

Elders Council

What does it mean to be an Elder? I was first presented with this inquiry at the age of 55 as, by my cultural standards, I was just beginning to feel resistance to the concept of being older. So the word elder felt uncomfortable and weighty. However, Elder can also be a demarcation of respect as a carrier of wisdom. But was I even close to an age venerable enough to embody elder hood?

I had recently become part of a group of people working with Jon Young, a cultural anthropologist and long time student of Native practices who was exploring what it would be like to live in community based on the traditional indigenous ways. The goal was to create a lineage of mentors who could bring Nature Awareness out into the larger society, specifically allowing young people to take the lead from their environment – learning intuitively - as we humans have done for the majority of our time on this planet. In order to foster this type of mentoring, Jon saw that there was a clear need for Elders who could hold the role of wisdom keepers and cultural anchors.

The most challenging thing about becoming Elders in this culture is that we have few models. Some of us can remember a wise and supportive grandparent or older family friend who was there for us. But, in this time of fractured family units and nomadic societies, most of us have grown up without those people. So, if we agree that becoming Elders is a good thing, then the next step is to decide what it's going to look like in the context of our modern world. Many of us found it difficult to follow the traditions of the Haudenosaunee people. Our group of practicing elders didn't have a long house to gather in on a regular basis. In fact we rarely were together in the same physical space as our community was dispersed throughout the Bay Area and beyond. And not all of us were comfortable doing Inipi ceremonies and following the 8 Shields model.

But as we spent more time together attending ceremonies, meetings, gatherings and workshops we slowly realized that, as we were struggling with defining what it meant to be an Elder, something else had been happening - organically. It's been almost 10 year now and after showing up time and again, listening to the young people and holding each other with Peacemaking Principles as our guide, we have discovered that we are now acting as true Elders.

What has become really clear to me over this process it that our culture needs embodied Elders. The children and young people need Grandmothers and Grandfathers and the middle-aged folk need Aunties and Uncles. They need us to be the placeholders in a world that is increasingly speeding up. And we need them to count on us to be that calm presence in the midst. This role is one that I have come to value immensely. No, at 65, I recognize the responsibility inherent in being this age and it's work that I welcome whole heartedly.

(Ron Pevny and the Center for Conscious Eldering recognize how critically important it is to be Conscious Elders. I am proud to be associated with this valuable work.)