

Moving From Who We Have Been to Who We Can Become

By Ron Pevny

I am often asked to define *conscious eldering* and explain how it is different than *conscious aging*. Those questions serve as the catalyst for this article.

Aging *consciously* means becoming more and more aware: of our emotions, our passions, our sense of purpose and calling. It means becoming able to distinguish what is most authentically ourselves from those many voices and images within us that are conditioned by the society around us. It means becoming aware of and working to heal those inner dynamics—unhealed wounds, unforgiven resentments, disempowering regrets and negative self-perceptions, that will invariably sabotage our best intentions for living and serving fully and passionately as we age. And perhaps most importantly, aging consciously involves deepening our connection with the spiritual dimension of our lives, because this is the source of our truest vision for what is possible for us, of our experience of being supported in living that vision, and of the strength we need to do the difficult work of clearing out the old baggage that must be transformed if we are to live with peace and passion as we age.

It certainly can benefit each of us, as well as the community around us, if we become more conscious as we age. However, I see *conscious eldering* as taking the commitment to aging consciously a step further. *Conscious eldering* implies recognition of an inner calling to the role of elder as we age, and commitment to growing into that role, with our work to become conscious supporting this commitment. *Elder* is a role and elderhood a life stage that has been critical for the wellbeing of the world's cultures since time immemorial, but which has been lost in today's world. It was the elders whose role was to embody the wholeness and share the hard-won wisdom that their communities needed to survive and thrive, especially in difficult times when the ability to see the bigger picture was critical. It was the elders who recognized the responsibility to share the fruits of their lives and experiences with the younger generations. It was in elderhood, as physical abilities weakened and day-to-day responsibilities lessened, that people could more strongly focus on their inner lives and on allowing Spirit to shine through, so that their biggest impact came more through the wholeness of their *being* than through the amount of their *doing*.

While modern culture no longer acknowledges the role of elder, and the word “elderly” connotes diminishment and frailty, the inner call to true elderhood as we age is still there. It is an archetypal dynamic built into each of us which seeks expression as we begin to move from the stage of mid-life adulthood into our 60s and 70s. Many of us are unable to hear this call because it speaks to us in a language of feelings, experiences and intuitions that is foreign to our culture and its

values. Others may sense this call, especially in times of inner or outer crisis when we are potentially most open to our inner guidance, but try to ignore it. In either case, by not responding to the call to elderhood we run the risk of stagnation and depression. The nature of life is growth through stages, and when growth is prevented, living things, including us humans, wither.

A reality that has largely been forgotten by modern culture is that our human psyches develop (or at least try to develop when we give them the opportunity) in stages. Each new stage presents us with challenges and opportunities for growth. As one stage is nearing its natural completion, we have the choice to either try to hold on to what has been (risking withering and loss of our aliveness in doing so) or to embrace the process of transition and allow ourselves to move into the unfamiliar yet potential-filled territory of the new stage that is calling us.

Some modern psychologists recognize what traditional peoples knew well and embodied in the rites of passage that were so critical for the growth of their members—that healthy transition between life stages is a three phase process, with all the phases being critical.

The first phase is *severance*. This is when we take stock of our lives and who we have become, with our mix of strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, seeking to learn and distill wisdom from our many experiences. We become aware of and begin to release or heal attitudes, fears, beliefs, behaviors, attachments and self-identifications that may (or may not) have served us in the past but will certainly not serve us in the future we envision for ourselves.

The second phase of transition is sometimes called liminal time, reflective of the fact that during a successful transition process, we must encounter the *limits* of our former selves and step beyond. This stage is more often called *the neutral zone*, first proposed by psychologist William Bridges in his excellent books on transition. This is time of being betwixt and between life stages, often feeling lost and confused with no map to follow into the future, knowing that who we have been doesn't feel alive anymore and may not even be possible to continue, but not knowing who we have the potential to grow into. While the neutral zone is difficult, it is through allowing ourselves to experience this discomfort and disorientation without grasping for the certainty of clear goals and direction, that the vision, creativity and strength that will define our elderhood will begin to emerge according to a timing that comes from layers of us deeper than ego.

As we emerge from the neutral zone, we begin to enter the phase known as *reincorporation*, or *new beginnings*. This is when we begin to experience a new life stage beginning, with gradually increasing clarity about who we can become, what brings us meaning and purpose and how we can best serve life in the new chapter we are entering.

My Center for Conscious Eldering gives participants experience of each of these

dynamics of transition in our Choosing Conscious Elderhood retreats which have strong roots in the rite of passage tradition as well as the wisdom of Sage-ing. One of the most profound experiences in all my 12 years of work with these retreats involved our retreat group sharing profound awe as, over several days, we watched three caterpillars undergo transformation within a wire enclosure on a table in our meeting room in Vermont. The retreat center owner had carried them, along with bunches of the milkweed they feed on, from a verdant hillside to this enclosure. As each caterpillar clung to a small branch, it gradually turned into a chrysalis, losing all its caterpillar characteristics and becoming a liquid green fluid contained within a translucent ovular membrane. The caterpillars had entered their version of the neutral zone, no longer what they were but clearly not yet what they would become. That green fluid contained a pattern or image for the butterfly that would emerge from the goo when the inner process was complete. Then over a couple of days we began to see within each chrysalis vague outlines of a new form beginning to develop. On the final day of our retreat, as we were reflecting on what we had learned about the dynamics of our own transitions, one chrysalis broke open and a magnificent, fragile, wet Monarch butterfly emerged. It needed an hour to dry its delicate wings in the sun, and shortly before our retreat ended we opened the enclosure and it off it flew to begin its new life. Shortly thereafter we left that place to begin new chapters in our journeys toward new life as conscious elders.

Parts of this article are excerpted from Ron Pevny's upcoming book on conscious eldering to be published next summer by Beyond Words/Atria Books