

ELDERING YOUNGER PEOPLE IN TODAY'S WORLD: MY TAKE AT 81

By Alice Loyd

When I hear someone use the term “elder,” I think: “old person being asked to provide wisdom.” From an early age it was in my plans to become wise. I said so in a poem I wrote in my thirties, “When I Am 94.” Though not 94 yet, I am definitely old, and I’m asking myself if I am an ‘elder.’ Even to gain maturity was a long shot for me starting with my childhood in the hands of my particular parents when I often felt like the only adult in the house, yet knew I wasn’t one either. It has taken much concentration for me to become an adult, much less to become what I view as an elder, due to the absence of either in my upbringing.

By my late twenties I’m sure I had the appearance of adulthood. Like all of my family, I fit well into a respectable social pattern: married and had children, performed reliably as an employee, kept food on the table and clean sheets on the beds. It took a lot of years, though, for me to fill in that shell of a person with my real self. I did the self-help books and encounter groups that were popular in the 1970s and 80s, and finally realizing I needed something deeper, I undertook serious psychotherapy. Committing years to the purpose, I was able by my mid-fifties to start to become who I’d always been in my heart.

In my sixties I finally had the confidence and opportunity to step onto a path that became my life work. The North Carolina Council of Churches accepted a grant from the National Council to educate faith communities about climate change, and I entered the program Climate Connection Interfaith Ecojustice Network as a regional coordinator. Following the death of its leader, Sister Evelyn Mattern, I was named director. I worked with the organization that became North Carolina Interfaith Power & Light as a member of the 40-state national IPL until I retired at 72. After that I took on responsibilities at different times as an NC WARN volunteer, paid lobbyist, and board member and chair, as well as an enlarged role with the Center for Ecozoic Studies, where I’d been a volunteer since around the year 2000. With the election of 2016, I stepped forward to form an Indivisible group, and for more than a year I sent out an almost daily activist newsletter with a growing subscription list. Within these organizations and working with a number of other environmental groups in the state, I’ve observed and learned and grown.

So here I am now, 81 years old and starting to slow down, mentally as well as physically. My career and activist experiences along with the inner work I did in my fifties have helped me mature. With my internal struggles largely in the past, I can give my full attention to the questions and the questing of others. And having come up in a way that was hard—though it could have been much harder—gives me ground to understand our wider society, a culture of children and adolescents who are headed over a cliff. More important, I can speak from the bond I’ve always had with the physical planet. To use words of Thomas Berry, I’ve enjoyed an “intimate presence to the natural world,” beginning with plants. I’ve had intimate presence with most of the flowers, vegetables, shrubs, and trees that grew wherever I lived.

Am I an elder? When I began writing this article, I was in doubt. I said, "I would be glad to serve in that way, but in order for me to be an elder, somebody would need to want one." I'd been hearing there was an absence in our society of the guidance an elder might provide, but what I was seeing was an absence of applicants ready to be guided. People of my generation are laughably ignorant in the matters young people seem to want to know about: social media, technology, fashion, popular entertainment. Even if some of them wanted to hear my kinds of experience, I was skeptical about how the generations might find each other.

When I was talking about this with my younger daughter, though, she mentioned my gardening classes. After I'd retired from NCIPL I had set up a project called "Food Is the Key," with a website and a list of people I knew who might be interested in improving their garden and kitchen skills. I sent out emails offering Saturday classes on growing vegetables and home food preservation. People came and brought friends, I did demos at farmers markets, and my mailing list grew. The other day someone I'd coached in gardening brought me a cooler full of vegetables. He had worked with me in my Raleigh, North Carolina, urban farm for two or three years, moved to another state, and now drove out of his way to share the fruits of labor in which I truly had a part. One of my classes was on non-alcoholic fermentation, and by now there must be dozens of households making kombucha from SCOBYs with origins in my kitchen.

My daughter reminded me, too, of the Care of Creation Sunday School class that I helped to start in 1999 at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church. We studied books on care of the Earth, including the Bible, and heard speakers who were putting creation care at the center of their lives and careers. Class members came to learn how to put these lessons into practice, to support each other's efforts, and to encourage the wider church and community to become active in environmental issues. I led or co-led the early classes, but several years ago new leadership emerged, and almost 20 years later the class is still growing.

Now that I'm classifying those experiences as eldering, I see how today's would-be elders might create opportunities. To pass on expertise in knitting, carpentry, or simple car care is one way to perform the elder function, and some of these skills are more in demand than ever. Word-of-mouth advertising might in time result in a large circle of influence, and within hands-on situations structured for one purpose, more profound conversations might arise.

I recently moved into a multi-generational intentional community where growing food on common land is important, so that as my physical strength wanes, I can remain a contributor due to fifty years of gardening experience. I'm also a writer, with the platform of this online magazine, although here I never meet the readers, if they exist, and I don't know what they seek that my writing might provide (write me at alice@ecozoicstudies.org). Do they want to read about a farm family dealing with the Depression, an American schoolgirl encountering World War II, the distance from kerosene lamps to solar panels traveled in one lifetime? What I'd rather share is more interior: how I've set about to become a person of integrity; some words I've clung to through hours of pain; people who pointed the way when I was lost.

Or are they absorbed with the bigger picture—the devastation of Earth, of the social fabric, of decency in discourse? Would they want to sit with older adults to talk about what is bad and good, and to look for how greater good might be encouraged? I hope the life I've lived and the work I've done will have lent a little wisdom to any words I might speak on these subjects. I do want to contribute toward the broad shift that will be required for us to turn away from the cliff toward which we're headed.

I'm still motivated to become wise, but I don't think isolated individuals who are wise hold as much potential for good as I once did. What we need now is group wisdom—thoughtful, informed decision-making that emerges from the combined effort of the whole. I see this kind of thing happening within the various arms of the progressive movement, and I'd rather have played an inconspicuous part in bringing that about than to have gained any amount of personal insight. My new wish for what I will experience by the time I'm 94 is that I will be a member of a multi-generational, multi-cultural group that appreciates democratic wisdom *in a wiser nation*.

Nevertheless, my generation carries the guilt for what we're handing on to younger people, and we bear the responsibility to lead them toward solutions. We had a hand in making the problems, and we'd better work until our last breath to find remedies based on our experience. If we're doing that, then I think we might say we are eldering.