

Thomas Owen-Towle

Minns Lecture VI

MEN AND AGING

GRAYING GRACEFULLY AND BECOMING ELDERS

Given May 7, 2003

Let us take care of the children, for they have a long way to go.

Let us take care of the elders, for they have come a long way.

*Let us take care of those in between, for they are doing the
work.*

African prayer

Setting the Stage

Aging starts the moment we burst from the womb, but it's a weightier concern, the older we get. The challenge is this: Can men become elders not merely elderly? Can we gray gracefully, whether or not we choose to darken our hair with paint?

But what specific age range will furnish my target audience in this final lecture? It all depends. Carl Jung (1875-1961), the eminent Swiss psychologist, back in 1933, wrote about the "the afternoon of life" as starting between the thirty-fifth and fortieth years, but life-expectancy was much shorter in his day. Our 35 year-old son is hardly contemplating the second half of life yet; he's just emerging into fullness of adulthood.

Gail Sheehy in *Understanding Men's Passages: Discovering the New Map of Men's Lives*, inspired by her husband's struggle with a mid-life career plight, focuses on the fears and self-doubts of men over 40 who battle identity crises both at work and with their partners and children.

So, men, 40 and over, will hopefully feel covered in my culminating presentation, since it addresses the watershed period of male menopause when hormones including testosterone—and therefore potency and sex drive—drop. From forty on, men suffer from irritability and mood swings; virility and vitality wane.

Jed Diamond, in his groundbreaking, exhaustively researched book entitled *Male Menopause* (1997) demonstrates that this condition of men is far more than merely a midlife crisis. Male menopause is a profound medical, psychological, and emotional reality for millions of men and the women who love them. As Diamond puts it: “Men at midlife often experience the loss of power, passion, potency, and purpose.”

Sheehy cites statistics that claim more than 52% of men between the ages of 40 and 70 can expect some degree of impotence which translates into at least 20 million men. If not addressed, it can be an underlying cause of despair, divorce, even suicide.

In addition to male menopause and impotence, there are the mid-and-late life challenges of the empty-nest syndrome, job downsizing, and the stresses on partnership that retirement brings. As the quip goes: “I married you for better and for worse, but not for lunch!”

Sheehy puts it succinctly: “We need an expanded definition of manliness.” This entire lecture series on “Save the Males” would strongly concur, although my responses prove broader, perhaps bolder, than her prescribed remedies. Yet if we think of aging not as a disease but as a series of negotiable passages, then men can muster hopeful responses and results.

Therefore, I’m essentially concentrating on the “second adulthood” that begins between ages 40 and 50, or simply that era when men are rethinking, even reinventing, our lives in order to make a “preemptive strike against sameness and sourness” to use Sheehy’s picturesque phrase. The key challenge is to become proactive rather than reactive males at this crossroads in our journeys. As Abraham Lincoln warned: “A man is responsible for his own face after forty.” Indeed, we are.

Remember Odysseus, the daring King of Ithaca and hero of the Greek legend, who would have been about 50 when the great series of adventures described in Homer’s *Odyssey* was coming to an end, and perhaps close to 70 when he began his last escapade? Odysseus’ spirit was so

dauntless and resilient that the poet Tennyson chose Ulysses as the subject of his grand poem dedicated to the thesis that only death can end the creative searching of such a man—and possibly not even death.

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

Indeed, for some men, aging is not a barrier but a bridge to brighter and more beautiful things.

One of our Unitarian Universalist brothers in his 40's, upon learning that I might be entitling my lecture "Graying Gracefully," said: "Whoa, I've been counting on life beginning at 50, not ending there. I've understood that everything up until the graying years is training, and it's in the 50-65 year age range that we want to take all we've learned and make our true mark on the world. Given this, I hope your lecture won't be about retirement but about rejuvenation into what would ideally be my most alive years yet."

Feelings noted, my brother. I'll do what I can.

I offer another sobering amendment, from the older end of the spectrum. John Updike, at 70, wrote in his most recent novel, *Seek My Face*, that "in old age...everything wears thin—the skin thins and declares its sun damage, the cartilage thins and bones grind one upon another, the membrane between what one feels and what one says thins." So, keep me in check if I start waxing romantic about this unstoppable aging process—a condition surely not for sissies, as Art Linkletter, who just turned 90, soberly notes.

And I can't keep myself totally out of the picture either. Hence, my own aging update. I've just completed full-time ministerial service of 35 years, and, while I'm not formally retired, I will presumably play and volunteer more than consult and work in the days ahead. At least that's my plan, but passion and money have a way of derailing things, so my soul remains wide-open to life's shifting winds. I usually tell people "I've just commenced, not retired. I'm transitioning into a new chapter of my evolving tale."

How do things feel from my present perch? Well, my body's full of weird aches and ailments. My runs are shorter, actually more like fast walks. All my physical drives are waning. Strange stuff's growing on my body. I used to be a whiz with names; I'm merely an above average rememberer now. I'm more desirous of viewing than climbing mountains. I unapologetically need and grab more sleep. I'm frustrated more easily. I both need people less and more—a curious state of affairs.

My competitive urges are giving way to contemplative moods. So, although I may enter a tennis tournament or two in the years up ahead, I'm more likely to take up yoga to arouse my sagging spirit and realign my gnarled body. Nearing 62, I'm ready, make that eager, to garner my social security checks as well as grab my share of discounts at movies and restaurants. I'm not shutting down by a long shot, but I'm slowing down.

So, here goes, some ruminations upon the elderring process, mulched in the soil of my soul. Brothers of all ages, listen in, glean what proves useful, and shuck the rest. And sisters, these sentiments are delivered straightway from my heart to yours as well.

The Eldering Context

The old must live in the young like a grounding force that tames the tendency towards bold but senseless actions and shows them the path of wisdom. In the absence of elders, the impetuosity of youth becomes the slow death of the community.

Malidoma Patrice Some

Our elders seldom became senile because they were needed right to the end.

Lavina White (Haida Nation, Alaska)

The root of the word old means “to nourish.” Old age was originally associated with strength not weakness. As James Hillman observes in *The Force of Character*, “the old were regarded as stable depositories of customs and legends, guardians of local values, experts in skills and crafts, and valued voices in the communal council. What mattered was force of character proven by length of years.”

The gray-heads, in ancient times, served as the sacred mentors in their villages, being finally deemed smart and free enough to make significant, enduring contributions. They would sit at the gates of cities imparting wisdom to the younger men. A man among men, the elder was sought after for crucial guidance, nurture, and understanding of life. To sit in the circle of such sages was actually the lifelong pursuit of young men.

To be sure, few of these older guys were truly brilliant, compassionate, and exemplary, but they had endured the slings and arrows of existence. They were still awake and had earned the right to be heard. The older men needed to open their mouths, and the less experienced ones needed to open their ears. A soulful covenant of speaking-and-listening was struck.

But, in current society, especially in the West, the opposite situation prevails. Our would-be elders are frequently seen playing shuffle board in parks, watching inane sitcoms at home, hunkering down in retirement homes, medicating themselves out of reality, frantically trying to reverse the inexorable erosions of time, or simply waiting around to close up shop.

There are exceptions to be sure; not all sages and crones are entrapped or warehoused, lonely or lost, societal throwaways. There exists a growing number of programs that invite, sometimes even employ, our elders in schools, businesses, community organizations.

We're recognizing now that seniors, unless very frail, are capable of making valuable contributions. They furnish the backbone of our large and growing volunteer economy, where they help out in abundant public services—education, environmental work, business consultation, and caregiving.

Marc Freedman writes in *Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America*: “America’s burgeoning older population is poised to become the new trustees of civic life in this country.” Contrary to the predictions that elders will only drain resources, a growing number of retirees are giving back more than they’re taking—and receiving psycho-spiritual nourishment in the process. In a study of “Leaps in Literacy”, 94% of older volunteers report having grown personally through their tutoring with children, and 83% said they felt more connected to the community. Clearly, the benefits are crossgenerational.

But let's not get carried away. On the whole, rarely do we see senior men being the "grounding force" in American society that some urge. How many men can you name making things with little boys or engaged in meaningful discourse with younger folks?

This poses not only a personal problem but a social one as well. Our aging men are frequently disregarded and despondent, saddled with a succession of privations: of financial means, of energy and achievement, of motivation, and saddest of all, poverty of hope and affection.

Aging can make men psychologically more vulnerable, brittle, and prone to self-destruction. By age sixty the rate for successful suicides is at least five times as high for men as for women. Also, men of sixty or older kill themselves at rates approximately four times greater than men under twenty. Clearly, for too many males, seniority doesn't deliver security, wisdom, serenity, mellowness and philosophical acceptance.

Our elders need assistance and support.

The Church Must Companion Men From Boyhood to Elderhood

How will our global community evolve sustainable social and spiritual structures for an aging population? Did you know there are now an estimated 629 million people in the world age 60 and over? By 2050, that number is projected to grow to almost 2 billion, and—for the first time in human history—the world will have more people 60 and over than children under age 15.

Are not seniors real, live folks with continuing needs to forgive and be forgiven, to deepen and broaden their journeys as long as they breathe? Is there any holier task for a religious community to assume than enabling our sages and crones to complete their jaunts with as much generativity and integrity as possible? Is that not the mission of a church, mosque, sangha, or temple: being a center of redemption and renewal that helps elders stay vital until the grave?

Even as we peruse our own liberal religious ranks, we take those in their 60's and above, grossly for granted. We either assume they'll keep on doing what they've always done or we infer that, due to waning energy, they can't do much of anything anymore, so we stop asking them. Let them be, let them go, let them fade...away. Across the boards we pay less and less attention to our aging and aged brothers and sisters.

One man in our home congregation was a full-fledged leader for over four decades. Charles had more than paid his dues. He was a consummate *steward*: literally a “keeper of the hall,” *our* hall, during fair and foul weather.

But when Charles progressed from being a well-aging to an ill-elderly man, and couldn't attend church much anymore, he was dropped like a hot potato. Less vital and less visible than in his heyday, Charles was basically forgotten, not due to mean-spirited intention, but simply lack of consistent attention. Although we mustered a fine caregiving program, Charles, like others, somehow got lost in the cracks.

As he put it: “Just when I needed my church the most, it wasn't there for me!” But Charles didn't quit; that wasn't his way. Nonetheless, I know he suffered.

That's a story that could be retold in every one of our Unitarian Universalist congregations across the land. I recount it not to make laity and religious professionals feel guilty but to motivate us to be aggressive caregivers, with all ages of members, from start to finish. As our babies need our regular, caring touch, so do our seniors.

One of the earliest, and most influential, motivations for my entrance into ministry was accompanying our pastor, when I was a pre-teenager, while he made house and hospital calls to seniors. And later on in my actual ministry, I've invariably walked away from interactions with elders feeling that I've just experienced the most privileged and sacred of connections.

One of my aspirations, as my life unfolds after full-time work, is to return to the primal source of my call: to visit elders, in their places of residence, building authentic, affectional bonds through touch and song, conversation and games. I will arrive neither as pastor nor family member but as human kin. I want to assist them in living more creatively, lovingly, and serenely during their homestretch. In blessing them, I will be blessed in return.

Our seniors sorely need external prods and nudges to keep their engines running. Especially the men, who've lived lives of rugged independence and who are less adept, although just as hungry, at navigating social communion. I'll be doing this out of duty and joy but also because of enlightened self-interest; for I'm aging too, and want to keep in vital spiritual shape as a late junior fast becoming an early senior.

After all, I'll shortly be their peer, numbered among the sages, perhaps dwelling in their midst, not just visiting. And I'm not embarrassed or chagrined to confess that I'll covet the touch and sight and words of some of you younger guys in the room tonight, even as you'll someday need the brothers coming along after you.

JUST DO IT: Ways to Honor our Sages

The spiritual eldering process entails migrating from aging to saging where elderhood is a state of consciousness that rises in the context of physiological aging, where the psyche issues a call for us to engage in life completion, a process that involves specific tasks, such as coming to terms with our mortality, healing our relationships, enjoying our achievements and leaving a legacy for the future.

Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi

Legion are the reasons why we fail our elders: we're squeamish around them, we're frightened of our own graying, we loathe seeing vital people decline, or we've got to build our church around the givers not the takers, or you name it. There are plenty of explanations but none good enough to excuse abandonment of our sages and crones.

Caring about seniors shouldn't wait until they're housebound. We've got to start the honoring process much earlier. What if we launched a bridging celebration of some substance for our elders (60+), thanking them for their savvy and service and liberating them to participate in fresh ways during the golden years? Our churches currently schedule bridging ceremonies for almost every other era-of-passage: for babies, for coming of age youth, for young adults. Why not foster programs and rites explicitly for our seniors?

If we want our elders to celebrate not merely tolerate their final years, this will require special attention from our beloved communities. Again, are not our churches the places where deep, durable confirmation of men must transpire at every stage, from birth to death? We abdicate this responsibility at grave cost to our individual and institutional souls.

Rev. Nancy Arnold from our Akron, Ohio church, in collaboration with lay leaders, has inaugurated a *Circle of Elders*, where one must be at least 60 years old, a member of the church for 20 or more years, and have demonstrated over the course of membership a strong involvement in the on-going work of the church. These folks are recognized and respected for their leadership, promotion, and support of their chosen parish. Like elders in the Native American tradition, they, in turn, are asked to advise the chiefs and teach the children, since they have more time than the younger generation. As this congregation puts it:

Traditionally, in the West, men were asked to be Elders; in the East, it was the women. Since we're in the Midwest, we will draw from both men and women when choosing the Elders in our church. Each one passes on a bit of wisdom from their life experience to the younger generations. This way, the wisdom is carried from one generation to the next, and the circle of life experience is not broken.

There's an ancient Hindu proverb that says, "Don't cut down the wisdom tree." In our western culture, the elders are not seen as valuable and wise. Youth and vital energy are elevated at the expense of anyone who is not young and healthy. Our UU tradition teaches us to value all ages; hence, we must draw from the wisdom of all ages.

In San Diego, we've occasioned long-standing crowning ceremonies for women (55 years of age and above) and are developing equally relevant and cherished rites for saluting the sages in our ranks. No flawless ways exist to recognize our elders, so congregations must experiment and explore modes that are satisfying to partakers. The need is long overdue; truly, of increasing urgency. As the Nike ad exhorts: Just do it!

Our Men's Fellowship has honored our senior brothers in a potpourri of venues. We ensure that every panel discussion of men includes an elder's perspective. And periodically, sometimes planned and other times spontaneous, we invite our elders (60+) to stand/or sit in the middle of our entire brothering community. Then, for a few moments, the outer contingent of men affirms the innate worth and stature of the older men—showering them with chants, kudos, and caresses. The elders aren't allowed to respond or reciprocate; they're mandated to soak in the gratitude. They're solely blessed.

On other occasions we invite our elders to dwell in the midst of the circle and face outward toward the younger men. This time they speak their pieces, each for several minutes. Our older kin voice past aches, current passions, and future hopes. Or we schedule times for the younger men to solicit from the elders lessons pertinent to their specific age: 25 or 40 or 55. And the gathered sages reflect back upon what they knew and didn't know at 25 or 40 or 55.

There is palpable hunger both for the elders to transmit their hard-won wisdom and for the youngers to receive it. A full-fledged blessing transpires as tales are told of fierce storms and tamed tigers, grievous losses and wondrous highs. Whatever the overall theme of our men's conference might be (ranging from ending men's violence to reclaiming our bodies to deep playfulness to becoming earth stewards to finding our life's call), there's always sacred time set aside for elder-younger communion.

The Growth Goes Both Ways

If you're not being admired by an older man, you're being hurt; if you're an older man and you're not being admired by a younger man, you're being hurt.

Robert Moore

I'm not sure how much actual blessing-and-being-blessed occurs for men at work-stations, during home lives, or in fraternal organizations. My measured observation is: not enough, and what there is, doesn't travel deep enough. Consequently, the main load of spiritual eldering needs to be carried by our religious tribes. And why not? We're intentionally built to foster deep brothering.

Now, brothering doesn't have to be structured as formal mentoring, although that's vitally needed in our culture. Just having older and younger men together—eating and sleeping, hiking and conversing, drumming and singing, dancing and weeping—for weekends in the mountains or evenings in the church parlor delivers soul-stretching camaraderie.

My buddy George, now in his 70's, an active member of our Men's Fellowship for years, went on to cultivate the brothering vineyards in Canada. He's currently summing up his life through vignettes, principally written for his four boys, assorted other relatives, and friends. George

relates that definitive studies have shown that men who experience the most successful old ages with respect to health, happiness, and comfort, possess in common one major criterion: *regular involvement with people younger than they are*.

I'm convinced one of the reasons my mother has maintained a vital life-will at the age of 95 is because she still engages, however simply and shortly, friends, both male and female, who represent most every decade of life, starting with babies up to fellow nonagenarians. When I last visited Mom, a three-year-old little girl, Anya, who lives with her folks in the duplex above, specifically came with her own mother to pay a visit. Upon entering the door, she burst forth: "Hello, Mary" and rushed to give my Mom a bighearted hug.

Psychologist Erik Erikson talks about the major challenges for our mature years being affiliation, generativity, and ego-integrity. All three are met when seniors and juniors interact meaningfully with visits, talks, projects, embraces.

Younger men are invariably fed by the sagacity of their older brothers: wisdom that includes travesties as well as triumphs, interspersed with tons of hard-earned comebacks. They flourish in being blessed. And the elders ripen in being able to bless younger guys, who, after all, will be inheriting the earth after the graybeards are gone.

Tears flow from all corners of the room in these salvational exchanges. The elders are saved by being affirmed; the younger are saved by being fed. Saving flows in both directions.

Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, nearing death, addressed Congress with these poignant sentiments: "The true, moral test of a country is what we do with those at the *dawn* of life (our children), with those enduring the *shadows* of life (our oppressed), and with those entering the *twilight* of life (our elders)." Sound doctrine, sound doctrine indeed!

Senior after senior moans about how we lose our primary identity and value when we stop working or producing. But our worth is regained through such intergenerational rituals and encounters. Why? Because we feel accepted for our innate personhood not our measured productivity. Elders need to feel validated for our past, confirmed for who we are now, and knighted for unimagined sacred ventures ahead. Men come to our retreats, locked in procrustean beds of denigrating labels such as "old farts and old geezers"; they leave liberated as elders.

Brother Michael spoke for many senior men when he wept with joy in telling us: “Being able to bless some of you guys alongside you blessing me in return stands as a highlight of my life. We’ve just shared what I never got growing up as a boy, never risked in my young adult years, and never expected during the twilight years. Thanks to this incomparable time of blessing and being blessed. I can now proudly walk off into the woods and complete my journey. It’s enough. I’m done now. Keep the blessings flowing!”

Michael died within the year. At peace with himself and his universe.

Men Blessing and Being Blessed

*My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.*

*While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.*

William Butler Yeats

Introduction

Upon turning fifty, the Irish bard, W. B. Yeats, penned this pivotal poem about blessing and being blessed by the world. He actually phrased it: “that I was blessed and could bless” which, in truth, captures the proper spiritual order. For we are first blessed by Creation, then we return the favor. Humans don’t initiate the blessing process, we merely ignore or confirm it. But for

purposes of this lecture, I want to start with our *doing*, the classic male condition, then close with *being*, a tougher charge.

The genius of Yeats' admonition is that it challenges men to mature both as givers and receivers. Evolving manhood is solely equatable neither with the passive tone of quietude nor with the activist demeanor of proficiency. Eldering requires both in rhythmic measure.

I exhort men, 50 and above, to be bilateral, to move ambidextrously and agilely between both blessing and being blessed as we saunter down life's lane. After all, a mature liberal religious masculinity, the mission of the brothering quest, is quintessentially about balance. As Carl Jung summed it up: "The definition of maturity is holding greater and greater opposites without coming apart."

Maintaining equilibrium is an essential skill for aging men, since we're prone to vault out of kilter, uncognizant of the need to square "being still and still moving," as T. S. Eliot puts it. One of my prized art possessions is a weighty bronze sculpture created by Carol Gold, entitled *Equilibrio*: in Spanish, meaning the "balancing one."

Equilibrio visually depicts the balancing act of the brother-spirit quest where men are charged to maintain equipoise between the enticements of spirit and body, friendship and solitude, desire and wound, work and play, poetry and politics, descent into earth and ascent into the heavens, hermitage and knightly endeavor, fierceness and tenderness. And in the case of elders, blessing and being blessed.

On the desk in my study, stands this robust male figure, surely an elder, one arm thrust outward for intimacy, the other upward in yearning. The left leg is lifted, the right one is planted firmly on the narrow, precarious path of life. *Equilibrio*, the balancer, gazes inward for strength without falling into the dizzying depths of the abyss. Responsive, courageous, awake elders are summoned to walk this rail.

Seniors need to be just as balanced physically, emotionally, and spiritually as little boys, young men, and mid-lifers do. Naturally, the age-appropriate tasks are different for 10 or 30 or 50 or 70

or 90 year-old males, but the quest for equilibrium is everlasting. Elder energy produces and yields, serves and surrenders.

Growing old is arguably the most arduous passage we humans navigate, a mixed-blessing to be sure. But men can unmix it some if we become versatile in our blessing efforts. In either mode, giving or receiving, brothers can fulfill one of my favorite scriptures on maintaining an evergreen awareness: “In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap.” (Psalm 92:14)

Our perpetual goal in aging is not perfection but completion, finishing well. Our final laps as men should be ones where we still produce fruit, utterly “green and full of sap,”—but not primarily through performing or producing. It’s tough for men to be still and feel adequate, to be full of sap...sitting, without directing or marshaling anything or anyone...just being quiet, letting go of outcomes, and allowing the sap to drip. One is reminded of the stanza from a fine Jane Kenyon poem:

*Let it come as it will, and don't
Be afraid. God does not leave us
Comfortless, so let evening come.*

Erik Erikson says the final life-crisis revolves round “integrity versus despair.” Well, integrity means displaying wholeness and embodying dignity during our closing laps. To do and be so, men will need to live alternately as givers and receivers: blessing and being blessed.

Blessing

We need to shift from aging to saging, which entails acting as guide, mentor, and agent of healing and reconciliation on behalf of the planet, nation, tribe, clan, and family—becoming wisdom keepers.

Schachter-Shalomi

Let’s view men in the active voice, the mode of blessing.

Elders are consciously engaged in life, harvesting all the way home, developing character, unwilling to disappear during life's third act. We track Shakespeare's wisdom: "This is to be new born when thou art old, to see thy blood warm when thou feels't it cold." Elders keep our embrace wide open. We exude "the gift of intelligent rage," knowing what things to fight and what things to disregard. Here are three ways to remain in the active voice, in order to be a blessing of the Creation.

Serving Others

*And if I ever touched a life, I hope that life knows that
I know that touching was and still is and will always be
the true revolution.*

Nikki Giovanni

First, elders refuse to narcotize ourselves with medicine or idleness and instead focus on interests of note and challenges of substance. Bingo may suffice as an intermittent diversion but not as a fulfilling activity for elders. One of the ways men stay vital is by undertaking tasks of worth—not to earn money or applause but to enhance our souls.

The key thing to remember is that nobody, at any age, ever finds life worth living, but, as minister Harry Emerson Fosdick used to say: "One always has to *make* it worth living by an interior, creative, spiritual contribution of their very own."

Elders have lived long enough to know that worthwhileness isn't found in a book, or under a rock, or in a foreign land. You don't get it from gurus, gold, or even gods. You make life worth living.

In the years ahead, I plan to continue to make my life valuable by assisting those on both ends of the age spectrum, children and seniors, to become more visible and audible. I hope to tutor children in schools and coach little leaguers. As an elder-volunteer I want more hands-on connection and less overall accountability.

And as I noted earlier, I also plan to enter nursing homes and sing to and with those in their 70-90's, reclaiming melodies of yesteryear in order to induce a bounce in their step and some spark in their eyes. I'll take my older life-companions on walks around the block, play zany, non-competitive physical games, and perform magic tricks. My goal is to keep their motors running by being an unabashed joy-bringer. From here on out, my lcard will read and my character will reflect: **merry-maker**.

We elders would do well to grow in alignment with the prayerful challenge of Dwight Judy in order for our masculine spirit to serve its part in transforming society:

Send me into the village square, send me into the schools, send me into the day camps for children, send me into the task of creating beauty, send me into the business world to create more jobs, send me into the political world to struggle for the values I hold dear, send me into the earth as her son, to love her and to cherish her. Send me to help create the 'thousand healths and hidden isles' not even yet imagined. Amen.

May it come to be: yes, may we men be integral partners in serving a vision that will enable such a just and joyous world to be born.

Taking Risks

Be patient with yourself. You're growing brain. That's literally true. If you continually introduce new learning situations and put yourself at some risk, even an older, developed brain can sprout new foliage and make new neural connections.

Gail Sheehy

To be sure, we need to keep growing our brains. For growth is evidence of life. A veteran American poet was asked how he kept young in spirit, and he pointed to the cherry tree in blossom, asking in turn, "Where are the blossoms?" The answer was "On the new wood." It's the young branches that have the blossoms and bear fruit. Elders, like trees, keep on going by growing new life.

The Canadian novelist Robertson Davies claimed that the finest gift we can exhibit during our senior years is curiosity: “Curiosity about something. Enthusiasm. Zest. That’s what makes old age a delight. One has seen so much yet is eager to see more. You’re not getting older, you’re getting nosier.” Or as I would put it: when we’re young, we yield to noisiness; when we’re older, we unleashed to focus on nosiness!

Furthermore, while life may be more uncertain and health less stable, expectations and pressures are lifted in our saging years so we can become curious, nay brazen, adventurers. We have earned the right to be freer and fiercer. Elders can venture tasks without specific purpose yet ones laden with great meaning. Chances can be taken now that we didn’t risk earlier, because we have less to lose—certainly not promotions or even adulation.

Taking risks means removing our armor, or as a male friend vividly describes: “elderhood is the time to dismantle our vertical coffins,” that is, to soak in every waking moment as a precious gift. Emily Bronte offers a pertinent poem:

Yes, as my swift days near their goal,

‘tis all that I implore;

In life and death a chainless soul,

With courage to endure.

Bronte pinpoints two critical gifts for the homestretch: **freedom** (“a chainless soul”) and **bravery** (“courage to endure”). The combination of these two will hold sages in good stead.

When we retire (or “graduate from work” as one teenager mused), it’s the season to re-tire, as in “put on new treads.” It’s a golden opportunity to explore innovative realities—perhaps gardening around church grounds, tutoring in prisons, taking up bird-watching, or joining the peace corps as one brother did.

I love the playful exchange in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*:

“You are old, Father William,” the young man said,

*“And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?”*

*“In my youth,” Father William replied to his son,
“I feared it might injure the brain;
But now that I’m perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I’d do it again and again.*

Elders are, at long last, more willing to venture upside-down attitudes and behaviors because we’re less worried about the world’s judgment or, alas, even our own brains.

Last Fall, elder Cliff Kindy, an organic farmer from Indiana who once stood up to Colombian rebels, led a 10 day anti-war delegation to Iraq of about a dozen senior citizens from the United States and Canada. Kindy figured his intrepid venture might force the Bush administration to think twice about attacking or invading Iraq. “You get about 500 grandmas and grandpas from around the world and you scatter them around Iraq, as human shields, and dare the U.S. to bomb them. That would give us some collective moral authority.”

I exhort all elders to consider a similar bold directive in which to become a blessing. Our own peculiar blessing. Work in a shelter serving meals as Pete and Oscar do. Travel with police cars at night through the streets of your city, to serve and protect society, as Hosea does. Be imaginative, be adventurous, serve in ways you’ve been waiting all your days to do. Now’s the time.

Grandfathering

God is still imaged by the majority of Westerners as an old white man. Yet the tragic irony is that elderly white guys are hardly revered, let alone valued, in our culture. I only have to turn to the three old men on my side of the family, Frank and John, my grandfathers and Harold, my dad. Their mature years were not that mature, let alone happy or useful. I seriously doubt if any of these men felt they met Yeats’ standard for fulfillment: blessing and being blessed.

Since our first grandchild, Trevor, was born some seven years ago, I've given lots of tear-soaked thoughts to the grandfathering enterprise in particular, and its eldering relevance. This section cross-qualifies as elderhood in both its active and passive voices, for grandfathering is definitely a door that swings in and out, back and forth, blessing and being blessed.

Grandfathers John Joseph Flanagan and Frank Wilber Towle are buried in my marrow, emerging now and again in the movements of my own body and mind.

John Joseph and I were both born on October 13th. He was a quiet, gentle man who displayed keen responsibility for his entire clan. He was a leader who possessed a strong sense of fairness and concern for others. John was a lover of fun, hard-working, and handsome. Sorta like me!

Frank Wilber was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts and grew up an Easterner. I've always wondered why a native Californian like myself could feel a visceral connection with the East Coast. He was an intellectual, always studying this or that while the weeds grew up around him. Frank could have been a college professor, but that path just didn't materialize. Instead he became a music teacher of the banjo, mandolin, and guitar. Those passions turned up in my genes as well.

Frank Wilber never joined any religion but is reported to have had an attraction to Unitarianism and Unitarianism alone. My father, once after hearing a sermon of mine, wistfully remarked: "This was right down your grandfather's alley. He would have understood it, agreed with it, been moved by it. He would have joined your church. I wish he could have heard his grandson preach!" So do I.

Frank and John are my blood-and-spirit brothers. They gave birth to me. I carry their seed forward. We dwell inside one another, despite the fact that I never knew them. You see, Frank and John died before I was born, one of a heart attack, all too young, the other by his own hand, all too sad.

In the nine months leading up to our first grandchild, Trevor's birth, I possessed a heartfelt of growing delight and niggling anxiety—*delight* because I would be the beneficiary of precious time with a tiny baby, something I didn't share enough of in my own parenting. *Anxiety*, because

I never benefited firsthand from a grandfathering presence, so I was nervous about being one myself.

My befuddled sentiments were reflected in the journal jitters I composed early on in our daughter-in-law Misha's pregnancy. "I never knew my grandfathers. Can I be one? How will I be one? Who can I follow, who can I resemble? Well, whatever you try, shun comparisons with award-winning grandpas, and, above all else, as tempted as you'll be—beware of atoning for all you failed to accomplish as a father. Put aside dreams of grandeur or being grand and just be the fullest grown man you are next to Trevor being the fullest baby boy he is. Nothing you can DO will ever be enough anyway, yet everything you simply ARE will strangely prove a gift!"

Squarely facing my fears in preparation for Trevor's arrival, then writing them down privately, seemed to steady me.

By the way, did you know that the word grandfather in rabbinical Hebrew means "my old person, my sage" and that Naomi says in the Book of Ruth: "The grandchild shall be to you a restorer of your soul and will sustain your old age?" I like the balance, and I've come to envision grandfathering as my challenge to be one source of *wisdom* for young Trevor along the way while welcoming him as a *restorer* of my soul in return. Quite a satisfying deal, if you ask me.

I could not have expected, despite my raw sentimentalist nature, the fountain of warm tears that flowed when I held Trevor for the first time on his day of birth. Somehow I knew instantaneously that a bedrock affection, both of and beyond my making, would prove sufficient to transcend my trepidations and inadequacies. When I held him on his natal day, and every time I've held him since, I experience a strange yet gratifying assurance that he and I, not blood-kin, will find our ways to become soul-kin.

Of course, there are no guarantees, only opportunities, in this adventure called grandparenting. The situations vary widely in our culture, and each connection must be honored in its peculiar specialness. Some of us are able to enjoy an active presence in our grandchild's life. A few of us are even raising our grandchild. Others are distant geographically or emotionally from either our children or grandchildren. None of us can judge, or fully empathize with, the grandfathering challenges experienced by another elder.

The best I can manage is to shelve my vast array of worldly wisdom and simply be present to, for, and with this unique, irrepeatable child named Trevor, who will call me Grandpa or some version thereof the rest of my days. Can I learn to keep my heart open and my mouth quiet? Can we simply walk hand in hand and experience the wonder of the world together?

Although Trevor will never look like me, perhaps he will someday sound a bit like me as he makes his own way through existence. Surely, our respective smells will never be forgotten, which is, after all, what I recall most vividly about the intimacy with my own Father: the unmistakable aroma of his cheeks.

I didn't produce Trevor; I didn't produce the child that was involved in producing Trevor. But, although biologically removed, I'm fortunately emotionally involved as one presence among eight grandparents and countless other companions in this little traveler's journey. And, along the pathway, Trevor will somehow learn that while he isn't the whole of my world, when I'm right next to him, he is the designated center of my universe.

Being Blessed

No duties. I don't have to be profound.

I don't have to be artistically perfect.

O sublime. Or edifying.

I just wander...

And now the music of the worlds transforms me.

My planet enters a different house.

Let others take care of it. Time for me to pay hooky.

Buena notte. Ciao. Farewell.

Czeslaw Milosz

(written in 1991 when Milosz was 80 years old)

In the Christian scriptures men reportedly come to Jesus and want to know what they must do to inherit the kingdom of God (Mark 5:36 and 10:21). Much to their amazement and consternation,

Jesus responds that it won't take *doing* but *being* something. Unfortunately, the men turn aside and amble off.

I share with Carl Jung the conviction that the second half of one's life has primarily to do with the exploration of one's spiritual being. "Among my patients in the second half of life...there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life..."

In the first half of life we men are developing outreach, going forth to make good in the world, rear children, and care for others. "But whoever carries over into the afternoon the aims of the morning must pay for it with damage to the soul." (Jung) Consequently, in the second half, adult males need to search within...to know life more deeply, to know our ultimate destiny to fulfill. What Jung calls the "religious outlook."

However, this gradual move away from the dominant *doingness* of our earlier years into the *beingness* of the second half of life doesn't mean that elders are committed to *nothingness*. Hardly. Being is a creative, fulsome state in its own right. It takes as much energy, albeit a different kind, to be blessed as it takes to bless. In truth, it may require greater effort, for most men, to soul, shed, and surrender than it does for us to serve and take risks. The salient reminder here is that both conditions are required to be a whole man, a mature brother, an elder.

My Mom has clearly earned the right to be on the receiving end of blessings. Fortunately, she has grown to appreciate that truth and is, in her own halting, ambivalent way, finally willing to be taken care of by others. Always the supreme giver, Mary Flanagan Towle is now learning its partner wisdom, the art of receiving. While maintaining her own dignity, she does need assistance in some of the fundamental tasks of life. And why should any of us be surprised? Mom is merely acting her age.

On the other hand, my Dad, like so many males of his generation, never got the hang of being comfortable in the hands of others. In fact, he died, perhaps purposefully, before caregivers could surround him. Dad was a man of his times: a consummate provider who plumbed precious little of his inner kingdom.

Harold Alexander Towle was able to bless others, here and there, but, rarely, allowed others truly to bless him. Dad's adult-long vocation was selling insurance, but he pursued no real avocations except playing the guitar and listening to games on the radio, both of which faded somewhat in his latter years. Although, I hasten to add: Dad was scheduled to play a New Year's eve gig the very week after he died.

We talk about today's kids being robbed of their childhoods by parents pushing them into almost non-stop, frenetic activity. But could it be true that our society is similarly robbing seniors of their full elderhood: the glorious, balanced experience of blessing and being blessed?

Dad couldn't sit still, tolerate silence, surrender to being, just being. He was productive in his own fashion but hardly fulfilled as a man. He deserved better. My Dad got older without becoming much of an elder. His heart and spirit grew dim, then his body followed suit.

He kept trudging into the office, continued to sell some insurance, then a few months shy of 82 years of age, Dad had had enough. He was wearing out; so he went home, mainly, I think, to arrange financial matters for his beloved Mary's future. Within a matter of weeks, he got ill, went to the hospital, and died behind a closed door.

I can't really quarrel with Dad's manner of shutting down and sauntering off, as animals do in the woods, for he knew no other way. But it won't be mine. I desire an eldery path that includes some souling, shedding, and surrendering.

If I'm fortunate, I hope to be an elder, a *zaken*, the Hebrew word for "gray-headed" which I already am, but a gray-head who dares to juggle service and stillness, who will risk adventures that don't have to prove much of anything...in short, an older guy who seeks his share of blessing and be blessed.

So, if I'm not mistaken, we've come full circle, for the foundational thesis of this entire lecture series has been *saving the males*: saving them as boys, saving them as youth, saving them as adults and, yes, saving them as seniors.

I would propose three modes of salvation related to men permitting ourselves to be blessed. I call them souling, shedding, and surrendering.

Souling

The Soulful Quest is a pilgrimage into the depths of the self. We leave the sunlit world of easy roles and prefabricated tokens of masculinity, penetrate the character armor, get beneath the personality, and plunge into the chaos and pain of the old masculine self...It's spelunking in Plato's cave, feeling our way through the illusions we have mistaken for reality, crawling through the drain sewers where the forbidden "unmanly" feelings dwell, confronting the demons and dark shadows that have held us captive from their underground haunts.

Sam Keen

The elder realizes that being blessed starts within himself, for if there's ever a decisive time to confirm one's own worthiness, it's during our second adulthood. Elder-being occasions abundant opportunities to be blessed by others as well, but why not start with thyself, by reclaiming one's own peculiar, irrepeatable loveliness? As Poet Galway Kinnell puts it: "*for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing.*"

Rather than continuing either to submerge yourself or follow somebody else's script (as most men are programmed to do the bulk of their early-to-mid adult lives), now is the time to say Yes to your one and only true self. Rabbi Zusya's right on target: "At the end of my life, I won't be asked by Yahweh why I wasn't Moses, but why I wasn't Zusya!"

By mid-life, men are sufficiently familiar with our own peculiar weaknesses and strengths, our singular ground and sky, so that we can halt tinkering with our temperament and begin to accept ourselves as we actually are. Moving from mid-life into elderhood is not a time for overhauls but refinements.

Mature men believe in growing old as naturally and gracefully as possible, and along with George Orwell, we observe that "everyone has the face we deserve." My brows, chin, nose, hair color, wrinkles, blemishes, and nicks—my face is mine. Not always happy, frowning when

necessary, seldom hiding when in view, may it be a faithful face, one that reveals my genuine feelings and one that can be met head on.

Authentic self-blessing requires traveling inside, descending deep within the soul. The majority of modern adult men are relatively unfamiliar with their inner terrain, for we've lived mostly above ground, in the sunlight, if not limelight—rising, climbing, progressing. But 50 years of age and older constitutes the season to slow down, saunter not race, brood, “rake the ashes” as Bly puts it, and deal with our own mortality. Having been sky-dwellers much of our adult lives, men would now prudently revisit the soil from whence we arrived.

According to Hebrew legend, Adam was formed out of the mud of the earth. His parentage was earthy, moist, dirty, even slimy. Starting with Adam, we humans aren't fashioned out of light or fire; we are children of mud. Our humaneness, our humility, our humor are grounded in the *humus* of our origins.

Have no illusion, my brothers. Souling will likely unearth some of the nastiest stuff you'll ever tackle, but, trust me, if you survive the confrontation, you'll be profoundly blessed in the process. Elders possess the quality time and emotional elasticity to do this digging. But souling is not done in order to report to a boss, confess to a therapist, or even to please God. Souling is ventured fundamentally for oneself, to bring our life toward a sense of greater alignment, completion or wholeness—the “integrity” to which Erikson refers.

Making sufficient peace with our masculine souls will comprise grappling with left-over, often unresolved, *angst*, *anger*, and *anguish*—those severe blessings of the netherworld. Genuine souling requires more raw courage than acquired knowledge.

Suffice it to say, there are fears that exist in our souls which, if unfaced now, will unnecessarily torment us all the way to our graves. There is bitterness that left unaddressed, diminishes our being. And there is immense mourning to be done.

Eldering presents men with the challenge neither to forget these potent emotions, nor to flee or fight them, but to face them squarely. At this stage in our masculine quest we can address, and, if we're lucky, transform angst, anger, and anguish into healthful energies for our closing chapters.

Souling, at core, will require deep crying.

“And Jesus wept” furnishes the shortest verse in Christian scriptures, but, oh what a mighty sentiment—particularly for emotionally constricted older guys teeming with groans, sighs, and tears to be released. Like most modern males at this stage in the journey, Jesus was afraid, enraged, and grieving—that is, full of angst, anger, and anguish.

The Nazarene was distraught over the rotten behavior of his people, of Jerusalem, but instead of resorting to typical masculine behavior such as ranting and railing, or drafting an oration, or marshaling a political or military response, Jesus was simply moved to tears. He wept.

Sometimes falling to pieces is the only way to put our male psyches back together again. Would that more men spent time every morning, every mid-day, every evening weeping, knowing that “blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

But deplorably, Americans, men in particular, are notorious for trying to tough things out. Our male predicament is too little weeping for our own good. We stuff our souls. The cost is often great, and as one physician aptly states: “Sorrows that find no vent in tears may soon make other organs weep.”

Brothers, the future of the very cosmos itself is parched for want of our inner water.

Shedding

*One definition of sin and idolatry is being weighed down with so much
luggage we lose the purpose of the trip.*

Clarke Dewey Wells

*And when the day arrives for the last leaving of all,
And the ship that never returns to port is ready to go,
You'll find me on board, light, with few belongings,
Almost naked like the children of the sea.*

Antonio Machado

Too many men live with material clutter that needs to be passed on, dumped, at least sorted out. Elders willingly summon assistance to execute this arduous, oft-agonizing process.

Men have found it useful to talk outloud in the trustworthy environs of their support groups about pruning objects and sorting through memories. This serves as a dress rehearsal. Obviously, I'm not referring to jointly owned relics but rather an elder's "own personal stuff."

Here's a suggested way to start shedding behavior. Walk around your house alone. Take your time. Bask in the memories. Sorting and shedding may take months or longer before you're sufficiently confident to keep something, pass it on to family or friends, give it to rummage, or take it to the trash. There will always be some private belongings remaining for the bereaved to comb through after we die, but they should be kept to a manageable minimum. Remember the mission of mature eldering is to bless not burden others, including our loved ones.

Shedding unnecessary, outgrown items now, not only frees our descendants but also empowers us to live more fully the continuing days with which we're graced. As I was completing my full-time ministry, I undertook a radical pruning program: divesting myself roughly of 80% of my books, 60% of my files, and 40% of my collectibles.

I did this for several reasons: first, I chose to travel more lightly in my final innings; second, I enjoyed placing much-appreciated professional stuff directly into the hands of up-and-coming colleagues who might relish using it; third, the process blessed me with energy to be fully awake in my present rather than poking around about in my past. Of course, I made mistakes; there are possessions I probably should have kept. But so it goes; that's the reasonable risk of shedding.

And men, there's more. This shedding process includes pruning lost dreams and futile emotions as well.

It's never too late to release regrets, to forgive and be forgiven. It took twenty-five years before Michelangelo could forgive a rival for deliberately defacing a set of his drawings. The cruelty associated with that act of vandalism drove Michelangelo into a lengthy depression. By the time he was finally able to forgive, the man who had committed the act was already dead. But Michelangelo still forgave him.

Shedding enables elders proactively to take spiritual stock of our lives, which after all, is the endpoint of the earthly sojourn. The sage's goal is to keep on living, as unencumbered as possible, amidst the imponderables: What remains for me to be and do? Whom am I summoned to bless? Whose blessing do I still need? In what ways can I find and deliver joy from here on out?

In men's retreats, early on during the weekend, I invite men to remember a half-dozen (no small feat for many) men—three within the family and three beyond—living or dead, older and younger men, peers too...in short, men who've had a telling impact on your life. They're free to mention more but at least six. Furthermore, I urge the brothers to remember these men in their totality, with regard to both positive and/or negative influences.

This poses a challenging endeavor, since most men recall more easily the impact of women than men upon their lives. Yet when we fail to re-member men, they're ostensibly lost, buried in our consciousness, no longer valued. Our already fragile brothering communion is willfully dis-membered.

Then at the end of the retreat I ask the gathered men to write a short epitaph or obituary notice (50 words or less) that captures the heart of who they've been, what they've stood for, and how they wish to be remembered as men. Then, as they're comfortable, I invite them to read their portrayals aloud to the other brothers in the circle. They then take their self-tribute home, refine and revisit it periodically, as a reminder of how they currently perceive themselves and how they desire to be recalled. This text furnishes a marvelous guidepost, not hitching post, for their evolving elderhood.

Surrendering

Growing into eldership is spiritual work and requires loosening our grip without losing our grip!

Terry Jones

Elders, in readying ourselves to be blessed, need to venture beyond the comfortable and familiar into foreign territories of surrender. Poets know this: “Love is plunging into darkness toward a place that may exist,” (Marge Piercy) and “love’s function is to fabricate unknown-ness.” (e. e. cummings)

Surrendering furnishes a most difficult process for high-control, tight-fisted, hyper-knowing men to undergo. It requires emptying. Yet it enables us to give ourselves *over* to another person or principle or place or reality without giving ourselves *away*. Elders recognize that healthy surrender is a final form of being blessed.

Surrendering means letting ourselves be who we truly are at any given age rather than clinging to what we used to be or might have been. It means permitting ourselves to slow down, just be our age, as fully as possible.

It entails bowing: surrendering to the needs and purposes of the universe, of the community, finally of ourselves. Bowing daily to all that arises in our journey, dropping our heads in gratitude and acceptance, enables men to get off those high-horses we canter around life.

It’s told of the philosophical giant, Krishnamurti, that when he was quite old and very frail, he was addressing a large assembly, with his customary engaging gentleness. Krishnamurti recognized a questioner and slowly, indeed haltingly, tried to respond to the man in the audience. But he was unsuccessful in mounting a dialogue, so he abruptly stopped, and with poignant vulnerability, conceded that he wasn’t mentally sharp anymore, so would the questioner please come down front and hold his hand for a moment. What a beautiful example of deep wisdom, of healthy surrender, during our last laps.

The Hindu way of religion emphasizes three pathways to communion with Brahman: the way of knowledge, the way of devotion, and the way of action. Each has its own merits. Surrendering emphasizes the way of devotion: love and affectional bonding. It reminds us that seeking understandably culminates in some form of surrender, that religion, most certainly Unitarian Universalism, is based on relationality, “deep calling unto deep” (Psalmist), requiring ample heartfulness.

We men exhibit moments of maturity, of genuine surrendering, when in recovery programs we turn ourselves over to an Inner or Higher Power. Or when we confess our deepest aches and burdens before our partner or children. As Michael Meade reminds: “When men start taking about the wounds they carry—their failures, their losses—then we’re into something completely different: the slow workings of the soul.” Yes, as the old hymn reports, there are times when we supposedly secure, powerful men are “standing in the need of prayer”—standing in the need of help, of divine assistance.

In surrendering to other men, to women, to children, to animals, to God, Spirit of Life, the Holy One, Creative Interchange (call it what we will) submission is not required, but trust is. Indeed, the Hebrew word for faith, *bitachon*, really means trust. Surrender is about forging a vow, pledging our troth, offering and keeping our trust. And surrender means that sacrifices will lie in store for us. For whenever men enter a holy union with either human or divine beings, we do not emerge the same. We are forever changed.

Changing and changed men change the world.

Epilogue

Not long before D. H. Lawrence died he wrote a poem entitled “Shadows”, the last refrain of which poetically catches the way I would invite myself, and other brothers, to complete our eldering path:

*And if, in the changing phases of man’s life
I fall in sickness and in misery
my wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead
and strength is gone, and my life
is only the leavings of a life:*

*and still, among it all snatches of lively oblivion
and snatches of renewal
odd, wintry flowers upon the withered stem,
yet new, strange flowers*

such as my life has not brought forth before, new blossoms of me—

then I must know that still

I am in the hands of the unknown God,

he is breaking me down to his new oblivion

to send him forth on a new morning, a new man.

Lawrence poignantly pinpoints the ultimate brothering act.

I complete my journey in utter trust: surrendering myself back into “the hands of the unknown God,” who ushered me graciously into being, nudged and caressed me along this wondrously mysterious path, and “is breaking me down into his new oblivion...to send me forth on a new morning, a new man.”

That is my prayerful hope for brothers everywhere.

Tom Owen-Towle

May 7, 2003