

ELDERS: THEIR CREATIVE ROLE IN THE HUMAN COMMUNITY*

By Thomas Berry (July, 1980)

On Spaceship Earth, as has been noted, everyone is crew as well as passenger. To be an idle traveler is not acceptable. Everyone is needed. The captain without the cook cannot long guide the ship. So in the social order with professor and craftsman, farmer and city dweller, governor and sanitation worker. So too with elders and youth. Everyone is joined in the single human venture. What is done by each is different. That is why everyone is needed. Activities that differ most from each other are most needed by each other.

In this context I present the following observations on the creative role of elders in the human community. Their contribution is of unique importance. What makes these reflections necessary is the extraordinary sequence of transformations in the entire Earth process that has taken place in the recent past and which is presently entering into a new and dangerous if also an entrancing phase of its development.

The main difficulty in achieving a satisfying future is that we have not yet understood in any adequate way the order of magnitude of these changes that have already sent the human community into a series of convulsions and which are presently affecting all our securities, personal and social.

The real order of magnitude in the changes we face cannot, however, be understood simply by consideration of human security. Even beyond the human is the security of the planet itself and of all living beings on the planet. The changes wrought in the past century are not simply changes in cultural adaptation, in economic institutions, or in political regime. Nor are these changes equivalent simply to changes in religious or in moral orientation. The changes wrought in the past hundred years of science; technology, and industry are changes of a geological and biological magnitude. The planet itself in its physical being as well as in its biological functioning has been extensively altered by human activities. While many benefits have been derived, these benefits themselves have become questionable when we consider what they have cost in terms of the deterioration of the planet and the uncertain future of all life upon the planet.

If the high benefits of this period have been experienced by relatively few persons, life has been profoundly affected for every living being on Earth. A long listing would be required to identify those living forms that have benefited most and those that have suffered most. What can be said is that the cost has been enormous. Many living species have disappeared forever. Tens of thousands of species could disappear before the end of the century. Since the lives of all the

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living from the one-celled bacterium to the human community are woven in a single fabric, we cannot but feel the loss and ourselves experience the deteriorating effects of an industrial establishment that is bringing about such consequences. The ambivalence of the industrial age becomes increasingly manifest. A significant price must *be* paid for every advantage gained, a price that is seldom adverted to by the defenders of "progress" and of mechanization as the ultimate norms of human value. The grime that has settled over our cities is invisible to those entranced with the power of the new technologies. The future itself is uncertain in the blessings it promises and the demands it makes.

But however this ambivalence of the industrial age be viewed from any of the "three worlds" of differing economic and social status, the present elders of the world carry within their beings the blessings and the burdens of the twentieth century. Their lives coincide with the century. Their earliest memories go back to the beginning of the century when the automobile was just appearing on the dusty roads of the world when the world was being electrified, when the first planes rose into the sky, when the entertainment industry took on its present forms in radio and later in television, when farms reached a new level of mechanization and the vast machines of planting and harvesting and processing began to move over the plains of Kansas and Nebraska. This was also the period when the great modern corporations were taking control of the economic life of the world and assuming charge of Earth's resources. The scientific research centers were being set up in the universities and in industrial establishments, centers that eventually would make nuclear power available. Above all, perhaps, the present elders of much of the world have lived in the petroleum age, the age not only of oil heating and gasoline motors, but the age of plastics and artificial fibers, of pharmaceuticals and fertilizers, all made of petroleum; an age, however, that already begins to see its own decline and even its termination.

Much else could be written in describing this twentieth century which verges toward its conclusion as elders who lived through this period themselves pass on into the last two or three decades of their lives. Socially the most significant development for elders has been the urbanization of the human community. The great cities of the century in this period were attracting their huge populations in Shanghai and Mexico City as well as in Cairo, Calcutta, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, New York, London, and Leningrad. While tribal and village life have continued, the centers of vital transformation in all parts of the planet shifted toward the urban centers. Whereas in the early 19th century less than five percent of the world was living in these large urban centers, by the year 2000 over half the world's population will be in these large population centers, a change of enormous significance in determining the quality of life that elders will be living. Without judging its human benefits or its human cost, its Earth benefits or its Earth cost, this has been an exciting century, a century that has given both the context and the content of life for many of the elders of the world. They have participated in its achievements and in its tragedies; in its wars and in its efforts to achieve peace; and in the rise and fall of its economic prosperity. Mainly elders as individuals have been caught in the swirl of forces beyond their control, forces that are only partially under any control. Once initiated,

science and technology have produced a sequence of changes far different from those anticipated.

The New Vision

But whatever the present situation, a new way of seeing the world, human life, and the future is emerging, a vision shared on an extensive scale by peoples throughout the world, the vision of a post-industrial ecological age of intercommunion based on awareness of the interdependence of all the living and non-living forces of the planet. The machine metaphor that has for several centuries dominated our Western sense of reality has definitely lost its validity as supplying the basic norm of the real. In its place, the vital, organic, person metaphor is finding expression throughout the human community. All professions, all human roles and institutions, education, and values are being reconstituted in the context of this understanding of the world. The clock-world of Newton; the manipulative, exploitive world of high-energy technologies; the quantitative value system: none of these can any longer assume a controlling position in the human community.

If the period of primordial human spontaneity gave way for a time to a dominant rational manipulative period, this period is itself giving way to a third period, a period that can be identified as that of a critical naiveté, a period of both scientific insight and intuitive understanding, a period when the emotional and aesthetic aspects of the universe find their proper recognition. This new attitude itself is coming about not by manipulative processes or by compelling propaganda but by a pervasive interior attitude that is emerging from the unconscious depths of a long-suppressed human mode of being and of feeling.

Most significant is the fact that the new developments are not emerging from the formal centers of professional training. The new sense of health, of nutrition, of exercise, of interior tranquility, is not arising from medical schools. The new educational practices are originating outside the academic centers where the more integral development of the individual human person and the deeper spiritual disciplines needed by the child to deal with fundamental life issues is still not understood or appreciated. New legal attitudes needed to deal with human-nature relations are not developing first in the law schools but in the general public consciousness. New paradigms of commercial and economic life are being first enunciated outside the schools of business administration. So throughout the whole of contemporary life, the organic-person understanding of the world is asserting itself with a transforming influence.

Most significant for the future however is the new sense of reality being manifested from within the scientific tradition. The sciences are discovering inner spontaneities, organic relations, intuitive processes, immediacies beyond mechanistic calculation, and synchronistic happenings beyond explanation by simplistic causal processes. The involvement of the subject in all knowing, indeed the personal nature of human knowledge, begins to be appreciated.

The total effect of all these changes cannot easily be indicated. We can, however, say that the great imperative of the present is that the human community respond creatively to the opportunities that are presenting themselves for shaping a more satisfying and sustainable world for the future. We can also say that no one is exempt from participation in this most significant task. Both young people and elders are integral to this activity along with all other components of the human community. Ultimately this new orientation is something that must be brought about by the entire Earthly community, by all the living and non-living beings of the planet.

The New Roles

By its own inner processes the organic nature of reality is asserting itself in a spontaneous identification of the new roles that individuals and groups are called upon to fulfill at this time. Educators such as George Leonard; physicists such as Sir Bernard Lovell; biologists such as Rene Dubos and Lewis Thomas; naturalists such as Rachel Carson and Annie Dillard; energy specialists such as Amory Lovins; lawyers such as Ralph Nader; economists such as Willis Harman and Hazel Henderson; philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead; theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin; members of the international political and economic organizations such as Robert Muller; ecologists such as John and Nancy Todd: all these and many more from all parts of the world have responded effectively in creating new roles in answer to the creative urgencies that are upon us if we are to shape a sustainable and satisfying world of the future. That these individuals are profoundly affecting the institutional expression of these different areas of life is abundant evidence that an inner dynamism in the reality of things is asserting itself. The overall agreement in the hundreds and thousands of persons who are involved in such creative activities has been outlined extensively in the recent publication of Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*.

So too with elders, it is a question of elders themselves being sensitized to their own new situation and to their own role in creating the new order of Earthly existence. Elders alone can create their new roles, even though the assistance of the total society is needed. Elders are natural leaders of the communities of which they are members. Elders in the professions have wide control over the professions. Elders in commerce have extensive control over commerce. So in education, in energy systems, in the arts, and in entertainment, elders have widespread influence and extensive control whether in Africa or Asia, Europe or the Americas. Especially in religious and moral affairs the judgment and influence of elders is of supreme importance. Because they have significant influence they have corresponding responsibilities. Elders can ruin their own cause.

The image of elders as inactive, as non-participating observers of the world scene or as having attained an age simply of enjoyment of life, of detachment from the turmoil of human affairs, is an image that is both illusory and damaging to elders. It is illusory because elders are absolutely involved in the total human and the total Earth process. Elderly participation is not a matter of choice. They participate either as positive contributors or as negative burdens to the

community and to Earth. While their mode of participation may be changed, their presence and their insight, their energy, and their influence are demanded. For elders to remove themselves or to be removed from Earth-human process is as unacceptable as is the removal of a functional organ from the human body to retire it before the cessation of bodily life takes place.

Any effort of elders to escape their proper functioning or any effort to isolate the active elderly is destructive in a very direct way to elders themselves. They become victimized by the consumer economy. Withdrawal is an indication of the dying down of the will to live on the part of the individual or on the part of the community which finds itself unable to incorporate elders into the functional pattern of its life. Above all the taste for life needs to be sustained on its proper scale and with its proper order of intensity. Generally efforts at isolation are primarily due to the mechanistic model of the universe and of the human community. The organic model has a place for functional activities that are of value in themselves and not merely in terms of benefits to a consumer society.

The Historical Situation

A present reading of the historical situation indicates that a transformation of momentous significance is taking place on the planet Earth; that this is due primarily to the scientific-technological developments that have taken place in the past hundred years; that *amid* its great benefits this period of exploitive technologies has brought about many disastrous consequences throughout the geological, biological and human realms of the planet Earth; that a reaction is taking place to establish a new ecological equilibrium beneficial to Earth and to the human community in their integral dimensions; that all human roles, professions and institutions are being reevaluated and reshaped in accord with a new sense of the vital, organic, person nature of reality; and that elders as a distinctive group within the familial and social context of the present are called upon to assume their share in bringing about this new ecological age in which they will achieve the fullness of their own lives along with the fulfillment that hopefully will be experienced by all living beings upon the planet.

The present elders are unique in the range of their experience which reaches back, in many instances, to a pre-industrial experience and which extends into the beginnings of the post-industrial experience of the ecological period of history. Hopefully in the future many peoples will be able to move more immediately from a prior stage of pre-industrial existence to a post-industrial ecological mode of existence that will incorporate the benefits of scientific achievements and non-destructive technologies into the advantages of intimate association with the environment with its air and water and vegetation and abundance of living beings.

For elders of the Western industrial countries to make their full contribution to the future there is need, first of all, that they reflect on the historical role they have fulfilled throughout this century. Elders of the present, whatever the benefits they have derived from the industrial developments of the century or whatever the difficulties they have sustained, are the ones who have carried through the great human vision that survives and makes possible the further

adjustments that can lessen the damage and enhance the benefits for future generations. Elders of this generation have carried out a unique role in Earth history. Never again will a generation be assigned the historic task of sustaining the human vision at such a moment of transition; for this twentieth century transition of traditional civilizations through a scientific-technological age to an ecological age will never again take place. It will be extended and developed but the inauguration period that has taken place in this century will not be repeated. It is an irreversible process. While this has been a most conspicuous event in the larger industrial centers, equally conspicuous events have taken place in other countries where the shock of industrial expansion has been compounded by political and economic colonization. Here the difficulty of sustaining a world of human meaning has had its own special manifestations. As elsewhere elders in more pastoral or agrarian societies have sustained this difficult period in their own beings even as they have been forced to make urgent decisions on behalf of their peoples and their traditions.

That so much of the human quality of life has been sustained and developed within this context must, then, be attributed mainly to the present generation of older persons. Amid all the new advantages of literacy and schooling and modern medicines along with city-building and all the institutions of a modern society, there has been an almost limitless amount of suffering, turmoil, and estrangement from a former way of life filled with human meaning and human values. But here too the need is to establish the new patterns of existence that can be described as a new way of life integral with the ever-renewing cycles of the natural world but intimately associated with a new and sensitive phase of scientific insight and with technologies coherent with the technologies of Earth itself. Hopefully in this way societies generally considered as less developed can begin to consider themselves as the *avant-garde* of the new ecological age. They can see themselves as establishing functional patterns of Earth-human existence that the industrial countries themselves will need as models and as inspiration for their own future adjustment if they are not to arrive at a total impasse in their exploitation of the planet.

In achieving this goal elders of the entire world have a most significant role to carry out. Their total experience, whatever its span over the past sequence of changes, enables them to envisage with special clarity this new period in their own societies and in the larger human community. More than others elders should have the capacity to identify the general direction of development. They have lived through the entire arc of changes that have taken place.

In this manner they should be able to fulfill their social role as the "wise old men" and the "wise old women" of the present generation. They will thus fulfill their life obligations to themselves, to the society, to their historical destiny, and to the future. Eventually all four of these identify.

The Life Stories of Elders

The wisdom of elders is carried not fundamentally in moralizations or in any philosophical or even religious principles but in the structure of their own being which finds its finest expression

in their life stories. This is why elders reminisce so much and in their later years become storytellers of the earlier years of their lives and all the particular experiences through which they passed. While these experiences are individual, they are also the archetypal experiences that reveal the depths of history of the human community and even of the Earth process. They provide the perspective needed, the vital sequence whereby the human heritage has been saved from being overwhelmed by the harshness of this particular century.

The importance of such local personal history is being realized wherever efforts are being made to recover a vital contact with the pre-industrial past and with the sequence of changes that have led us through this century and now back to the dynamics of the living planet. These efforts can generally be summed up under the term of "bio-cultural regionalism," which is a "third way" now being fostered by such creative persons as John and Nancy Todd, Amory Lovins, Hazel Henderson, and many others. This "third way," often referred to as an "alternative future," is a way that is not simple acceptance of a traditional form of peasant life, nor is it acceptance of the high-entropy urban industrial society. It is rather a reactivation of life within the ever-renewing rhythms of the natural world but with a substantial if refined use of science and technology and with a high level of emotional-aesthetic-spiritual communion with the natural world. It is intended that well-articulated human communities in intimate presence to the natural world can be a healing and activating presence that will give to the land as much as it takes from the land.

In carrying out this program a reflexive consciousness of what is being done requires that the land be understood in its pre-human, geological, and biological formation, that its sequence of early and later occupations by human peoples be appreciated, that the later period of Western-industrial commercial influence be understood along with the alterations that have occurred in the animal and plant life, in the quality of water and air and soil, and finally that the land be understood in its emotional-aesthetic impact upon human consciousness.

For an understanding of the present human renewal of life in any such bio-cultural region, the accounts of the ancients who still live in these regions and who remember the events of the past become extremely important. In many instances in North America, in the San Francisco Bay region, in the Passaic watershed of New Jersey, in some of the southern states, and in New England, serious efforts are being made to record the stories of elders who have lived a substantial part of their lives in these regions, for renewal is a continuation of the past even when undesirable disturbances of land have taken place. Even in the region of the South Bronx in New York, a devastated slum area, it is of great value to know something of that area before the present devastation was brought about, what was its original condition, how the land there really is when in its fertile and fruitful condition, and how perhaps once more a sustainable and vital form of life could be lived there in association with a blossoming landscape.

Here, then, is one of the unique creative roles for elders, a role so identified with their own being and the story of their own lives that it should find spontaneous and delightful fulfillment. While only a few of these life stories will be recorded in writing or find their way into print,

there exists throughout the human community verbal traditions, group memories of past events. Only when such memories exist can a reliable sense of direction be identified by a community.

The Cultural Coding

These traditions of the human communities exist as cultural codings which function at the human level much as genetic codings function throughout the world of the living. In the human community we have a genetic coding for a further trans-genetic cultural coding to be invented, developed and carried on through the language, rituals, spiritual disciplines, social customs, the arts and entertainment, education, and the various occupations of social groups. Whereas genetic coding at the pre-human level guides the various living organisms through their lives with relatively little additional education, the cultural coding of the human being is not communicated so completely at the time of birth. A long period of cultural development is required that takes place through imitation of elders, through family customs, through the language of the society, through participation in religious rituals, through instruction in behavior, and through the teaching of values. These latter aspects of cultural development are generally communicated through the stories that are recounted in the society.

Elders are considered endowed with special wisdom because their many years of experience has given them a depth of insight into the structure and meaning of the cultural coding that guides the life of the society. They understand the language and rituals better than the others, they know the stories of the society, they have the depth of insight needed for making the major life decisions of the community, they understand the mysterious functioning of the natural world, how best to survive its destructive influence, and how best to cooperate with its beneficent powers. In some parts of Africa, the death of an elderly person is considered like the loss of a library.

This cultural coding is of immense importance, for only through this coding do we know how to feed and clothe and shelter ourselves, how to think and speak and act, how to laugh and weep, how to play and sing and dance, how to communicate with the spirit powers of the universe, and how to respond intelligently to the mysterious world in which we live.

While we have been mainly concerned thus far in this discussion with the nature and magnitude of change in human-Earth relations and the role of elders in activating a new and more coherent world of the future, we must also be concerned for the role of elders in providing that continuity in the complex cultural codings whereby the human community sustains its sense of human meaning and human values throughout this sequence of cultural changes that we are experiencing. This eventually is the most difficult of our present human tasks. It is also the most important, for unless this be achieved, the various cultural heritages will continue to experience disintegration rather than creative transformation.

The transformation needed requires both continuity and creativity, both at a high level of expression. Nothing less than the personal and cultural resources of the entire human community, even of the entire Earth community, are required. Our confidence in a successful outcome rests eventually in the larger dynamics of the planetary process which shaped Earth and brought forth all the living beings on the planet and finally gave to us our human form. This inner providence of the planet is a sustaining and guiding power. It moves by violent upheavals as well as by silent, soft, and delicate processes; yet its final benevolent nature need not be doubted. Above all it moves by interior attractions, by the indestructible spontaneities hidden in the depths of the unconscious realms.

The human community need only develop its proper sensitivity to this matrix out of which we emerged and in which we live and breathe and have our being in order to identify and make functional the cultural coding of the future that constitutes the supreme creative task of our generation.

The assistance and insight of elders is required in a special way for this achievement. Fulfillment of this role belongs not to the addenda of their lives, nor to further involvement in a consumer economy; nor does it further trivialize their enjoyment of life: rather it bestows upon elders a sense of profound personal significance, a sense of fulfilling a historical role in the human order; ultimately of being a participant in the larger dynamics of the planet Earth and of the universe itself. While many of the present generation have forgotten what such an experience is, elders cannot but feel that life in this context has the expansive and meaningful quality that is especially needed in their later years.