**THE SAGES AMONG US: HARNESSING THE POWER OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

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**FOREWORD**

Thousands of books and articles have been written about leadership, and there is a substantial body of literature on community development as well. But little has been said about a closely related subject: *the civic engagement of sage leaders*—the role that unusually talented men and women voluntarily play in sharing their experience, judgment, and wisdom to advance the welfare of the communities in which they live.

Furthermore, while “civic engagement” is now an understood and accepted concept (“working to promote the quality of community life”), the term “sage” usually is not associated with it. To some, “sage” is a herb with a camphor-like aroma. To most “sage” evokes images of oracles and shamans, wise old men and women who for thousands of years in tribal societies served as political leaders and judges, guardians of traditions, and teachers of the young. This age-old meaning of “sage” lingers, but the forces of modernization left traditional elders without meaningful roles and they lost their honored place in society. In our time, senior citizens have become stereotyped as “old people” and have been relegated to retirement communities and nursing homes, awaiting pending death. For all intents and purposes, they are no longer considered contributing members of society.

Enter stage left: S*age-ing,* a new model of late-life development which zealously proposes that elderly men and women have the potential to “become spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible elders of the tribe.” (Zaltman and Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*). Viewed in this provocative and powerful way, sages are energetic risk-takers who work to heal and humanize society by becoming deeply involved in strengthening the civic lives of their communities.

The subject of sage-ing also has a corollary: It is not only senior citizens who have the potential to become sage leaders. Many young community members possess and exhibit the qualities of sage leadership as well—and deservedly so. The conventional notion of wisdom emanating only from the elder is being replaced by the compelling notion of *reciprocity*—the potent truth that each age cohort has something of great value to bring to the other cohort in serving their community together. Building on the idea that *sage leadership is an intergenerational phenomenon*, this book tells the story of the civic lives of 50 emerging sage leaders (ages 25-55) and 50 senior sage leaders (ages 56-90) in Grass Valley and Nevada City, California. These 100 certainly are not the only sage leaders in these two communities, but they are highly representative of those who are voluntarily engaged in its civic life.

The early chapters set the stage for sage leadership in “Twin Towns.” The book then shifts to the dynamics of sage leadership and civic engagement, followed by reflections on leadership from a “sagacious” perspective. The book concludes with musings about the continuing personal and professional growth of the Sage 100 and their views on religion, spirituality*,* and the meaning of wisdom.

Rich narratives from the 100 in-depth interviews provide significant insights into the nature of sage leadership and civic engagement. And lessons from these interviews make a compelling case for those unengaged “others” who possess sage qualities to step forward and offer their leadership on behalf of the community. It is hoped that you, the reader, will come away with a rich understanding about the extraordinary lives of these civically engaged sage leaders and their gift of intergenerational bestowal.

**PROLOGUE**

***What do I get out of my civic involvement in our community? Millions of dollars of good feelings. I don’t think there’s anything more to it than that.*** Sage Leader

What is sage leadership? And what can be said about the civic involvement of sage leaders in advancing the welfare of communities in which they live—especially during difficult economic times? This book invites answers to these and other intriguing questions.

**The Five Influences**

Inspiration for *The Sages Among* *Us* arose from loose connections among five influences. The first and oldest is the classic 1929 and 1937 sociological studies of Muncie, Indiana, called *Middletown*, by Robert and Helen Lynd. Second is the intriguing story of two dynamic and historically-linked Northern California communities, Grass Valley and Nevada City. The third influence is the emergence of a powerful concept called community capital, the key to building fully sustainable communities*.* An essential part of community capital is a fifth influence, the cogent argument made by John Gardner in 1988 for the civic engagement of senior citizens. And the fifth influence is the relative absence of literature on sage citizen leadership. We begin by briefly looking at each influence.

*Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, investigated changes that had occurred in Muncie, a small Indiana city of thirty thousand, between 1890 and 1925. The results of a follow-up study, *Middletown in Transition in Cultural Conflicts*, were published during the Great Depression in 1937, a time not unlike our own Great Recession. The Lynds used the methods of cultural anthropology (interviews, surveys, documents, statistics) and investigated six community themes that had been identified by W. H. R. Rivers in his classic work, *Social Organization*: getting a living, making a home, training the young, using leisure in various forms of play, engaging in religious practices, engaging in community activities. *Middletown* became the muse for numerous studies of community change and development that have been undertaken since that time, including the project on which this book is based.

**Grass Valley and Nevada City**

The great beauty of Nevada County and its rich history and strong sense of community have made Grass Valley and the county seat, Nevada City, special places in which to live, work, and play since the earliest days of the gold rush in the 1850s. Miners settled in Grass Valley and mine managers lived in nearby Nevada City—setting the stage for much distrust, then heated competition, and now growing collaboration between the two communities. Mining was followed by logging, and that was followed in the 1950s by the founding of two premier technology firms. Charley Litton, founder of Litton Industries and vacuum tube manufacturing pioneer, moved his engineering labs from San Francisco to Grass Valley. Several years later his friend, Donald Hare, created a solid state amplifier for the flourishing motion picture industry that resulted in the founding of the Grass Valley Group.

Geographically only three miles apart, the two interdependent communities are becoming extraordinary “arts destinations of distinction.” And they have made their individual marks in other ways as well. Earlier, in Grass Valley, Lyman Gilmore is said to have made the first powered airplane flight in 1902—a year before the Wright brothers. And Wallace Stegner set his 1972 Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Angle of Repose* there, while down the road in Nevada City the made-for-television movie *Christmas Card,* starring Ed Asner, was filmed and released in 2006. This small county of 99,000 also features the presence of 693 registered non-profit organizations and, several years ago, engaged the leadership in Grass Valley and Nevada City of two young and vigorous women mayors. All of this rich and innovative history, plus the growing influx of retirees and others from across the country, has made Grass Valley (population 13,000) and Nevada City (population 3,000) fascinating and inviting places in which to live and serve. And like *Middletown* earlier, these “Twin Towns” are ideal places to investigate the dynamics of community development and the active civic roles that sage leaders play in advancing it.

**Community Capital**

This powerful idea embraces three elements: *natural capital,* (all of the things that nature provides for a community), *financial and built capital* (the structures, manufactured goods, information resources, and credit and debt in a community), and *human and social capital* (the people that make-up a community). Human and social capital reside at the heart of this project and involve the way people work together to engage their community. Set in psychological terms, human capital is the recognition and full use of human potential that exists in a community. Set in sociological terms, social capital is the building of social cohesion and personal investment in community.

**Civic Engagement**

The subject of “civic engagement” goes back to the ancient Greeks and was later described by Alexis de Tocqueville as “habits of the heart”—the nurturing of democratic principles and values he found during his visit in the 1830s that were manifest in everyday lives of Americans. Since those early days of the republic, voluntary organizations and their leaders have become a fundamental part of American society. And so has the rising concept of “civic engagement.” Among the current meanings are “making a difference in the civic lives of our communities by employing the knowledge, skills, values, and motivations to make a difference.” The end game of civic engagement is to promote the quality of community life through both political and nonpolitical means and processes. Enter John Gardner, the late great American educator, author, and leader. In 1988 he advocated for the civic engagement of *senior citizens* by observing that “they are a great reservoir of talent” and should be called upon to “give back” to the nation and their communities. Many others have since amplified on Gardner’s theme, including author Robert D. Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) and organizations like Civic Ventures, which sponsors the Encore Careers and Experience Corps programs.

**Sage Leadership**

An enormous amount of research has connected late-life development with civic engagement, but the literature has not adequately explored the nature and function of *sage* *leadership* in strengthening community life. This deficiency has been partly remedied by the codification of compelling ideas about *sagacity* in the still influential book written more than a decade ago (1995) by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Old.* Among the book’s many virtues is that it closely links civic engagement with s*age-ing,* a new model of late-life development that involves people becoming *“spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible elders of the tribe.”* The book also takes the courageous step of disavowing sage-ing as being but a one-way relationship between the old and the young by emphasizing the idea of *reciprocity*. The central premise is that the old and the young can bring immense value to one another, and this is key to understanding the role that sage leaders of all ages can play in the civic development of community life.

This book, then, is about the coming together of five loosely-connected influences to undertake an exploratory community-wide study of sage leadership and civic engagement in Grass Valley and Nevada City, California—and which we periodically refer to throughout as “Twin Towns.” Beginning in the fall of 2009 and concluding in the summer of 2011, the project was conducted entirely by volunteer leaders and without benefit of financial support. A detailed description of the project’s vision, purposes, and methodology is presented in Appendix A.

**Overview of the Contents**

Section One sets the stage for understanding the context for sage leadership and civic engagement. In Chapter One we review the convergence of four powerful trends that are reflected in the Sage Leadership Project: changes in demography at all levels of American society, dominant characteristics of the nation’s four generational age groups, a significant shift in the senior population from *aging to sage-ing*, and the documented social and personal benefits that are derived from civic engagement. Chapter Two takes a snapshot of the histories of the Sage 100 and then proceeds to Chapter Three, which reports the powerful peak life experiences that have shaped who and what sage leaders are today.

Section Two explores the nature of sage leadership and the dynamics of civic engagement. We begin with Chapter Four, which looks in-depth at the actual civic engagements of Twin Towns’ sage leaders. Chapter Five describes how sage leaders help their favored civic organizations, and Chapter Six examines roadblocks to effective sage leadership and civic engagement. Chapter Seven identifies the most meaningful and satisfying experiences that sage leaders have had within their favored organizations, and Chapter Eight probes what motivates sage leaders to become civically involved in their community. Chapter Nine reports on sage-ing and the question of personal sacrifice, and Chapter Ten moves to the benefits that sage leaders say they receive from their civic engagements. Chapter Eleven explores why some potential sage leaders are not civically engaged in their community, and Chapter Twelve proposes what might be done to cultivate greater civic engagement from persons possessing sage qualities who currently are not involved.

Section Three looks at leadership from a “sagacious” perspective. It begins with Chapter Thirteen, which reports views that sage leaders have about their own leadership. Chapter Fourteen offers reflections on what sage leaders like and dislike in other leaders, and Chapter Fifteen shifts to how sage leaders believe their leadership has changed over the years. The section ends with Chapter Sixteen, which explores the personal and professional growth, spirituality, and wisdom of sage leaders.

The book includes five appendices. The vision, purposes, and methodology of the Sage Leadership Project are outlined in Appendix A. This is followed in Appendix B by a list of the in-depth interview questions that were asked of the 100 sage leaders, and in Appendix C Karen Marinovich reports the demographic profile of these leaders. Appendix D revisits the inspiring story of Grass Valley and Nevada City civic history, “A Tale of Twin Towns,” written by Jan Westmore. This is followed in Appendix E by a compelling essay written by Cristine Kelly and Chuck Coovert that reflects on why sage leaders believe that living in Twin Towns is so valued today. Appendix F presents a verbatim transcription of the final project seminar that the two, ten-person emerging and senior interview teams held on completion of their 100 sage interviews. This insightful and far-reaching conversation explores what the young and old most need to learn from one another and how the two generational groups can work together to address and resolve community issues that face Grass Valley and Nevada City.