

Sage Leadership/Setting the Stage III: From Aging to Saging

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In the absence of an extensive body of literature on sage citizen leadership, there is need to explore four subjects: a new paradigm of what aging means today, an understanding of the historic role of the elder, the meaning of “sagacity,” and the relevance of leadership research.

A New Paradigm

It may not always be at the forefront of our thinking, but each of us knows that physical and mental decline and death are inevitable. So it should be of some comfort that significant improvements in health and life expectancy make the aging process potentially a time for personal and spiritual growth and service rather than the end of productive life. This shift in thinking about aging is wonderfully captured in the pioneering book by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*.

The authors, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, argue that longer life expectancy provides an opportunity for heightened consciousness as the best way to counterbalance the physical and social diminishments of old age. They contend that without nurturing inner awareness, prolonged life can lead to depression and poignant despair (“Who needs years, maybe decades, of physical and mental decline?”) (Endnote 1).

The authors describe the conventional view of aging and offer a compelling alternative:

According to the traditional model of life span development, we ascend the ladder of our careers, reach the zenith of our success and influence in midlife, then give

*way to an inevitable decline that culminates in a weak, often impoverished old age. This is **aging** pure and simple, a process of gradually increasing personal diminishment and disengagement from life. As an alternative (we) propose a new model of late-life development called **sage-ing**, a process that enables older people to become spiritually radiant, physically vital, and socially responsible 'elders of the tribe' (Endnote 2).*

The Social Role of Elder in Transition

The traditional role of elder has guided human social order for thousands of years, and the authors break this history into three stages. In the first, which runs from prehistory to the Industrial Revolution, elders were at the center of tribal life. They served as political leaders and judges, guardians of traditions, and teachers of the young. As *council chiefs*, elders settled tribal disputes. As *initiators*, they guided adolescents through rites of passage that prepared them to assume adult responsibilities and carry on tribal traditions. As *visionaries and seers*, they served as conduits between “the divine realm and the mundane world,” making the abstract truths of spirituality accessible to the community by embodying them in everyday behavior. Elders also served as *sacred ecologists* who preserved the world’s beauty and harmony, and as *escorts for the soul* from the pending approach of death to the afterlife (ancient hospice counselors).

As elders in traditional societies aged and their physical prowess waned, they surrendered their secular reins within the tribe to younger members and turned to cultivating inner spiritual power. Exercising this power for the welfare of their tribe, they became shamans, healers, and priests. Traditional elders also served as bridge-builders between the generations. To usher children through the long period of helplessness, human parents also needed to be nurtured. And in getting parenting themselves, these parents received uniquely important support from older men and women.

During the industrial era of human history the forces of modernization made traditional elders increasingly useless. Power passed from fathers to sons, who valued the new and technological rather than the old ways of the past. This shift created enormous technological progress but left elders without meaningful roles, and they lost their honored place in society. They became

victims of what the authors call *gerontophobia*, a fear of advanced age based on disempowering cultural stereotypes. Like any other disempowered group, elders in time got warehoused in new ghettos (nursing homes and retirement communities). Segregated, they have become victims of *ageism*, discrimination because of age. Old people also have come to serve as psychological shields that younger people use to deflect the reality of their own aging and ultimate death.

To counteract this ageist nightmare, gerontologists have proposed a third stage of eldering. Called *successful aging*, the emphasis is on lifestyle changes, sound nutrition, and the pursuit of an active life to combat physical and intellectual decline. The authors of *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* acknowledge this is a good beginning, but they go much further. They argue for the powerful role that spiritual engagement—*Sage-ing*—can play in the aging process, and which they explore throughout their book.

Sagacity

So what is sagacity, and how will we know it when we see and experience it? We begin by attributing three qualities to the concept: 1) Wisdom in action, or active reflective practice. 2) Unusual effectiveness that only exposure to experience can achieve. 3) Generativity, the motive of wanting to leave behind a legacy, something of lasting human value. In exploring additional meaning, colleague John Bush formulated eight descriptive statements for sagacity: *Sage leaders are people persons*. They demonstrate this by their respect and care for persons in their charge and in everyday dealings. They enjoy people interactions and are liked and admired by people in their community. And they believe that people, rather than organizations, are the most important ingredient in community life. *Sage leaders have a calm confidence about them*. They have been tested and have achieved their own identity as leaders. They are open to discussions and diverse opinions and are willing to enter into dialogue.

According to Bush, *sage leaders also have a working theory of human nature that they can describe*. They are students of human nature and are interested in people's motivations, values, and desires. *Sage leaders have a working theory of organizations which they can articulate*. They tend to see organizations as living organisms and seek to learn new and better ways to achieve success along with the success of persons within them. *Sage leaders have a working*

theory of leadership and can convey it. They believe that leadership is dynamic rather than static. They know when to coax, cajole, push, encourage, and when to leave alone. *Sage leaders have a broad worldview.* They recognize that organizations exist and function within a larger interdependent network of organizations in the community. They seek to develop and strengthen these networks and partnerships. *Sage leaders are students.* They seek to increase their own knowledge and are introspective. They search for lessons in their own failures and successes and use this knowledge to better lead. And *Sage leaders are teachers.* They derive great satisfaction in helping other people to develop and grow. (Endnote 3)

Various dictionary definitions often attribute three qualities to sagacity: *unusual experience, sound judgment, and wisdom.* It is safe to say there are leaders who are not sage and sages who are not leaders. It is also clear that wisdom comes with age. And although age does not guarantee wisdom, one cannot get wisdom without it. Wisdom is said to be “caught, not taught.” We teach by contagion, not by compulsion; that is, situations where wisdom can be influenced by first building relationships of trust and affection. Then, opportunities to teach come naturally and wisdom flows through intimate connections built over time (Endnote 4)

Maggie Kuhn, the late dynamic founder of the Gray Panthers, approached the subject of sagacity in a different but complimentary way. She saw elders as risk-takers who heal and humanize society by playing five appropriate roles: *mentor* (intergenerational bestowal, the art of teaching the young,), *mediator* (helping to resolve community conflict), *monitor* (serving as public policy watchdog), *mobilizer* (working to enact social change), and *motivator* (urging people away from self-interest toward the public good) (Endnote 5).

The authors of *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* parallel and reinforce Kuhn’s proposal. They see elders as wisdom-keepers who have on-going responsibility for nurturing and preserving society’s safety and well-being. The authors’ model goes well beyond the idea of honoring the elder because of age and long life experience. They see the elder as *a guide for evolution and change*—the elder as *sage leader* (Endnote 6)

Endnotes

- 1 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, 1995, Warner Books, p. 7, p. 50.
- 2 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, 1995, p. 55.
- 3 John Bush, *Prospectus: The Civic Engagement of 100 Sage Leaders in Twin Towns USA*, unpublished paper, 2009.
- 4 *The Smith Family Newsletter*, Vol. 7, Spring, 1990.
- 5 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, 1995.
- 6 Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, 1995.