

**Peak Life Experiences:
The Beginning of Senior Sage Leadership**

Gary Quehl and William Bergquist

When I joined Bell Labs and later went to graduate school with some of the best minds in the country, I found I could compete well with anyone. Senior Sage Leader

The 50 senior sage leaders had peak life experiences in ten major areas that moved them toward sagacity and civic engagement: overcoming tragedy and hardship, work, international travel, mentors, education, recreation, nonprofit organizations, the Civil Rights Movement, religion and spiritual awareness, and marriage.

Personal Experiences

Many of the senior Sage leaders found—like their younger Emergent leader colleagues—that their peak experiences were very personal.

Overcoming tragedy and hardship

The peak experiences of senior sage leaders tied to tragedy and hardship are rich and varied. One very senior person became toughened to life by overcoming death as a young woman and then having to rely on dialysis for 30 years, while another learned memorable leadership lessons by rising to the occasion in the aftermath of a devastating hurricane. A senior sage leader walked 12 miles out from Big Sur Canyon (on the Northern California coast) on a broken leg and found that his not giving-up had permanently changed him. Another became her mother's guardian at age 23 and committed her to a mental institution against family wishes, while a third dwells on feelings of caring for her father before he died from leukemia. Two senior sage leaders mention growing-up poor—but along the way having acquired moral values, a strong work ethic, and knowing the importance of community service. Two others had horrific peak experiences in

combat, one in WWII and another in Vietnam. Several identify divorce as a life-changing experience, and one woman who lost her children through divorce became a well-known expert on intact families and adoption. And then there is the senior sage leader who lived through the Battle of Britain during WWII:

I grew up in England and was given quite a bit of responsibility as a small child during the war. While most everybody else was evacuated, we lived in the country about 15 miles from London. This was a key area for the bombing, but we didn't leave because of my father's business. Some of my early memories are of my father saying, "Now be a grown-up girl and take Mommy to the air raid shelter." So I would be sent out ahead, in the dark, to turn the lights on there. My mother had another child, who later died, who I also took to the shelter while my father was off on "hell and gone duty" patrolling for possible parachutists.

And there are other types of hardship that senior sages say have been peak experiences in their lives:

My decision to leave the East coast and move to the San Francisco Bay Area without a job—to leave friends, connections, and all kinds of relationships I had developed over sixteen years—was devastating. My whole self-concept and persona had evolved around my work life and my role as a national leader in my field. It took the better part of three years to transition from the depths of despair to discover a more wonderful and satisfying life. I learned that if I could do this once, I could do it again if something awful happened in my life. So this experience was the greatest gift to my life. I didn't realize it fully some 21 years ago, but my having confronted despair and disappointment and learned from it transformed my life. I still wake up many mornings wondering how I could have been so lucky to have had that happen to me.

Religious/spiritual experiences

Many senior sage leaders have had a transforming religious or spiritual experience, including one who became involved with the local Ananda Community. Another had his Christian faith instilled in him by his mother, and a third recalls a moving experience as a child in church summer camp. A fourth went to a retreat at his Episcopal Church group in high school and came

away as a dedicated spiritual seeker. And two senior sage leaders had powerful spiritual experiences of a different nature:

I had my first visioning experience many years ago with altered states of consciousness, like meditation. This particular experience was a guided meditation where we went on a spirit walk. I was walking through a forest when a huge stag, this deer with an enormous set of horns, walked out from behind a boulder and looked at me and said, “Without freedom there is nothing.”

Friends of ours got us involved in an organization that sponsored a variety of projects. As our experience in the organization unfolded, we found that it was entirely based on the principles of Jesus as a wisdom teacher. And that started our quest to understand who we were by looking at what Jesus and the Bible say are important guides to living our life. With others in the organization we did things like celebrate Passover, explore the Enneagram, and study the beauty and truths of various religious traditions. We did this for 20 years, and I continue to draw on this experience in musing about such questions as “What would Jesus do in this situation? What are my areas of darkness, and how do I bring them to light?”

Marriage

Of special interest are the several senior sage leaders who point to the transformative power of a highly successful, long-term marriage—and especially their spouse’s role in making it so:

One peak experience in my life has been my wife. We dated as youngsters, produced a wonderful family, and last year celebrated our 50th anniversary. She has been such a wonderful sounding board and great equalizer for me. Given my temperament I can be all over the ball park, but she has kept me centered. I can’t say enough about how my wife contributed to my career, raised our two children when I was gone much of all the time, and became a loving guide in my life. Without her, the life I have wouldn’t have been possible.

Recreational experiences

A small number of senior sage leaders reflect on the immense power that recreational activities have had on their lives. One discovered marathon running in his young forties and has since completed marathons on every continent, including Antarctica. Another found that teaching art in her home was richly rewarding, while a third continues to find backpacking in the wilderness deeply moving. A fourth remembers dancing ballet when young and being around great dance studios. And a fifth senior sage points to the influence of his musical directors and being in a marching band in high school and at Ohio State.

Collective and Shared Experiences

The peak experience could also be one that involved (even required) the involvement of other people.

Work experiences

Senior sage leaders identify numerous peak experiences that have grown out of their work lives. One worked at a horrible job during college years, and this gave her a strong perspective and grip on life. Another is thankful for having been passed-over for a position as a young man that led to an even better job. Truly potent, the most senior sage leader interviewed tells the remarkable story of his company having helped him as a young man get into flight school during WWII, where he flew P-38 Lightning and P-51 Mustang fighters before returning to the company and eventually climbing the ladder to become its President/CEO. Yet another prepared for a career in finance but was interviewed by an officer at his Fortune 500 firm who invited him to take a job in human resources—a chance career move that resulted in his becoming the senior human resources officer of the company for 35 years.

Several senior sage leaders point to the profound effect that getting fired had on their outlook, while one was transformed by the power of her boss saying how smart she was and how she would be very successful in banking—which turned out to be true. Another senior sage reflects on the personal risks it took to start a new bank, and a second ponders on having formed a start-up company that resulted in 200 employees and \$10 million in sales. And, then, there is the story of how life-altering the United States Marine Corps has been for a home town senior sage leader:

I applied for Marines Officer Candidate School after graduating from Stanford but my application was denied because “they had better qualified candidates.” I then enlisted in the Marines and reported to basic training with the idea of staying in for just two years. That denial of my OCS application was a humbling experience, but six months later I was sent to the next OCS class. I had a company commander who said he wanted me to apply to OCS, but I told him I had already been turned down. He insisted that I try again and I got accepted. Years later, after being informed by the Commandant of the Marine Corp that I was being promoted to Major General, my wife hugged me and said, “Don’t forget that you still have to take out the garbage.”

International experiences

A small number of senior sage leaders, like many of the emerging sage leaders, reflect on the important role that international experiences have played in shaping their lives. One was deeply moved by going through “Check Point Charley” in East Germany during the Cold War, another by going around the world with her husband on a sail boat for a year. Yet a third had a mother take her to Thailand and Hong Kong, which gave her a life-long bug to travel and expanded her understanding of different cultures and compassion for others. And there is the senior sage leader who went to Laos as a civilian and experienced the Viet Nam War from the other side, causing him to return to the US to see if he could live in a country he didn’t respect any more.

Mentors

Senior sage leaders reflect on the transforming power of mentors. One identifies a high school teacher who had confidence in him as a young man, and another mentions the influence and example that her piano teacher had in launching her career in music and music education. A third senior sage leader had a high school teacher who taught him the importance of finishing whatever he started, and two had fathers for mentors; one was a distinguished attorney who supported his son’s decision not to pursue a career in the law, while the other was so inspired by his father’s gift of good example that he chose to follow in his footsteps.

Educational experiences

Many senior sage leaders point to peak experiences that are associated with formal schooling. One was greatly impacted by going to boarding school at a very early age and having to survive away from home. Another recalls the transforming privilege of coming from a local modest home and going to Stanford University on a football scholarship, while a third remembers that Sister Eleanor was hugely influential in shaping his values in elementary school. Then there is the senior sage leader who trained in college for a career in teaching, only to discover that he was interested in music instead. Or the sage leader who found that moving around a lot as a child to attend many new schools had been profoundly formative. Two had great school leadership experiences, one running for student body president against all odds and winning, and the other being made captain of his team at age 12. And then there is the spirited story of the senior sage leader as an undergraduate:

I remember sitting at my desk and going through the catalog and decided I was going to graduate with honors so I could get a master's degree. At the time I had a 2.5 grade average, and all of the hardest electrical engineering courses were coming up. I marked the grade I wanted to achieve after every course I had to take for the next two years to graduate with honors—and I nailed every one of them. I went from being a 2.5 to a 3.6 student overnight just because I decided this was what I was going to do. After that I knew I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. When I joined Bell Labs and later went to graduate school with some of the best minds in the country, I found I could compete well with anyone.

Nonprofit experiences

Most senior sage leaders have had life-changing experiences that move them to expanded civic engagement due to their involvement in nonprofit work. Service as board presidents has been very growth-enhancing for many senior sage leaders. One sage reports on volunteering to provide food and shelter for those in need, while another recalls the style and behavior of her Junior League president and her decision *not* to be like her. Several senior sage leaders remember the impact of being elected to chair important organizations and activities, while another explains a flow of transforming experiences that carried her from the convent to meeting her husband and embracing his children as her own, to taking in foster children, to chairing The Masterpeace Conference, to working with Native Americans – and finally to helping found

Hospitality House, the local program for the homeless. And one senior sage leader and her husband had a life-changing experience in another state:

What motivates me to engage in civic activities is the desire to continue building my life and learning from every situation that I can. And part of this is having a life within the community in which I live. My husband and I learned this in spades when we spent a period of time volunteering in another state to work on an important project. Our goal was to engage the state and change the way the people there thought about our planet and solving conflict without war. We learned how to penetrate small towns and large cities and found that getting involved can be very rewarding and satisfying. So being in a community and being involved in it is part of having a whole life. If you're not involved, your life can pass you by. You want to be able to get to our age and be able to say, "What have I done with this life of mine? What difference has my life made?" If you don't get involved, you'll never know the answers to these questions. So just open the door and walk through.

The Civil Rights Movement

Two senior sage leaders had influential experiences during the Civil Rights period. One found his involvement in Mississippi's civil rights struggle to be an enormous education, and the other still reflects on the troubled racial integration she experienced in her Baton Rouge high school:

When I was a senior in high school, our schools in Louisiana became integrated. A small group of extremely bright, wonderful students from the all black McKinley High were placed in all white Baton Rouge High. It was incredibly difficult. We couldn't leave the classroom to go to the bathroom without an escort. It really wasn't about white girls; it was about white males bothering black females. When we exited the school, students left via different quadrants of the building to be picked up by their families. It was terrible.

Variety of Peak Experiences

Much as William James noted at the turn of the 20th Century in *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, some persons are twice-born (Endnote 1). They change as a result of specific, powerful events in their lives; they are "converted" or transformed. Others are once-born. They

change gradually as a result of a set of small events or the accumulation of gradual societal changes. They “transition” rather than transform. Their life is on a trajectory rather than being piloted by a set of abrupt changes. These two different life models can lead senior sage leaders to similar civic interests and involvements, but they may also lead these future leaders down quite different paths—and they require different kinds of mentoring. Mentors to the once-born person are there to assist and support their mentee over the “long haul”; they provide sustained support and offer penetrating insights throughout the lengthy transition. Conversely, mentors to the twice-born are there at the right time and in the right place to support mentees as they confront the big event in their lives. This kind of mentor supports the twice-born in ways that the peak experience is not just traumatizing—it is an event that teaches and transforms.

Major Societal Events

Some senior sage leaders have been witnesses to major events earlier in their lives that forever changed the communities in which they lived or were visiting—ranging from growing up in WWII London during air raids to observing the integration of schools in the Southeastern United States, to collapse of the Soviet Union and tearing down of the Berlin Wall. This range of profound social transformations provided these men and women with great appreciation of the need for social justice. Such events altered their perspectives about the world, and more generally about the nature of humanity. They came away with a dramatic recognition of the great differences that exist in other societies and distant regions of the world, and this helped them gain a strong sense of what they wanted to do with their lives.

Interpersonal Events

For other senior sage leaders, the peak experience was more personal in nature. Rather than observing or participating in a major societal event, they identify specific personal challenges as being particularly important. It may have been the relationship they established with a teacher in grammar school or junior high school. In a few instances it was the advice of a parent at a critical point in their life, or the actions that parents took in supporting some initiative. In most instances, however, it was someone outside the family—like a powerful and persuasive mentor who made the difference.

The future sage leaders came to a period in life—usually between ages 12 and 20—when they were at a cross roads. And then someone entered their lives and believed in them. These key persons said, “I have confidence in you.” This profoundly impacted the future sage leaders’ sense of self and helped to clarify their strengths and potentials. And that, in turn, led to greater self-confidence and self-esteem. In other instances, a significant other person provided the future sage leader a new life experience. In values research this is known as “values-expansion” rather than the more widely acknowledged “values clarification” or “values inculcation.” All three are common outcomes of powerful mentoring.

Reframing

As the senior sage leaders reflect on the major events and the influential interpersonal relationships in their lives, they often reframe their critical experiences. At the time, events and interpersonal relationships may have seemed negative – even tragic. In many cases, the senior sages acknowledge they had made a major “people mistake.” For example, some were now in a second marriage, and it had taken the healing power of time to realize they had made mistakes in their first; in the case of several women sages, the mistake led to divorce and the profound challenge of becoming a single parent while having to make a living entirely on their own. In other instances, the mistake occurred in the workplace, for example coming to understand that people are ultimately more important than a product or process. Other future sages had handled an important interpersonal relationship very badly, and may have emotionally damaged a person in their lives about whom they cared deeply.

Yet in retrospect, the senior sage leaders realize that earlier events and people led to their current life position and served as incentives and even guideposts for the kind of Theory S leadership they are now providing—and for the kind of community services in which they are now engaged. The event or interpersonal relationship is now reframed as an opportunity to learn, and they are more fully able to appreciate and honor this learning and move forward without being stuck in either regret or anger about the past event or relationship. In some instances, it was faith that carried future senior sages through hard times and supported new personal insights. In others it was gaining an appreciation of internal strength and resolve that carried them through

challenging times and toward new insights about themselves. These senior sage leaders all now seem to “know themselves,” and this may be one of the key attributes and sources of wisdom that successful sages manifest. As one senior sage observed, “Peak and trough experiences may be just opposite sides of the same coin, and wisdom may come from the recognition that this ultimately *is* the same coin.”

Notes

1. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, 1900.