

A REFLECTION ON THE TRAITS AND CAPACITIES OF FAMILY ELDERS

One of the most rewarding activities of this third stage of my life has been a study of the traits and capacities of elders through intimate connection with such remarkable members of the Human Community. I have benefited from their wisdom and, even more, by knowing the blessing of observing their lives in service to their communities. It is their service which assures the constant regeneration of those human societies of through their elder's gifts of hope, wisdom and resilience.

I have written this piece in the hope that as I describe the traits and characteristics of a family's elders that you will imagine who fulfills this role in your family and which of their traits they reflect.

Human history and pre-history records the critical roles elders have played in the continuity of human societies. All successful cultures reflect the position of those individuals, while many as they decay reflect the lack thereof. So, what has my research, my experience and my observation of true elders offered?¹

¹ Many readers may wish to know how elders provide service in their families communities. What do they do? They offer these societies, through their daily care of the communities' well being, the means to make the adaptations to their ways of living, and their decision making regarding how to reach their fifth generation in flourishing condition and then helping them thrive for many generations thereafter. They offer service that is above all compassionate, grounded in questioning, listening and humility. These qualities together represent the wizened helping hands of the elder who holds her community in her hands so it can safely evolve and survive. In my book, "Family; the Compact Among Generations," in Chapter 9, pages 107 – 113, and Chapter 12, pages 139 – 141, I discuss this question of what elders do. On page 107 I list "The Four Authorities" tribes grant to their elders. They are, and I quote: "(a) The authority to mediate disputes within the tribe, so that all members feel heard. No judgment of a dispute should result in some feeling like winners and others like losers, which destroys the fabric of the tribe; (b) The authority to advise the entire tribe when it is not following the decision-making rules the tribe adopted. Elders never seek to make those rules themselves, (c) The authority to tell the tribe's stories; (d) The authority to maintain and implement practices for carrying on the tribe's rituals and the ceremonies that memorialize them. These rituals mark the tribe's most important transitions; its children becoming adults, new members of

The nature of the human experience throughout our species' 200,000 years of existence has been to evolve through a series of three major life stages. The first stage: through childhood and adolescence; the second stage: adulthood, as house-holder, parent, and finder and server of vocation,; the third stage; the seeking of the spirit, of being, not doing, of giving back, of altruism and generativity. Nearly all the elders I know have gone through this process of evolution and are defined by their third stage lives.

However, there are exceptions! It is true that age often brings wisdom through experience; however, it doesn't always do so. Our current times suggest that our dominant population, the "Baby Boomers," are not evolving into elders as they reach their 60's. Instead they are continuing to exhibit, the same narcissism, me-ism, that has characterized them throughout their dominance as a population cohort. Age does not seem to be leading to the ripening of an altruistic state of being; the state of being that leads to being an authentic elder. No doubt my statement will provoke challenges and exceptions, and. I bow to them.

I have also observed a few quite young people who are deeply wise and act as elders within their communities. Often true elders seek the young out for special mentoring. These elders know that the young people will be the ones who will, in time, take their places in the larger world of leadership in their communities. This identifying and mentoring process is characteristic of true elders and has been practiced in all successful societies. So, yes, there are

affinity entering the tribe, primarily through marriage or life partnerships, tribal members achieving the status of elder, the deaths of tribal members, and electing new chiefs for peace and war."

exceptions to the rule that only enlightened individuals in its third stage of life are elders, however, they are only that, exceptions!

So what might the traits of a family elder be? While I am writing here about family elders I think these traits apply to all elders. It occurred to me that a series of words that begin with “disc” seemed to do it best. The words that came to mind were discernment, discreet, discretion, discipline and discovery, and their active senses, being discerning, being discreet, exercising discretion, being disciplined, and discovering. How strange that these five exceptional ways of being should all begin with the same letters and thus the same sound. What do these five traits connote in an elder?

DISCERNMENT/BEING DISCERNING

An elder carries within herself² the ability to discover where the larger truth lies on any issue she confronts in her family community,³ not simply what the facts suggest. She can do this because a part of her life’s journey has been learning to discover and to define. She uses this learned process to assist other’s to uncover theirs. She finds her truth by sorting through all the possible facts of the problem to find its core, its root. She constantly questions her findings. On one hand, objectively she asks “do the facts lead to a clear and unequivocal answer?” and on the other hand, subjectively she asks “doas my intuition take me away from reality or toward it?”

On discerning the truth of an issue she then builds up, through a review of the discrepancies

² I have elected to use the feminine for this essay. I have done this out of a belief that the spiritual paths of the Persians, Greeks, Romans, of Judaism and Buddhism, rightly see a mature female spirit as exemplifying pure wisdom. These same traditions see the path of a mature male as exemplifying pure compassion. While some readers may find this surprising, since their tradition suggests the opposite, my experience of true elders is that while they are deeply compassionate, they are better characterized as infinitely wise.

³ While I am always speaking of a family’s elders, I here will use the word “community” throughout the rest of this essay. I intend the words “family” and “community” to be interchangeable.

within her community that brought the issue to life, the way for the community to respond to that issue. Her suggestion will be one which the community can adapt to because of its capacity for resilience. A response the thinking community can integrate; a response that will strengthen the community and will not compromise it by harming it. In this way she discerns the depth and complexity of the question the issue poses and the best means for the community which engendered it to resolve it. She is practicing discernment.

DISCREET/BEING DISCREET An elder epitomizes the ability to hear all, see all, feel all, experience all and say very little or nothing. She is the person to whom all in her family turn to talk through their largest issues. Each knows that she will reveal nothing that is shared with her without explicit permission. Each community member also knows, tacitly, that the elder will use that information within the web of connection she maintains in her community entirely as she sees fit for the good of that individual and of the whole community. To be discreet is to know when transparency and when opacity is needed for the best outcome for all. She knows how much of the truth her community can bear. Her discreet way of communication demonstrates patient leadership as she does her work of knitting together and strengthening the strands of her community. These elders are the weaving spiders, the spinners and weavers of the threads of our lives individually and in community.

DISCRETION/EXERCISING DISCRETION

The elder constantly reflects on all aspects of a community issue after listening to everyone whose opinion bears on the question. She takes very seriously the possibility that she could be wrong. As the final arbiter of her community's most important issues, she knows that

her authority contains within it the seeds of the community's continued good health or its demise. She also appreciates that she is the holder of the wisdom of dozens of elders in her lineage or, in the case of some existing communities, even dozens of generations. She knows that each decision she makes will be honored seven generations from today as she honors those of seven generations ago who made her role today possible. She also feels that no one decision will matter as much as maintaining and reaffirming the process of decision-making that her lineage has built over the history of her community. Thus she is patient; she is prudent, and she is slow and deliberate in her decision making. She listens to all who have a view and then listens again to those whose views she has come to know, through her lifetime association with them, have a greater gift of vision of what is best for all, of altruism, than others have. Finally she will ask her ancestors for their wisdom on the matters before her. In this way she is exercising the discretion that is her hallmark. Her capacity for reflection, and prudence, which defines her capacity for discretion is the reason her community asked her, in an ages-old formal ritual, solemnized by ceremony, to be its elder, and then so anointed her.

DISCIPLINE/BEING DISCIPLINED

Human beings often resent being disciplined while failing to appreciate that without consistent regulation of our thoughts and behavior we remain childlike. A characteristic of an elder is that her behavior in all areas of her life is defined by interior regulations, constancy, consistency, perseverance, tolerance, and humor. It is the elder's virtue of prudence tempered by moderation in her that permits others to have confidence in her. The elder cultivates these behaviors throughout her life thus permitting her to serenely adapt to each situation confronting

her with aplomb, equanimity and dignity. In this way of being she is discipline personified; she is being disciplined.

DISCOVERY/THE ART OF DISCOVERING.

The elder exhibits this trait through her intuitive skill in observing, assessing and evolving the complex systems that make up her tribe: systems comprised of the evolving lives (a) of each individual tribe member; (b) of each family within the tribe; (c) of each clan within the tribe; (d) of the tribe as a whole; and (e) of the tribe's complex relationships with all the other tribes that form that society. She spends her days observing the lives of each of her tribe's members, seeking to discover each of their unique gifts and then fostering their development. She knows that each person's life contributes something positive to the tribe's continued existence. She seeks to learn what that contribution will be and then gently helps that individual member offer it.

Her method Questioning, Questioning, Questioning!! Always questioning herself first. Is she distorting her own truth? Is she being truthful to herself about what she is hearing and observing or is she trying to bend the truth to suit her desires rather than the tribe's and its individual member's best interest? What is she learning about herself in this process of discovery? Is she integrating her discoveries of herself and then is she able to appreciate that the new knowledge of self changes her objective and subjective self? Has she ceased to be a life long learner and so is offering left over answers because her love of discovering of self and others has been extinguished? Heaven forbid has she become an expert by ceasing to question herself and thereby ceased to be an elder!!!

To the families of the tribe she offers gentle mediation, often leavened with humor, of the complex issues each faces as it evolves. To young parents she is a matriarch and an ever-present maternal grandmother in whose arms the screaming children can find the quieting that permits over-committed mothers surcease and the time to regain balance. To parents of older children she offers wisdom on their nurturance, their education and on how to bring their dreams to life. She also offers gentle mediation when the stresses of the parents' individual lives and of their partnerships put them at risk. To families as a whole she offers mediation to help them with the natural ebbs and flows of their members' cycles of life and their transitions.

Finally, as a story-teller, she helps the tribe as a whole, constantly rediscover its lineage. She does this by helping them do seventh generation thinking and imagining so they can understand why the present is as it is, and discover in that present its course for the future. She offers stories that tell of her own personal journey, and of those of her mentors. She offers stories of the community's lineage; stories of its growth, of its collapse, of its heroes and heroines; stories of good and evil, of bounty and famine, of creation and decay. Always the stories speak in parable, in metaphor and in paradox. She sings like a bird and recounts like an orator. She changes her persona to offer masquerade for the imagination of the listeners. With exotic costume and voice she helps those struggling with current perils and anxieties by telling a particular story that illustrates other's safe passages through those same white waters. She offers this gift of story so they can apply their imaginative experience of safe passages to actually act out that behavior in the face of their current difficulties. She challenges the hearts and minds of her listeners to connect to their humanity, and place in creation. .

Thus through the discovery of the paths of the individual journeys through life of each member of her tribe, of its families, its clans, and of itself, using her method of questions of self and others, and as its story teller, she epitomizes the trait and art of discovery.

Now we have learned how the elder's behavior exhibits the five traits of discernment, being discreet, discretion, discipline and discovery, as the characteristics that define and govern her actions. Her way of being offers evidence of her authenticity and offers a picture of wisdom. I believe it is not surprising that when our ancestors imagined their goddess of wisdom, Astarte for the Persians, Isis for the Egyptians, Athena for the Greeks, Minerva for the Romans, Sophia for the Jews, Tara for the Buddhists, and Mary as wise elder woman for the Christians, that these are the traits that defined each of them. Were not our ancestors exhibiting the same consciousness that we exhibit today in so far as their observations of the behaviors that define us as humans and those few among us who are our elders? Our ancestors' observations of the traits of an elder and their manifestation in these wise women are as strong today as they were so long ago.

Many of you may be wondering, "How can I know if someone is an elder?" Isn't it likely that someone combining these traits is opaque, shuns the limelight and is by her nature seriously hard to discover? Even that she may not know she is an elder since healthy self deprecation must in some way be inherent in her, and modesty and humility normative behavior? Yes, she is hard to find, scarce as hen's teeth.⁴ So, how might one uncover one? My current

⁴ A wonderful example of the role of elders in the world is the Hasidic idea of the Tzadics, the Righteous ones. These are either 7 or 30 individuals, I have heard both numbers, who are alive at any time and whose lives sustain

sense is to look inside your own family's community's system for the person whose invitation to a convening of that community everyone accepts on receipt! The family community's gift to its elder or elders is this **AUTHORITY** to Convene.

I have come to wonder if it is by this authority that we know them. Think for a minute about all of the invitations you receive in a year and how few you accept. Some, of course, you accept out of duty, some out of responsibility, some out of your sense of your social status, some out of joy, some out of greed, most grudgingly and with some sense of their taking your time. How many do you accept immediately. Why? because my elder invites me – nothing more. I go because I would be bereft if I were not present at her convening and almost certainly not because it is convenient or socially important as it is not likely to be either. Rather it is a call to my heart as a member of her community, and I accept as a member in it. Additionally, should I choose to regret, is it not because I have ceased to be a member of that community? Is it not because I have ceased to hear its elder's voice? And thus I can comfortably ignore it? Thus, the elder appears through her ***authority to convene*** as she calls in the members of her community for dialogue, calls them in to reaffirm and celebrate its rituals and its ceremonies, calls them in for mediation, and calls it in for the telling of its stories and reconnection to and recitation of its lineage.

Yes, we do know her, and perhaps most easily and visibly, when she takes on her formal roles of authority, particularly as convener, as granted to her by her family community. Equally,

humanity, by providing to the human species the necessary balance for its survival. These righteous individuals do not know or intuit that they are among this group nor do they know one another. Simply they act from a place of gratitude and compassion grounded in love and expressed in altruism. Their actions uphold human existence in the face of human frailty in whatever ways humans express it. These are our elders and blessed are we that they stand for us in this righteous intercessory capacity; never seen, never heard, never felt and revered for a thousand years.

we will always rightly find it difficult to find her when she plays her day-to-day role of informal leadership and exercise her wisdom through discernment, through being discreet, through discretion leavened with the discipline gained by her experience, and all interwoven with her constant discovery and reconnection to the ever flowering wisdom of her lineage for the maintenance and flourishing of the human community of affinity she serves.

Now that we have some idea of the traits and characteristics of a family elder I hope your imaginations have been triggered so that you will observe who your family elders are and which of those traits they reflect.

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