with a way to earn money and I was looking for more than that. I spent the next two years trying various things. These included substitute teaching, part time controller for a start up company, and volunteer work as a teacher of nature programs at Cincinnati Nature Center. This turned out to be a difficult time for me because there is very little in the way of understanding and support in our culture to simply stop working at my age. Who we are in our consumer culture is defined by what we do to earn money. Volunteering does not count as work in our culture because you are not engaged in paid employment. I was fortunate to have a very supportive wife to help me through this time.

During this time I took a course offered by the Cincinnati Earth Institute called Voluntary Simplicity. This was an eight-week discussion course that gave me the chance to explore new ideas with a thoughtful group of people. A chapter in the course book called "Your Money or Your Life" from the book by the same title encouraged me to define how much is enough in terms of money. I realized that by living simply I was free to spend most of my year not engaged in making money. I decided to work part time during tax season only and to dedicate the rest of my time to finding volunteer activities in which I could make a difference in helping people develop a love for the Earth.

I had started my work career as a sixth grade teacher and I decided that I wanted to try to connect my life long love of nature with my desire to teach children. My experience teaching at Cincinnati Nature Center encouraged me to seek out other similar volunteer opportunities. I had heard about an organization called Imago from people involved in the Cincinnati Earth Institute and learned they had a nature center located on the west side of Cincinnati. I found out they were offering a Valentine's Day hike and thought it would be romantic to ask my wife Beth for a romantic date. As it turned out the hike was actually for children and their parents. It was another in my long list of not so romantic things we have done together. Anyway that night the volunteer coordinator, Casey Carmichael, who was warm and friendly and made us feel at home, greeted us. The Earth Center itself rests on sixteen acres in the middle of an urban neighborhood. We were lead on the hike by the energetic director of the Earth Center, Chris Clements. He did a great job of exciting the kids about nature and used the modest earth center property to its maximum advantage.

After that night I did some research on the Earth Center and found their primary mission was to connect kids from urban environments to nature. I decided I would volunteer a bit at the Earth Center to find out more. What I found was a small group of people totally dedicated to exploring the wonders of nature with children. I have been volunteering now at the Earth Center for about two years. I am really thankful that I can be a part of such a wonderful organization. Over the last few years I have become convinced that connecting youth with nature is one very important piece of education that must be done if we are to develop a deep rooted love of the Earth. It is one way that I really can make a difference. Now, at age 51, I look back at the last five years as the start of a great

adventure. I waken each day to all the great experiences ahead of me. When I hit 50 I was not depressed about being considered old by our culture. Instead I took pride in entering a part of my life when I could aspire to become an Earth Elder.

- Bob Staggenborg is deeply involved with Highlands Nature Sanctuary, IMAGO and the Cincinnati Earth Institute (CEI) as a volunteer devoting many hours of his time and expertise and providing invaluable assistance in many areas of this Great Work.

Earth Elders, (Becoming) Wisdom Keepers for Our Time Imago For the Earth

By Jim Schenk

Eileen and I founded Imago in 1978. I had been working at Covington Community Center, an inner city neighborhood center. Through my work we came to a recognition that most people in this culture are not happy with their circumstances, not just the poor. The question was why. After extensive research our conclusion was there is a dichotomy between the values of this culture and our human needs. Our culture values consumption, money, and materialism. Our inner human needs are to love and to care and to be loved and to be cared for. Our cultural values drives us to mobility, longer work hours, more time purchasing and repairing the stuff we buy – taking us away from the love and caring that is important to us. After further research it became obvious that this culture has not only isolated us from each other but alienated us from the Earth of which we are a part. It has moved us from seeing the Earth as a creation of God and thus sacred to a place that we can own and use or abuse as we like.

All of this worked for the human species for a number of centuries. We have over six billion humans on the planet and life expectancy has doubled. However the disconnect from the Earth has led to values that are not meaningful and is leading to the destruction of the planet.

We began Imago to look at how we would live if we held the Earth and its people as sacred and our most important priority in life.

Our first efforts were holding workshops and presentations in order to learn more about this type of lifestyle. Some of our first courses looked at community, living more simply, organic gardening and other issues of personal interest. Over the years we have brought in such people as Thomas Berry, Miriam Therese MacGillis, Dorothy McLean, Sun Bear, Dennis Banks, Charlene Spretnak and David Korten. We have continued these events over the years.

In 1985 we made some major changes. Jim had been working alone as staff of Imago till 1985. It was at this point we began considering the idea of hiring a staff person to work with Jim, though we had no money. I spoke of this to a number of people, and one of them brought us a fund raising book, saying that the primary message of it was that if you believe in what you are doing, you need to let other people be part of it.

One way people can be involved is by donating money. Jim approached eleven people about donating; ten of them did, providing enough funds to hire our first additional staff. With this staff person we were able to begin producing an Imago newsletter to share the thoughts and ideas that we have learned and to share programs that Imago is involved with. It also allowed us, in the same year, to begin a membership in Imago to involve others in this undertaking.

In 1989 we began our efforts to preserve land. One day sitting in our home office we saw a deer walking down Enright Ave. While we had seen deer in the woods around us, this particular event sparked our curiosity – where did the deer come from when we are only minutes from downtown Cincinnati? We literally jumped in our car and drove west along River Road. What we discovered was there was a wooded corridor running some 20 miles from our street to the Indiana border. After some research we also discovered that along the corridor there are fox, deer, raccoons, the endangered buffalo clover, oak elm, and hickory trees and incredible views of the Ohio River. We started the Western Wildlife Corridor to work toward preserving land along the Ohio River. We did it out of a belief that other species have a right to a place to live and also that humans need wild places. The Western Wildlife Corridor, Inc. became its own organization and is flourishing, preserving many acres of land. Imago itself has preserved 25 acres of urban land over and above the successes of the Western Wildlife Corridor, Inc.

The Earth Center began in 1994 as a way to share an appreciation and love for the Earth with young people. We had heard the school board was being pressured to sell unused land to pay off debts. Eight acres of land had been purchased by the school board in the mid 1970's to build a school. After tearing down a number of houses they decided that the school was not needed and the land just sat there. Eileen developed a proposal to the school board to purchase the land to develop a nature center for education. Borrowing money against our house, we proceeded to purchase the land and began the Imago Earth Center. Staff was hired in 1994 to run programs on a piece of land totally overrun by honeysuckle. Eventually honeysuckle was removed, a building constructed, a pond dug and wigwams built. We have gone from serving 500 children the first year to serving 12,000 children per year today.

Imago also began looking at ways of walking our talk, and began working to develop a demonstration of rejuvenating a neighborhood by focusing on an ecological theme. Price Hill was the neighborhood where we focused. In 1993 a group of 12 people met to discuss this possibility. We renovated some homes with environmentally friendly techniques, developed a brochure on Price Hill the Ecological Neighborhood and, in collaboration with Xavier University, developed a video on the project. We organized block clubs, worked to improve parks, improve energy efficiency, held a seminar on Greening a Neighborhood. Our focus now is to create an eco-village on Enright Ave. in Price Hill. It is called Enright Ridge Eco-Village. We are working on walking trails, rehabbing houses, children's programs, gardening, waste reduction and the like, shared skills and community support for residents.

EarthSpirit Rising Conferences were begun in 1998. One of the Imago staff went to an Earth and Spirit Conference in Seattle, Washington, in 1992. Her report to us made the notion of a conference that melded ecology and spirituality very attractive. Understanding the need for humans to see themselves as part of this planet and preserving it, and that spirituality is an important component of our lives, it made sense to provide support to people who are involved in this way. Four EarthSpirit Rising Conferences have brought close to 2000 people together to share and support each other in this effort. More such conferences are planned for the future.

The Earth Elder project was started a few years later. Joyce Quinlan, who helped in the formation of Imago, returned after a 12-year absence, with a strong commitment to older people becoming elders, the wisdom keepers for this culture. She began support groups of elders based on the Spiritual Eldering program developed by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. While continuing these programs, Imago also looked at ways we could provide elders a venue in which to carry out an Earth Elder role. The Earth Elder project evolved. We held two national conferences for Earth Elders. We have now developed this course, ELDERevolution, which is providing ways for Earth Elders to use their skills, resources and knowledge in a way to serve this magnificent planet, and supporting them in doing so.

There is much that needs to be done to preserve this planet. We strongly believe that elders, as Earth Elders, can provide a significant impact in this undertaking. We believe that Imago provides a wonderful venue to do so.

Jim Schenk and his wife Eileen have a long history of activism in their visionary efforts on behalf of the Earth, ecological education, land preservation and restoration, wildlife habitat conservation, sustainability, the eco-village neighborhood concept, and EarthSpirit Rising national conferences which have addressed the ecological-spiritual evolution that is necessary to preserve "The Planet Called Home"

SESSION 5: EVALUATION QUESTIONS

I: Logistics: Please rate the following, adding any comments/suggestions in the margins.

Introductory Quotes:

(Poor)

1

2

3

4

(Excellent)

5

Comments

Introduction:

1

2

3

4

5

Circle Question:

1

2

3

4

5

Discussion Questions:

1

2

3

4

5

II: Articles: Were the articles helpful? Circle "Y" article was effective in conveying concepts, thought provoking and well-written. Circle "N" if you think it should not be used and please use the margin to explain and/or provide suggestions.

"Scenario for the Future "

Y

N

Comments

"Ethical Will"

Y

N

"An Earth Elder Experience"

Y

N

"One Elder's Story"

Y

N

"Earth Elders: Wisdom Keepers"

Y

N

III. Session As a Whole

Legacy in Action

1

2

3

4

5

Suggestions:

Does the Title work?

Y

N

Suggestions



☐ **I WOULD LIKE MORE INFORMATION ON BECOMING AN EARTH ELDER AT IMAGO IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:**

- ☐ **EARTH CENTER**
 - ☐ Nature Educators
 - ☐ Caretakers/Adopt A Trail
 - ☐ Habitat Restorers.
 - ☐ Native Plant Rescuers.
 - ☐ Graphic Designers.
 - ☐ Curriculum Developers.
- ☐ **EARTH ELDER**
 - ☐ Help facilitate courses – helping older people become earth elders for our time.
 - ☐ Organize a course – Share the earth elder concept with your friends.
 - ☐ Help with publicity – Sharing the idea of earth elderring course with the larger community and groups.
 - ☐ Council – Ongoing gatherings of Earth Elders who have attended the course to discuss, plan and celebrate.
- ☐ **WORKSHOPS/CONFERENCES**
 - ☐ EarthSpirit Rising Committee – Help with a national conference linking ecology and spirituality.
 - ☐ Assist with developing other workshops – related to sustainability and re-visioning our place on the planet.
- ☐ **ECO-VILLAGE**
 - ☐ Research ideas for the Enright Ridge Eco-village – From solar applications to neighborhood development, as needed.
 - ☐ Marketing of concept to community – Inform the broader community about this effort.
 - ☐ Write about eco-village model – as a way to spread this concept to other neighborhoods.
 - ☐ Help with neighborhood projects – from insulation to developing the wildlife preserve.
- ☐ **SUNDRY TASKS**
 - ☐ Newsletter – helping with writing, editing, layout and/or mailing.
 - ☐ Finances and Fund raising – Helping with the financial end of sustaining Imago programs.
 - ☐ Office assistance (Mailings, filing, phone contacts, equipment maintenance & procurement)
 - ☐ Membership in Imago: Recruiting, renewals, contacts.
 - ☐ Legacy Donations – Consider Imago in your will, donation of stock, or annual gifts.

Imago (*em ah go* is *Latin for imaging*) is a non-profit ecological education organization committed to living in harmony with the Earth & all it's inhabitants. We believe that the Earth is sacred and humans are part of a vast network of inter-dependent species.

To Become A Member Please Fill Out & Return

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ **State:** _____

Phone: home _____ **work** _____

Email: _____

I am enclosing:

- ☐ **\$35 Single Membership**
- ☐ **\$50 Household Membership**
- ☐ **\$75 Supporting Membership**
- ☐ **\$100 Sustaining Membership**
- ☐ **\$25 Fixed Income/Student Membership**

- ☐ **I would like to be a monthly contributor and support IMAGO on a regular basis. Enclosed is \$ _____, my first monthly contribution.**

**Return to: IMAGO, Inc
700 Enright Avenue
Cincinnati, OH 45205
513-921-5124**

website: www.imagoearth.org

Other Cincinnati Area Earth Oriented Organizations

Cincinnati Earth Institute

The Cincinnati Earth Institute (CEI) started as a program of Earth Connection, an organization that began in early 1997 with the first offering of the Voluntary Simplicity Course in Cincinnati. In August 2000, CEI became one of twelve regional institutes. All these regional institutes are all extensions of the Northwest Earth Institute (NWEI) founded by long-time earth activists Dick & Jeanne Roy, of Portland, Oregon in 1993. The Roes departed from their professional careers to develop a series of stimulating discussion courses meant to clarify personal values and attitudes on critical environmental issues. Since the closing of Earth Connection in June 2001, CEI mentors have transitioned the institute into a non-profit, fully volunteer-based organization.

The primary method for pursuing CEI's mission is through offering a series of interactive and supportive discussion courses. These include Voluntary Simplicity, Choices For a Sustainable Living, Discovering a Sense of Place, Deep Ecology and Globalization and Its Critics. In addition, CEI offers, on a regular basis, presentations of environmental topics.

Cincinnati Earth Institute
P.O. Box 30092
Cincinnati, OH 45230
513-207-0038
website: www.cinciearth.org.

Grailville

Visiting Grailville can give you a whole new appreciation for the simple idea of "arrival". Grailville's 300 acres of woods, gardens and trails provide a restorative calm and an inspirational backdrop for the House of Joy, a warm and inviting Victorian-style country home. Nearby, neat clusters of historic farm buildings have been converted into simple yet comfortable lodging and conference meeting center with space for self-development programs and workshops, personal retreats, educational programs, women's empowerment seminars and special occasions.

Grailville
932 O'Bannonville Road
Loveland, OH 45140-9705
Office: 513-683-2340 Office Hours: weekdays 9am to 5pm (EST)
Conference Center: 513-683-5548
website: www.grailville.org.

Highlands Nature Sanctuary

Just a few years ago, the Highlands Nature Sanctuary said "YES" to wilderness in Ohio. It was a brave response at the time, some would even say naïve. With zero dollars in our bank account and zero acres in deed, we existed by merely a name and a mission. Today, just a few years later, we have raised over \$5 million dollars and have purchased 1700 acres of some of the most beautiful forests in Ohio. Although we have made incredible accomplishments, we hope this is just the beginning. To bring wilderness back to Ohio requires the purchase of an immense amount of

land. We need the help of everyone who still believes wilderness is possible, and is willing to transform dreams into action.

Land Stewards bring multiple treasures to the Sanctuary. Not only do stewards fast-forward the Sanctuary's wilderness restoration, but they often become highly involved volunteers for the Sanctuary, bringing into the region new and highly-valued skills. Land cannot be protected as "Sanctuary" merely by an organization passively intending that it be so. Immersed in a culture in which visible land usage is the public proclamation of ownership, a nature preserve which owns land not obviously used must regularly defend its intention. This is an active, on-going educational process, and committed stewards who are also neighbors become voices of the land through their committed intentions and concern. Perhaps the best benefit of being a Land Steward is becoming part of the greater community of people in the area who love nature and volunteer for the Sanctuary. You couldn't meet a more wonderful and inspired group of people.

We think acting on behalf of land, life and biodiversity is the highest form of earth stewardship attainable by human beings today.

Highlands Nature Sanctuary
7629 Cave Road
Bainbridge, OH 45612
937-365-1935
website: www.highlandssanctuary.org

Michaela Farm

Michaela Farm is sponsored by the Sisters of St. Francis, Oldenburg, Indiana. It focuses on particular values representative of the Franciscan heritage. These values are the core of the programs and attitudes toward Earth. They seek to see all creation as "kin." The goal is to have a just relationship with all Creation. They are striving for sustainability, gratitude, hospitality and sharing.

Michaela Farm
P.O. Box 100
Oldenburg, IN 47036
For more information contac: Sister Carolyn Hoff
812-933-0661
<http://oldenburgfranciscans.org/michaelafarm/MichaelaFarm.htm>.

WEBSITES OF INTEREST

www.ecozoicstudies.org
www.brianswimme.org
www.earthlight.org
www.spiritearthnet.org
www.culturalcreatives.org
www.consciousevolution.net
www.metanexus.net
www.ThreeEyesOfUniverse.org
www.greenbeltmovement.org
www.awakeningearth.org
www.rainforestinfo.org.au
www.greenspirit.org.uk
www.thegreatstory.org
www.ions.org
www.ReligionandNature.com
www.deenametzger.com
www.spiritualityhealth.com
www.asaging.org
www.secondjourney.org
www.spiritualeldering.org
www.nwei.org
www.earthholders.org
www.theagingadventurer.com
www.wisdomcenter.org
www.ethicalwill.com
www.imagoearth.org
www.cinciearth.org
www.mosaicvoices.org
www.genesis.farm.org
www.simplyliving.net
www.thesacredfeminine.com

