

The Inner Work of Conscious Eldering **by Ron Pevny**

The aging process seems to bring out either the best or the worst in people— magnifying and emphasizing the flaws and shadow elements of some of us; amplifying the wisdom, radiance and compassion in others. Some develop those qualities that have traditionally been honored in elders, while others seem to merely become old. An important question carried by those of us committed to an elderhood of fulfillment, service and joy is, “how can my aging bring out the *best* in me?” The inner work that I call “conscious eldering” holds important answers to this question.

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

LIFE REVIEW

If the essence of conscious eldering is increasing awareness, then its core practice is Life Review. Wisdom does not automatically come from having experiences. Wisdom comes from reflecting on one’s life experiences. There are many ways of doing Life Review and many available resources. Some entail *structured exercises* to focus on challenges, learning and growth during the stages of one’s life, and they use pen, computer or art materials as tools. *Oral history work* with a knowledgeable friend or guide can be a powerful catalyst for remembering and finding the significance in life experiences. Whichever method most resonates with us, what is critical is doing it. The awareness we gain is what makes virtually all the other inner work possible and effective.

HEALING THE PAST

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

RECONTEXTUALIZING

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

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

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

CREATING LEGACY

We all leave a legacy—positive, negative or mixed—to the generations that follow us. Aging consciously implies becoming aware of the legacy we have created up to this point in our lives and being intentional about the legacy we want to create in our elderhood. As we review our lives and work to bring healing to the past, we help ourselves to acknowledge and build on the positives of this evolving legacy, and we free up the energy needed to identify and move forward in building the legacy that is our gift to the future. Here again, a growing spiritual connection that allows us to see clearly our unique calling and gifts as an elder is key. This *experience* of calling (which is more powerful than a concept, an idea or a “should” alone) helps us become aware of the legacy we truly want to leave and of the path that will help us realize this goal. It opens our heart,

strengthens our intention, focuses our action and taps our spiritual depths so that we bring our *whole* selves to the creation of legacy.

LETTING GO

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

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

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