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Culture Change in Practice

Maturing with Soul: Elders Giving the Gift of Being



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By James D. Henry

When I first heard about physician Bill Thomas' new book, *What are Old People For?*, instinctively I kept wanting to insert a new word into its title: *What are Old People Good For?* Like so many people in our American culture, I tend to insert this word because of having been programmed throughout my lifetime to believe that old people are hardly good for anything. We live in a culture dominated by the glorification and power of adulthood, whereas elders are generally viewed as being "over-the-hill" people who suffer from physical and mental decline draining society's resources. The world of aging portrayed in the mass media has not traditionally been an enjoyable or positive one. The elderly suffer from negative stereotyping on television as much as any other social group. Unflattering elderly people (feeble, absent-minded, slow, stubborn, etc.) appear in prime time television commercials such as "Clap on! Clap off!" and "Help! I've fallen and I can't get up."

Even many professional caregivers stereotype older people. Bill tells the story about giving a speech at the [University of Southern California's](#) renowned [Center of Gerontology](#). He asked how the audience many of them had spoken the word "elderhood" during the past week and only one person put up a hand. In contrast to "childhood," the word "elderhood" is not even in the dictionary.

Founder of the international [Eden Alternative™](#) movement, Bill sharply challenges this stereotypical belief system and envisions a human life cycle that promotes a positive elderhood for all. He expresses this vision essentially in terms of *being* and *doing*. "Humans are interesting creatures," he asserts. "They are able to create an amalgam or blend of the two fundamental energies of *being* and *doing*."

It is my desire to expand upon these energies and give special credence to the value of *being*, especially as we witness its prominence during the aging process. As we shall see, for elders, *being* matters much more than *doing*.

The characteristics and experiences of *being* that we describe are closely related to the mysterious energies of soul. Like the energies of *being*, soul is more earthy, organic, relational and unifying. *Doing* is more masculine and *being* more feminine, both of which exist to some degree in every individual. Soul derives from the Greek word [Psyche](#), a [mythological maiden](#) who was eventually united with Eros. As elders embrace *being* more than *doing*, they shift emphasis and experience greater maturity of soul.

Bill claims that *doing* happens when we come into a relationship with the visible, tangible, material world and we seek to change or alter that world in some manner. We do our chores. We do our homework. We do our jobs. In the process of expending these energies, we often keep "to do" lists. *Doing* comes easy for most of us because it is so practical and applicable to everyday

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living. We find it easy and straightforward to count the number of things we do or to check them off on a list.

These two energies are essentially joined together as two aspects of a single whole, but the part that tends to be subjugated in our culture is *being*. Bill maintains, "*Being* is a lot more complicated than *doing*. *Being* involves coming into a relationship with that which is invisible, that which we cannot see or touch and cannot fully know. For instance, we hear a person say that he/she is in love, a form of interpersonal relationship that cannot be quantified."

In order to further understand these two energies of *doing* and *being*, it is helpful to place them in the context of the caduceus and to highlight their respective qualities. In his book, *The Way of the Physician*, philosopher, historian and prolific writer Jacob Needleman brings to light the fact that there are two serpents rather than one in most images of the caduceus, which is widely accepted as the emblem of healthcare. He suggests that the two serpents represent two fundamental energies. More left brain, one energy focuses more upon rational, analytical, technical exploration and competence. It serves as the *doing* aspect of healthcare. Its opposite force concentrates attention upon *being*. It is relational and is more concerned with compassionate caring.

As Bill describes it, the *doing* energy is more active, quantifiable and thinking-oriented. The *being* energy becomes more receptive, quality-oriented and

more feeling. "What we humans do involves combining these two energies," he reports. "However, during different times of our lives, we place more emphasis upon one or the other. For example, a newborn baby cannot do very much. It can eat, cry, sleep and soil its diaper. On the other hand, somehow a newborn child participates in a life-long bond of *being* in relationship with parents and is a master of this receptive energy. In addition, when the little one grows up to become a child, *being* continues to take precedent over *doing*. All we need do is to ask your kids to do their homework or to clean their rooms; they would rather play and playing is a very rich *being* activity, a natural thing that children enjoy. Although perhaps more balanced, even during adolescent years the young people will gravitate toward *being*."

"On the other hand, you will know when children reach adulthood because they finally give *doing* much more emphasis than *being* on a regular, daily basis. Adults chain themselves to the rock of performance. From morning to evening, they are on the run, becoming clock-watchers, *doing* what needs to be done. They often fall asleep thinking about what needs to be done tomorrow."

Conversely, toward the later years of adulthood we often enter a period of fatigue and burnout. The energy of *doing* exhausts itself as we enter a time of mid-life crisis and we begin to question the reason for existence, asking questions like "Why am I in this rat race?" and "What do I want to do with the rest of my life?" We become more

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reflective and receptive, paying attention to our feelings and to quality of life issues which, as we said, are *being* energies.

Similar to the turmoil of adolescence which serves as a time of growing into adulthood, Bill calls this period of transition *senescence*, a period of growing into old age. There comes time when it begins to occur to us as adults that someday we will be leaving adulthood behind. Speaking generally, the focus upon tasks recedes and shifts to relationships. A botanist will tell us that the word *senescence* means, "ripening." It is a time when we begin to move toward maturity and fullness, becoming in part self-reflective by asking questions such as "Who am I?" We begin seeking fullness of life purpose. We tend to define ourselves less by our roles such as parent or professional, seeking out images and talents that lead to greater satisfaction. We might go on a retreat in order to more fully mediate on existential questions. We may seek out more in depth relationships with others, perhaps through a support group or with a counselor. Spiritually it might be thought of as "the dark night of the soul" before beginning to come to the light of a new time in our lives.

After senescence comes elderhood, a word used very rarely in our society. Bill describes elderhood as a way of living lying beyond adulthood, a way of *being* in the world that puts receptivity, quality, feelings, relationships and meaningfulness ahead of *doing*. "Very few elders covet new sport cars and other very expensive gadgets," Bill informs us. "Elders are most concerned with relationships and the emotional

environment surrounding themselves, in contrast to caring about material things." As an example, when the Sherbrooke Centre in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada decided to build a new long-term care facility, Executive Director Suellen Beatty conducted focus groups with elders seeking their input. The result was the construction of a number of cottages housing about 10 people, each having a private room located only a few feet from a communal area and the kitchen, all of which is surrounded by exterior expansive glass in order to view a pleasant external landscape. Focus group participants were instinctively drawn toward emphasizing the need for intimacy and connectedness.

So, What are Elders Good For?

Contrary to current cultural perspectives, elders are good for a great number of things. We highlight just a few of their more critical contributions.

Teachers of being

Elderhood is a return to a way of living that puts *being* first, raising it up to become an important part of daily life. Interestingly, this perspective finds itself congruent with the theology of one of 20th century's most respected theologians, Paul Tillich, who spoke of God as the "Ground of Being" and our ultimate concern. In *Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer addresses it this way: "I had always imagined God to be in the same general direction as everything else I valued: up [as in upbeat or uptown]. I had failed to appreciate the meaning of some words that had intrigued me

since I first heard them in seminary: Tillich's description of God as the 'ground of being.' I had to be forced underground before I could understand that the way to God is not up but down." Informed by an entire life of experiences, many elders would implicitly understand these words. Elders who are attracted to *being* are much more interested in connectedness and putting things together, as opposed to adults, many of whom focus primarily upon problem-solving by taking things apart.

Givers of wisdom

Returning to the caduceus, we described the energy of *doing* as flowing from the masculine archetype and the energy of *being* as emerging from feminine essence. *Sophia* is the personification of feminine energy and is known as the goddess of wisdom. Accordingly, because of their many life experiences, elders are givers of wisdom, purposely applying knowledge and experience with common sense and insight.

Relating with quality and feeling

The number of overall relationships may begin to decline as people age, perhaps because of reduced mobility and/or sensing that the end of one's life is drawing nearer. Yet interactions tend to have more depth and intimacy. *Quality* takes precedent over the quantity of relationships. Social worker Cathleen Ingle informs us that no matter how much she puts into her work, her elderly clients give back a thousand fold. "They have a limited amount of time and physical resources, yet they connect with us," she says emphatically. "We find



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ourselves engaging in a small part of their journey. What a true gift we are given through these intimate occasions."

With respect to feeling, [Laura Carstensen](#) and her team researched the emotional states of people from 18 to 94 years and concluded that elders are more emotionally astute and balanced. The emotional system "works" well even in very old age; the ability to experience emotions deeply and regulate them effectively may even improve with age. Elders tend to accept and express a broader range of feelings than younger people.

Spiritual guides

In support of his theory of gerotranscendence, gerontologist [Lars Tornstam](#) believes that with elderhood comes an expanded understanding of the connectedness of everything and of exploring interrelationships. Things are seen as happening for a reason. By whatever name used to call "it" (or [Martin Buber's](#) concept of Thou), there seems to exist an energy, spirit or life force at work in the universe. "I think that people over the age of 65 are somewhat more spiritual due to their own feeling of mortality," chaplain Ken Nolen suggests. "As they age, they often begin a life review, thinking about their spiritual connections, what they have missed with their family and friends and whether they have a connection with God."

Peacemakers

Elders display a tendency to perceive and appreciate the mystery of life. Openness to paradox expands, as well as appreciation of the truths of various traditions and viewpoints. Bridge building is valued, which contributes to a talent

of peacemaking. Bill Thomas writes and speaks about this in terms of three dimensions: Making peace with oneself, with one's family and making peace in the world.

Quality workers

In the most complete sense of the word, all people work. However, for many elders who are freer from financial and time constraints, work takes place for the sake of one's soul. There is a deepening sense of being "called" to perform a task. For instance, a 70-year-old friend of mine built a carpentry shop in his backyard and makes beautiful wooden, painted ducks that sell for a considerable amount of money. His creative work reflects an element of mastery rather than production and a high degree of self-fulfillment as opposed to drudgery.

Librarians of Stories and Legacies

In *The Power of Myth*, [Joseph Campbell](#) affirms that we tell stories to try to come to terms with the world, to harmonize our lives with reality. An African proverb says, "The death of [an] old person is like the loss of a library." Elders carry around a lifetime of experiences and stories. As a career guidance professional, I have been exposed to hundreds of people's stories and have never yet heard a dull one. Stories preserve past events in a manner that those events still have power for us.

In his book, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, Richard Stone takes the reader on an inward journey to relearn the healing art of storytelling. It includes step-by-step explanations of how we can use stories to uncover lost pieces of ourselves, discover places that are hidden wellsprings of healing and

satisfy the hunger for meaning in our lives. "Through storytelling we can come to know who we are in new and unforeseen ways. We can also reveal to others what is deepest in our hearts and, in the process, build bridges." As mentioned earlier, elders and especially those connected to soul, tend to be bridge builders.

Legacy identification and sharing is closely related to story sharing. Obituaries in the newspaper serve as partial descriptions of people's legacies. However, Bill Thomas believes that we must be less formal and "more explicit and methodical in our effort to capture and share the legacies of our elders." One way to accomplish this involves using resources such as *A Guide for Recalling and Telling Your Life Story*, published by the [Hospice Foundation of America](#).

Bill believes that we are currently at the center of a gathering storm in our society. The irresistible force of the baby-boom generation is about to collide with current assumptions, stereotypes and practices related to aging. He states, "Those of us working in long term care who were thought to be in some quiet backwater of the profession will in the near future be turning the world upside down; baby-boomers will demand it. The opportunities for creating an aging environment rich in *being* will soon accelerate well beyond current levels. We all have a need for expanding *being* in our lives. For elders, *being* matters much more than *doing*."

Jim and his wife Linda have authored three books; the latest is award-winning The Soul of the Caring Nurse: Stories and Resources for Revitalizing Professional Passion. They are currently working on a new book, Transformational Eldercare From the Inside Out. jlhenry@aol.com

