

# ELDERS IN TRANSITION

A Handbook for Growing Elder Community



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# **ELDERS IN TRANSITION**

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Growing Elder Community**

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by these authors.

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## ***The Soul of Community***

*The soul of community  
is coming through us,  
light on its forehead,  
old stories in its right hand,  
unknowing freedom in its left.*

*Don't ruin this chance  
with easy promises,  
politeness,  
pretenses of knowledge,  
or elegant quotes.  
The help that has been longed for is here.  
Join with other great souls.*

*Gathering together becomes a ceremony,  
approaching Mystery.*

*Meaning: pass quickly through your being  
into absence, unknowing and emptiness.*

*The self of your name and fame  
secures you  
with a new knot  
every moment.*

*Personal identity is a sheath  
The unique one resides within.*

*Reality unites  
worn covering,  
with our mysterious,  
unencumbered, nature.*

*Look closely.  
In community,  
Love is purifying love.*

—Rumi (a re-translation by Lucky via Coleman Barks)

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# Introduction

— *Lucky*

I had just finished writing *Embracing Life*. I thought I might die before I got through it, but that didn't happen. During that writing I developed a desire to work with older people. Being oriented to human development I found myself speculating that the farthest reaches of human development were more likely to occur amongst old people, the most experienced of our kind. I wanted to find out if this was indeed likely. Because I hadn't reached the end, and I am Lucky, I was moved by my community into a new home. In the process I met Alexandra (who hereafter I refer to as Xan).

She was trying to help the new residents of this development become a community. I don't understand why, completely, but we became friends enough that I was on the scene one day when she said she would like to create an on-going group of old people. I think she was mainly interested in inquiring into the unfinished business of the 60's and 70's. I had the audacity (I didn't know her very well yet) to ask her if I could do it with her. I think she surprised us both by saying "yes," even more audaciously.

We didn't know it, but that moment turned out to be quite fortuitous. From the first meeting of the Salon, which was composed mostly of her friends, something unusual began to take place. Now nearly four years later we are pausing and trying to capture some of what has happened in this handbook. I have been surprised, delighted, humbled, heartened, and greatly moved by the words, hands, and hearts of old folks. The Elders Salon has transported me into a new world. In this place discovering each other has amounted to discovering ourselves.

Xan and I have had the good fortune to provide a social space that allowed the gifts of old people to become visible. Without really knowing what we were doing we tapped into a kind of mother lode. Our emphasis was upon consciousness raising because we quickly learned that many old folks didn't even know what they were capable of, but this emphasis was rapidly joined by community-building. Caring turns

out to be one strength of old folks, an attribute that took us deeper into each other's lives and brought connection. As people got to know each other and learned more about themselves, the Salon became an important bulwark against the ageist voices that seek to define old age for us. The Salon, this group of old people, began to develop its own voice and its own ideas about what aging is about. Old people defined for themselves what they were up to.

I don't know if this handbook will help anyone start an elder community. It is intended to be of help, but I have learned that old people have too little time and energy to waste on simply good ideas. It seems to me that old folks are hungry for real meaning. It is my hope that there is enough real meaning within these pages to feed some of that hunger. I don't kid myself, however; the real food lies in the connections made. Feed each other with yourselves. That is what lies at the heart of elder community; it is why it works for us; and it is a process by which old people discover the miracle of who they are.



# Transition and Elders

— *Lucky*

*Transition Sebastopol serves to build a positive future by cultivating community resilience and responding to the great challenges of our times with inspired local action.*

—*Mission Statement, Transition Sebastopol*

## *Now*

We exist at an historical time, an evolutionary moment, where the future teeters uncertainly. Anxiety about Nature and survival has always faced our ancestors. Now it is our own form of nature that threatens. Clearly this is a complex moment. How will we respond?

We are the greatest threat we have yet to face. Our success is now our greatest danger. This is a time of a natural rite of passage. No one knows how to thread the eye of this dilemma. It seems reasonable to believe that the moment calls for creative attention, learning and cooperation. By emphasizing community resilience the Transition movement offers a way through this dilemma.

To succeed, this movement needs combined effort. The future seems to be calling for us to become communal again, to rely once more upon our social nature. Our creative strength lies in our shared hearts. Transition offers us an opportunity to learn what we already know; our best chance for survival comes from fitting in, learning how to blend our perceptions and abilities, and enjoying together the lessons and gifts of nature.

Community resilience calls for community. Community thrives when human hearts are meaningfully connected. This is a strength of older people, especially those who believe themselves to be elders. The symmetry between Transition's emphases upon surviving into the future, along with the elders' focus upon living fully in the moment, is too great to ignore. Transition and elders can empower each other.



### *What Can Elders Offer Transition?*

Old people are far more capable than has been assumed. They have, thanks to new longevity, the time and the energy that could drive a movement. Elders tend to be more capable of the kinds of relationships that optimize community. They are natural leaders, having benefitted from surviving hardships and losses, They have gained a lifetime of perspective and are particularly talented at seeing the big picture. It is in their natural developmental interest to give their abilities for the well-being of their community. And there will be many seeking a way to use their life energy well.

If Transition can make elders visible then it could provide a way toward elder fulfillment. By practicing community, which the elderly tend to be more capable of, transitional values can merge with a desire for meaning, caring, and learning. Elders will not only volunteer for change, but they will ensure that “doughnut holes” don’t appear because, for them, it won’t be volunteering but living fully. They have the most experience with surviving, thus offering us a real chance at sustaining the human experiment.

### *What Can Transition Offer Elders?*

The symmetry between Transition’s efforts and the needs of the old is striking. Elders thrive on meaningful service. Transition could harness the affections and energy of older people by supporting their communal awakening, by recognizing and valuing them, and by putting their enormous creativity, heart, and experience to work. Transition offers an opportunity to utilize their life energy well. A dramatic and alternative synergy is possible.

Transition merely has to do some genuine outreach. There are elders currently who would be glad to have a meaningful way to invest themselves. Millions more are on their way. Globally, they comprise what could be a great evolutionary force. If the Transition movement can respect what Nature has cooked up in its grey form, then the wisdom that comes with age can assist the needed changes.

## *Conclusion*

We are at an unprecedented time in our species' life. It is apparent we need to develop a more mature set of capabilities. Elders already embody many of these needed characteristics. Our species' future, maybe the future of Life as we know it, may well depend upon how we respond to this moment. Nature has ripened some for such an occasion. Let's find a way to honor and utilize this resource.



# Using this Handbook

— *Alexandra*

Lucky and I have decided to each create mostly separate pieces for this Handbook, as our styles are distinct, just as our roles have been in putting together the Elders Salon which instigated all this. We believe that part of the success of our elders' project has been due to our differences. So, as you will see, we provide bylines. While we both have much experience with groups and with community-building activities, again we have come from very different points of view. This has been a source of growth for me, not least in the developmental move from "tolerating difference" to appreciating and welcoming differences that arise.

A minor area of difference is in our writing choices. In our elder groups we have been discouraging the use of "we/our" and "you," choosing to speak as much as possible in "I statements." This becomes very awkward when speaking about generalities. We have discovered that learning more and more about not accepting cultural attitudes is freeing, and that cultural attitudes are often spoken as "we." Sometimes using the pronouns "I" and "one," while avoiding the trap of speaking for someone else who may not at all agree with one, becomes just too cumbersome for me, distracting the flow of meaning. So I ask forbearance if I sometimes write generally, apparently including you in something with which you don't agree.

There is also a politically correct gender pronoun problem when trying to speak of what a person might feel when he or she (they?) is/are referred to ungrammatically. That sentence was constructed to demonstrate the difficulty, which you are all likely to have encountered. I may retreat to the accepted masculine reference (in English grammar), or alternately use something made-up like "s/he" or simply allow the ungrammatical to occur. Lucky is on his own here as well.

A larger difference in what we provide here is that I am prone to let you know the mechanics of how we did create the Elders Salon and

he is more prone to tell you of the “inside job” and the more hidden discoveries we have encountered along the way. I am grateful to his skill in flushing out these characteristics and his competence in putting words to that part of the Salon experience.

I believe that for any group of elders (if not the “merely old”) to find a group engaging, they will be happiest finding their own style. Still, it may be helpful to have a bit of early guidance toward getting the group into more substantive discussion while including a good deal of freedom. We found that most of us were wary at first that a group of this sort might simply not be our cup of tea — for myself, because I couldn’t see myself as *old!* Later I came to appreciate my age and age cohorts with a sense of pride. To counter this wariness, a speedy entry into what truly engages our minds is of benefit. Practice saying one’s age proudly is as well. Format and structure can, to some degree, aid in this process; therefore, I shall provide some of what we did. Do not interpret our path as prescriptive but rather as informational, with an intention to point a possible direction if it is useful.



# **HANDBOOK**

**for**

## **Growing an Elder Community**

*Life doesn't care about what you know;  
it only cares about who you are.*

*— Anonymous*

*As for old age, embrace and love it.  
It abounds with pleasure if you know how to use it.  
The gradually declining years are among the sweetest of life...*

— *Seneca*

# Prologue

— *Lucky*

Aging is a favor to us. All the losses, hardships and joys of growing older wise us up. As our bodies and memories become less reliable, something else is happening, turning us grey and ripe. This is what this handbook is all about: ripening, becoming actualized, living out life in the fullest manner. Aging not only greys and diminishes us; it alters our awareness and thoroughly changes the way we see life. While we are losing the life we once knew, we are gaining a new riper one.

This handbook is designed to help us aging folks discover what a favor aging can be. Luckily, this handbook cannot do that alone. The favor that aging brings is most visible, most experiential, most palpable in a community of older people. Interestingly enough, the benefits of aging become clearest within, when one is connected to others.

This is a time of deep actualization and freedom. What has been only a wild and desperate hope, now is coming to fruition. One of the favors of aging is that Life has honed one down, making time and energy (called retirement) for the uniqueness within. Coming to the surface now is something of each soul's truest nature, and it becomes richer when shared with others having similar experiences. This is the time in life when one can be culturally dismissed, and it is the time when one can be alone enough to finally be oneself. While one's truest nature is being brought to the fore, community with others is useful. A compelling social experience brings friends, recognition, and renewed meaning.

Meaning and connection are the goals of this handbook. Aging sets us up, but ripening is up to us. Happiness is related to fulfillment. Becoming fully oneself, being rich internally, goes a long way but isn't enough. What's called for is the opportunity to participate, to share life experiences, to discover unknown meaning together, to care about and be cared about, to face the future as part of a larger whole. This provides the ultimate nurturance for what is coming forward. It is as if Life has

provided the best place for fruiting to occur. And that place is within ourselves and within community.

People discover themselves, each other, and what is possible in community. Old people who, by and large, are ignored in the social reality of our culture discover themselves, the true value of their attributes, their ability to connect, what they have to give, the perspective they hold, and the vision that sets them free in a community of age-cohorts. Frequently, old people don't tend to know what they are made of until they start connecting with other old people. Then something more fully enlivening happens; the true gifts of aging become clear. This handbook is dedicated to nurturing that possibility.

Community-building is an art form, not a science. There is no guarantee that a group of strangers will experience community. In this culture at this time obstacles to community exist. Yet, it is just those difficulties, plus the emerging capabilities of the old, that make coming together such a surprising gift. Caring is what is left to the old. It is what we are good at, and it is what ties us all together. This handbook gives that caring a chance.





# Basic Philosophy

— *Lucky*

Life is the teacher. Each of us is endowed with the basic freedom of knowing for ourselves the way towards our own uniqueness. Becoming ourselves is an inside job. Others may help along the way, but the ultimate unfolding is unique, like no one else, and is utterly idiosyncratic. Life guides each of us home, to ourselves. The recommendations of others, no matter how well intended, are based upon their own experiences, which may be authentic, even profound; but each of us is uniquely guided by Life into our most original and authentic form. Life is the guide.

Self is our gift. The most incredible and beautiful gift each of us possesses is our own self, the gift that Life has endowed us with. The truest benefit we can provide to others is to be true to ourselves. By being present and by being true, an alternative to all posturing is presented. Self-possession is seen as a real possibility, and Life's diversity is affirmed. The greatest gift of old age is the actualization of Life's capacity in each of our lives. Self is our actualization of Life, and it is the greatest gift we have to give.

Community is the ripening ground, the practice field, where access to the gift of self most meaningfully unfolds. Life can unfold the self, and does, without community; but community is the place where the gift of self is most meaningfully given and where recognition occurs. Human community, because it is a smaller form of the much larger web, most palpably provides a sense of connection with others and the larger Cosmos.

The irritating complexity of social diversity, which appears in genuine community, provides the honing friction that is necessary for the development of complex and nuanced selves. By weathering the complex challenges of community, one proves oneself and simultaneously reveals the self as a gift of Life for all to share and relish. Community provides the place that can naturally hold and nurture this kind of development. Immersion in others coaxes out of each of us

our greatest uniqueness and makes explicit our beauty. This empowers individual and community alike, making collaboration practicable. This is how the gift of Life grows.



# Hosts

— *Lucky*

Doing something as unusual as starting and hosting an elders' community is an on-going act of service. Like any act of service it is bound to educate all those involved. The process of growing is a humble one. Each increase in consciousness is accompanied by a realization that one has failed to be judicious and inclusive in the past. To set out with the objective of growing a community means that one must be willing to forgive oneself. In essence a community grows itself. This is an essential attribute for doing real service, helping the group find its own will. Forgiveness is especially recommended for the hosts, as forgiveness takes a while to take hold in the group-at-large.

Hosting and guiding a burgeoning elders' community requires no specialized skills. That means that hosts do not need to be therapists, community experts, social activists, or politically astute. In fact, all of these forms of knowledge might be troublesome. Essentially, hosts need only be as human as possible; this means letting one's vulnerability, passion, and willingness to learn out loud (and in the moment) show. The larger the desire to learn is in the hosts, their willingness be fully befuddled about growing older, the greater the likelihood of touching the same place in other elders. Remember, the greatest gift the hosts have to give is their own being.

Hosting and guiding the growth of an elder community is a balancing act. A community must grow of its own accord. No amount of good guidance assures this. The willingness to risk publicly impacts the group and catalyzes deepening intimacy. Listen for these moments, and affirm how they grow trust, meaning, and connection. You and your hosting team are not responsible for making such moments happen, but you can be open to them happening and encourage them, both within the group, and within yourselves.

Caring, for humans, is deeply ambivalent. So is community with others. There is a level of vulnerability that comes with each. While this is to be encouraged, and old people often have more capacity for it, real

communal intimacy is the exception not the rule, and must evolve in its own time. Patience, listening, and caring enough to let intimacy evolve are all skills innate to elders, which will only show up over time. The best thing a host or host team can do is surrender attachment to having anything happen at all. Elders' community is a natural phenomenon that simply needs a chance to happen. If you and your team can be enough in front *and* get yourselves out of the way, then you've done all you can to optimize that chance.



### *Evolving our Host Team*

— *Alexandra*

The initial impulse may come from one or two people or be quickly passed among more. Our experience tells us that at least two, ideally a man and a woman with differing attitudes and skills which will mean that if you satisfy *both* of you, you'll satisfy more of a larger group. We could have used a larger core hosting group from earlier on, simply because it creates a wider knowledge, listening, and feedback base — more creativity. It can also slow down the process in the beginning because so many decisions have to be made. Group decisions are always slower in the making, though often speak better to more people since they represent a wider range.

When we, after four years, invited a few people who were core to the continuing salon to serve as a Guidance Council, we also announced to our whole group that we were doing so and invited anyone who had thoughts and ideas about the ongoing nature of the group activities to come as well. We ended up with six more people. Coming in later, they didn't fear that they would be saddled with more responsibility than they were ready for, as they were already well on-board.

This Council has been very helpful as the responsibility for creating each new event was spread over eight people instead of two. This also began to grow a sense of ownership or co-leadership as these folks

felt capable of taking on at least one salon or more on their own or in pairs. We also get feedback about what works and doesn't work so well for various people and we get a break on the burnout front.



# Getting Started

— *Alexandra*

Assuming you've decided to try establishing an Elders Salon in your Transition Town, you've met with whoever is cohosting, and you're ready to start. I'll give some suggestions from our experience about place, time, who and how to invite people, and agendas.

## *Place*

What our Transition Sebastopol has yearned for is a clubhouse, but we've really never been able to manifest one. What we have for our Elders Salon is a cohousing common house where Lucky lives and which blessedly comes free for our use because of this. Finding a place where you don't have to charge to cover rent is ideal. We believe it is one of the major reasons we have been able to create a community of people who are on an equal basis with no concern for status or class. (See "Free and Freedom", p. \*\*, by Lucky.) Be creative in a search for a regular free venue. Because services for senior citizens strikes a cord in many hearts, you may find a church or organization that is willing to make a space available to you.

Because we settled into a cohousing common house we had a kitchen available and a big hot water dispenser, cups and saucers, and refrigeration. This made it easy to always have hot tea and filtered water available, but means there's always a little cleanup.

## *Time*

If you want the older folks (from their late 70's on) to come out, it needs to be early enough to get them home relatively early. If you want the folks who are pre-retirement (Baby Boomer age), then you'll need to start after work hours with time for a meal. This doesn't leave much leeway unless you can set it up for Saturday or Sunday daytime hours. Many of the older group won't like driving after dark, either, so our solution of 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday of the month (3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday in November and December because of holidays) cuts out a few of our people in the early dark days of winter. We start at 6:30 p.m. and end at 8:30 so folks can be home by 9:00. We also have an informal gathering on Friday afternoons from 3:30 to 6:00 (closing time) at a local coffee house.

## *Getting out the Word*

Ideally your Transition group has an email announcement list which you can use. Also, each one on your host team is likely to have friends in the community to enlist, especially for the first meeting. Perhaps there is a community email bulletin board or events announcement list you can use. Relying on print invitations is a difficult and ultimately unsustainable way to go. For the non-computing population you can rely on word of mouth and personal invitation for the first one, then make an inquiry about need and make a buddy system for those few who cannot receive emails.

After the first time or two you're likely to have a lot of people who were supporting the host team members dropping out and have the others making direct invitations to their friends. In this way those who are really into it begin to accrue. We have had between 20 and 40 people come to every salon we've had over the past 5 years, always with a few new folks, a certain number coming now and then, and a reliable core group.

It's very helpful to have one team member who is willing to keep up the mailing list and make up and send out the announcements on a regular basis. We use a Google Group list serve within the Transition Sebastopol main announcement system for Elders Salon announcements and another Elders Discussion list that any member can post to. Membership consists only of being on the list or showing up at meetings. The main Sebastopol list makes a calendar twice monthly that we appear on and our events are regularly the most in number of all the local working groups. We also send a "designed" pasted-in email announcement at the beginning of the month and again a day or two ahead to remind folks.

## *Devising an Agenda*

The first time we thought of all the things we thought older folks might want to have general information and conversation about. We didn't know whether they would want to have a person from outside representing Medicare or other health or social services say something and ask questions, talk about death and dying (*à la* a Death Café), just

socialize, talk Transition topics, or really have a Wisdom Council or circle. So, we put lists on the walls in categories on pieces of newsprint and at some point gave colored sticky dots, maybe one red for top priority and four yellow to indicate interest.

6:30 Arrive; Tea & Cookies

Assess numbers and seating – potential topics sheets hanging on walls

6:40 Open with welcome, thanks to [host place], where things are Transition and what it is:

*“Transition Sebastopol serves to build a positive future by cultivating community resilience and responding to the great challenges of our times with inspired local action.”*

What the Elder branch of Transition is in relation to the Salon and our interest in identifying what resilience means for Sebastopol elders

Email list: pass around sheet and explain how it works (they can sign up for other Transition groups as well)

General shape of evening and intention for future

Reminder to SPEAK UP as many older people need volume

Intros of the hosting folks

6:55 Introduce yourselves (This is [previous person] – and I am [name]. I’m [age].)

7:00 Overview of topics and using colored dots to choose top interests

7:10 Set up a fish bowl: What are your top concerns for the future of Sebastopol elders and which topics do you want to see us bring up for consideration?

7:45 Gather into loose groups of 5 or 6 to further explore common interests

8:10 Come back into large circle for Wisdom sharing

8:25 Close and apply dots, mill and talk

8:30 – 9:00 Clean up



## *Topics and Format*

The primary interests settled into what I would call the developmental tasks of becoming an elder. In essence, the transition into elderhood is occurring for our generation at the same time change is also a major, ongoing fact in the larger world. A variety of transitions seem to be much needed at this time on the planet. Many of us came into the Salon environment rather wondering how we fit into all this change.

Truthfully, designing any meeting, format, or agenda should be primarily focused toward how to best enhance discovery of the elder experience and of one's dual position as a fully developing individual and a part of the developing community social group.

It didn't take long to discover that people at this stage of life *need* to talk to each other, compare experiences and notes, and discover how they can make the internal shifts that their bodies and life situations call for in order to live fulfilling, meaningful, and useful lives. Nor did it take long to discover that the quality of elder thinking and our capacity is different from how it was at younger ages. So the interaction with others helps a great deal in determining what "right action" looks like at this stage. Of course that's individual, though some of Lucky's writings in this handbook explore our some of our more general discoveries.

There is a list of some of our past topics in the Resources section, called "Sample Agendas," but here's what we've settled into as a general form. Since one of the things many of us seem to be hungry for can be addressed by being witnessed and recognized, we try to create experiences and present topics (often posed as a question) that draw out authenticity and the opportunity to witness one another while hearing oneself. There are always a few new people, so making sure a brief, introductory round is made helps the group to arrive and settle. With only two hours, it's good to get to the meat fairly quickly. And everyone wants to get to know the others.

Introductions are important because people want to know one another and to be able to remember names. This makes some repetition useful,

especially if you have new people joining the group as we usually do. A simple fact that a person can provide as they give their name can help. Sometimes providing one's age is a good choice because it can seem like everyone is older than oneself until you get used to your own location in the age range present. It also begins a process of undermining ageism, especially internalized ageism, which is itself an interesting topic. You have to be careful with asking a question that could stimulate a whole story unless you don't mind having the first round take up much of the available time. There are standard name-giving games that can be used, such as having each person sing their name followed by the group singing it back to them or having the second person repeat the first person's name then give their own, as in the first agenda that was provided above. I prefer something that is more personal that can add to my knowledge of each person.

We let people mill and settle for a few minutes, then start with a welcome, give basic space and procedural info, any housekeeping, and announcements. The general topic is presented, then we elicit the group response to the topic in whatever format seems to be best suited (go-rounds in the large circle, small groups, fishbowl, something more experiential, or combinations of these). Some people prefer the large circle; others speak more easily in a dyad or small group, so we try to mix it up from one month to the next. If there has been a small group to draw out specific responses, then we will return to full group for a sense of the highlights, and it is in this last 30 or 45 minutes that surprising wisdom is likely to coalesce. Sometimes it is hard to stop to close, though keeping to the promised time frame is important. One of our members is a poet and our closing has come to be his sharing a poem that seems to relate to our evening's experience. Cleanup and mixing a little more occur as people gather themselves up to go home. One facilitation style mentioned above that may need more description is "fish bowls" since there are differing ways of facilitating them. I suggest keeping it simple so that either as many people as are interested in speaking to a subject go to the center, with the others witnessing from the outside of the circle, or a specified number of chairs are set up (say five) and once a person has said all he or she wants to say, s/he leaves the circle and another person from the outside circle can fill that space.

If the topic is gender-specific, it could be one gender in the center then reverse to the other. Then within that circle people can be directed to interact with cross-talk as desired or to speak one at a time, staying as long as they like.

### *Facilitative Guidelines*

— *Lucky*

1. Design all group activities with a special sensitivity to the autonomous and freedom-loving needs of elders.
2. Respect differences, and cultivate them.
3. Appreciate all flags (all ideologies) but don't let any of them dominate.
4. Infuse all activities with an ambiguously defined spirituality (in service to something larger).
5. Create various social opportunities (dyads, small groups and the group-as-a-whole).
6. Create a variety of opportunities for self-expression (play, talk, physical touch, movement, and other forms of creative expression).
7. Validate minority voices (underscore the message, courage and value of minority awareness).
8. Actively listen. Elders benefit by hearing themselves, but the facilitator might have to hear first. In any case, as facilitator one wants to stay close to the group without being captured by it. Be a reliable echo.
9. Encourage the personal and the transpersonal.
10. Affirm leadership as it emerges from the group.



# Gathering

— *Lucky*

Something magical happens when a group of old people come together. Of course there are all of the standard kinds of social anxiety about what might happen; but there is something else, a sudden recognition that other older people have an interest in what being older means. What's possible? To find out, requires starting someplace.

The task of the hosting team is two-fold: create a congenial space and help the meeting be as compelling as possible. The first matter involves simple common sense. Make sure the space is congenial for a group of old folks. Make sure to explicitly ask the group if there are any special needs that require attention. This can help the group to find comfort with hearing loss, sight impairment, chemical sensitivity, and any other disabilities. If, there is going to be a break, then that should be made clear, and when should be identified. If people are expected to take care of themselves (my recommendation), then that should be made explicit. The timeframe of this meeting and all meetings should be clearly stated and kept.

The making of a compelling meeting is more challenging. It is true that one can lead a horse to water, but one cannot make the horse drink. So it is with a group of older folks. Initially, the hosting team must take a major portion of the responsibility for presenting a plausible way for people to get acquainted and to get into something of concern to old folks. Later, the group will have ways of indicating what is of interest.

Here, it is important that the hosting team use itself well. This theme will be reiterated throughout. The hosting team has created for itself an enormous learning opportunity. Listen, try to stay present, and check out your assumptions with the group. The diverse reactions of the host team will mirror those of the group. Everyone on the team should be taking the pulse of the group and sharing these perceptions and assumptions with each other in your organizational meetings. Where the group goes will be, to some degree, aided by the readings of the hosting team.

If the goal is to create community within the circle of older folks, then community must be the focus of the hosting team. How each of you holds the other members of your team and what you learn about yourselves and each other as you interact will likely parallel the learning in the larger group. The emergence of communal feelings in the group will happen as those same feelings emerge within the hosting team. Older folks have been shown to have a greater capacity for relating well, if given the chance. As the hosting team discovers these capacities within themselves, they are much more likely to notice and invite out those same capacities in the larger group.

No facilitation team lasts long and truly serves its constituency if it is unable to cope with surrendering control. It is as important to be able to surrender an agenda as it is to create one. So, the practice of surrendering outcome is essential. The emergence of communal feelings in the group must be the group's own authentic natural expression, not the host team's. To serve well, hosts must merge into the group and let go of personal concerns in order to further group concerns.

Remember, Life is the teacher, the chief motivator, the great organizer, the deep, and the tie that binds. It is part of humans' natural inheritance to be social animals, to crave meaningful interaction. Some would say we humans are endowed with the instincts of curiosity, play, and sociability. The hosting team merely has to find a good starting place, then the group will take over. If the host team can join in and not get in the way, then it is likely that something will happen. Let yourselves be moved by what is happening; share yourselves. The process benefits when anyone really shows up authentically.

For community to grow is not so different from how any of us grow. There will be moments where there will be some discomfort. This is natural. Groups have to learn how to deal with it. It is customary in our culture to avoid social discomfort, but learning and bonding depend upon the group's capacity to go beyond social norms. The hosting team can convey trust in such developments by predicting them and by meeting these moments with curiosity. The hosting team models, as best it can, the social traits that will lead toward greater connection.

Connecting emotionally is, amongst us humans, an ambivalent thing. This is very human and natural; we want to be known and fear the same thing. We want to connect, but fear what connection will deliver or ask of us. Opening our hearts almost always means opening through hurt, rejection, and disappointment. True community takes time and has multiple levels. Let it unfold, and let yourselves and the group approach it slowly. Caring is the currency that will make all of this work. Old people know more about caring than most. They simply need some encouragement. That is the gift that becomes available when old people gather.

Finally, a natural part of the ambivalence that people feel is based upon the sure knowledge that community, real social connection, will ask each of us to grow ourselves.

Not just in the ways we want, or are good at — so compassion is called for. The hosting team is likely to feel this need first. What is done with it may well set the tone for the group. This is one of the valuable learning opportunities that the hosting team has set up for itself: developing compassion for self, others, and this precious world we live in. Community emerges along with compassion and caring.



# Interactions

— *Lucky*

In essence the hosting team has responsibility for making an event that tries to balance content with process, guidelines with freedom, fun with seriousness, and consciousness-raising with community-building. Essentially, this impossible task can only be approximated, and then with a lot of help and good will from the participants. Close is good enough, if the group feels that you have their interests in mind. Have fun, enquire into topics and group processes, and remind everyone this is an experiment in growing an elder community.

Start somewhere compelling enough to draw curiosity. Meetings will evolve. Through paying attention (one of the Four-fold Way guidelines) the hosting team will come to notice many things about the group that will help it fulfill its role. All one has to do is learn to set the original conditions and then track the group. You will notice that this handbook offers few examples because groups always have their own idiosyncratic nature, especially, a group of old folks (see Facilitation of Elder Groups in the Appendix). Initially, the team provides a beginning place then moves on to paying close attention to what is going on within the group.

So, what is meant by “setting the original conditions?” This entails affirming the consciousness-raising and community-building goals of the event and describing some of the means for getting there. For instance, one will want to introduce the hosting team, ask for patience and cooperation, describe the ways of interacting, affirm the guidelines (show up, pay attention, tell the truth and surrender attachment to outcome are the ones we like), and ask for permission to proceed. The confidence and togetherness of the hosting team will help buffer any natural social anxiety in the group. The group will test everything the host team says to find out if it is real. This might happen from the get-go, but should be expected at some time. Eventually, the hosting team will arrive, with the help of the group, at a standard way to open and close each meeting.

It is good for the hosting team to introduce content and processes. This promotes learning and social engagement. Meaning and connection are the key elements, which will make this endeavor compelling. Track the quality of engagement you perceive in the room. Craft the events so as to increase the level and significance of contact and interaction. Good conversation — questions about meaningful topics, and stimulating peers — are all sorely missing from old people's lives. Besides that, old folks cannot discover the value of what they hold for the larger community, until they begin to know each other (and themselves).

It is always good to have questions. My partner in hosting says, “a good question is extremely valuable.” She's right. A good question can facilitate a deep discussion, evoke connection, and raise consciousness. Look for questions that directly relate to the process of growing older in this era. Old people are so subject to unquestioned stereotypes. So questioning is a pathway to freedom from the cultural trance, it is a very good way of throwing off the invisibility cloak that haunts old folks. Begin with questions, and watch for their emergence. They tend to take a group into the depths.

The hosting team will be under the group's scrutiny. The team, like it or not, is going to serve as a model of what is possible. This is good for the burgeoning community and for the learning of the host team, too. Remember, there is a parallel process between the host team and the larger group. This can be relied upon to increase understanding and development of each. Hosting is a great learning privilege.

We recommend the use of some minimal guidelines. This can be tricky. Older people are highly sensitive to the level of freedom around. They want to know if they are free to express and discover themselves in the circle. Unfolding and experimentation with self are what this whole process is about. So, guidelines that are useful to increase focus and social cohesion, must be held carefully. They are useful as guides, but not as rules. Our recommendation is to encourage play and the creative use of the guidelines, while holding firmly to how they can help increase the quality of information and value of social sharing.

For very similar reasons cross-talk is not encouraged. The goal of our work together is to build a place where all forms of belief have an



opportunity for expression. It is not to fix, heal, or convert anyone. All flags (beliefs) are welcome, but to preserve the chances for community, none should prevail. Proselytizing is also not encouraged. These assertions of the supremacy of belief will happen very naturally at first. But with appropriate guidance from the hosting team this pattern of interaction will slowly disappear. Eliminating this tendency gently removes old patterns of dominance and provides, instead, a more egalitarian and learning-full social space.

The tendency your team is most likely to see is a tendency to talk about things, not feelings. Our goal has been to foster caring. Toward this end the hosting team tries to create a space that is congenial to feelings. Caring is a feeling. It strengthens and grows when the feeling dimensions of our shared experience are expressed. Encourage the showing of feelings, more than talking about them. Feelings break the heart open, and this is the fountainhead of caring.

Lastly, as much as possible, cultivate an attitude of play. What is happening is fun (old folks' fun). It offers chances for humor and creativity. Modulate fun with learning and connection. Use group enjoyment as the guide. This is a Goldilocks sort of thing — the team is looking for the “just right” balance. Go for it! Death is bearing down on all of us, so live it up a little, in each other's presence. Learn together the potentials held by aging!

### *More on Interacting*

— *Alexandra*

The most important thing we've done, I believe, is to provide a congenial setting where older folks with a Transition/sustainability-conscious outlook can interact meaningfully. These people (we) are also in transition within themselves due to encountering an entirely new landscape in the aging process from other generations of aging folks. We've never been at this stage of life before, either. Having a place to explore what it actually is like for others and what it reveals to us about ourselves aids in the discovery of how to hold our own aging process. It also helps to separate inherited and projected cultural attitudes toward

being old from our own personal experience and what we each can make of the journey, freeing us further.

And, as Lucky points out above, getting to the fun part of knowing people, revealing who one really is, and being received without judgment generates such caring and community feeling. This seems so much easier at this stage of life now I have a capacity to be fairly nonreactive with people who are very different from myself, and that who we've each been in our younger days is more or less irrelevant.

As for guidelines, don't use them like a cop. Setting them originally and having them listed on the wall to be referred to only at need, is my suggestion. Cross-talk can be fine in dyads and small groups but can disrupt communications in a larger group. We have found that some people like the more intimate 2-5 person group size because they feel more comfortable speaking — and everyone gets more opportunity to speak. Others really like the large group conversations because the group wisdom has more points of view to emerge from. Mix it up!



# Consciousness-Raising

— *Lucky*

What makes elder community so vital to a lot of old people is the chance to explore out loud the process of aging. Old people have a hunger for meaning. This really became clear to us early on. Our Elders Salon is (and elder community can be) a place devoted to community-building and consciousness-raising.

Living in an ageist culture it is surprising how little is really known about aging. There is a dearth of truly useful information and a wealth of misinformation. Old people suffer under the weight of stereotypes and labor under culturally-induced, internalized ideas of what is possible in old age. The gifts the old have to give are unknown primarily because of cultural assumptions. Beliefs make the old invisible and rob old people of their self-esteem. In some ways one of the primary objectives of the salon (elder community) has become this kind of empowerment, helping us old people see the lies and opportunities that come with age.

The hunger for meaning that comes with aging isn't just a need to become better informed. Knowing more helps people become freer, but experiencing the wisdom of aging is another thing; it frees one to become oneself. Elder community unleashes people. It does so by inviting everyone to share their own perspective on a host of things that matter in making of one's latter years into a life worth living. Meaning isn't really about becoming better informed. Real meaning emanates from the best uses of information. Seeing and hearing how others are struggling with the issues of age provide perspective and resilience. Connecting people leads to sharing, and that raises general awareness.

Meaning is enriched by interaction. Take for example the statement, "Death happens to us all." On the surface that is a very meaningful assertion. Besides being intrinsically true, this statement is aided by being laden with implication. In a community the statement gains meaning by virtue of all the ways it can be taken. Death comes to everyone, but everyone doesn't deal with it in the same way. The fact

that death touches us all is made more meaningful by the additional fact that it affects each of us differently.

The assertion that death is inevitable is meaningful but only thinly nutritious. Compare this to placing that same piece of information in an interactive environment. The fact of death and other explorations or events in a community context are more richly meaningful, thickly nutritious, and connective. The hunger for meaning that so many old people feel is fed better, in more life enhancing ways, by being shared.

Elder community has a catalytic effect. It takes what already has meaning and expands it. In this way old people are not only fed, but also nourished. They have a chance to experience additional meaning that comes through shared and creative responses to things. This enhances perspective, choice, meaning, and freedom. These are the attributes of raised consciousness, and they are the products of shared meaning. Old people are better at this than they used to be, and they benefit when they discover this fact.



# Community-Building

— *Lucky*

Community is a complex phenomenon. A lifetime can easily be devoted to knowing its many permutations. A common mistake in community-building is the assumption that to build community one must know something about it. This is only partially true. It is helpful to know the feeling that arises as connections are made and become more vital (such a feeling is distinct). But many folks have been tripped up because they relied too heavily upon what they believed they knew about community.

Life doesn't care what you know; it only cares about who you are. This is the real core of community building — showing up. It is easier to relate to someone who is willing to let themselves be seen than it is to connect with someone who thinks they know something. So, instead of focusing upon the many attributes of community (see the appendix for a thorough description of community), this handbook is emphasizing the aspects of being human that are most likely to engender emotional bonds. Community building is, therefore, not about information; it is about presence.

There are elements of personal presence that contribute to meaningful connections with others. These elements (which are described below) generate a social environment that is rare, magnetically inviting, and incredibly lively. People, when they are exposed to each other in this way, discover themselves, each other, and the mystery that binds them together. A feeling of caring arises from exposure — revealing the real heroism involved in being human. Feelings of connection extend out to include the world (the Transitions component) *as* those who are present assume their full human stature.

These vital elements that create a congenial and magnetic environment are: presence, openness, learning, and reverence. Each of them is a personal practice that, when integrated and shared, generates a field that is highly magnetic and draws out similar qualities from others. As you will see, community-building depends upon revelation, and revelation depends upon practices that grow one's experience of self. The greatest

gift you have to give your community, the penultimate contribution you can make to community-building, is to share yourself, to learn out loud, to make your uncertain journey a public passage. Then the rigors and beauty of being an aging human are evident to all. This mobilizes the heart, reassures the soul, and empowers everyone to be all they can be.

### *Presence*

Showing up. This is what the Salon is all about. If old people can be themselves wherever they are, then the social world of our kind will mature. Elder community is desirable, and available as a practice field, a place to learn how to show up. It is also a very satisfying place to discover that showing up can be so meaningful, contributive, and bonding. Bring yourself to the dance; give what you've worked a lifetime to become. You are enough.

### *Openness*

At the bottom of our existence there lives uncertainty. This is a common ingredient of being human, yet it is hard to live with. When folks allow themselves and each other to be uncertain publicly, then a whole new set of human possibilities come into sight. Mature community is built around emptiness, the foregoing of knowing. One of our recommended guidelines is “surrender attachment to outcome.” Practice openness, not knowing, for the benefit of connection with what is and for the benefit of gaining access to diverse elder experiences.

### *Learning*

Reality is a complex, unknowable wonder. Sharing in the adventure of discovering the marvels contained within it has a stunning effect upon people. All are equal before mystery. Sharing a deep inquiry into the mystery of existence as it has come into being through each person present opens up a whole field of collective awareness. Learning together gives the old person a stimulating new take on Life, growing older, community, and other humans. Innocence is reborn.

### *Reverence*

There is a larger being, some call it “Higher Power” or “Mystery.” Staying humble, facing reality, and inquiring into what unfolds each

of us is a deeply meaningful way to share with each other. A group of old people becomes an elder community when they do so. Keeping “something larger” ever at the center of group activities preserves and honors the glue that holds it all together. Cultivating this awareness is an elder necessity. Growing older educates us and makes the world a miracle worth sharing, as we become the product Life intended us to be.

In the final analysis growing an elder community is a shared endeavor. No one person can ever hope to do it alone. It is the by-product of a lot of people’s caring. All one can do to promote what comes in the form of grace is be as real as possible. Fortunately, realness is an attribute that matures with aging. When old people come together, this attribute is already present. All that is needed is for mutual discovery to begin.



# Essentializing

— *Alexandra*

There comes a time in everyone's aging process when you find you can no longer keep up your familiar pace (if you're lucky enough to survive into your older years). For women, if it hasn't happened previous to menopause, that particular life and body change is sure to start this up. Women are familiar with big changes in their hormones at various times in life, which brings a certain edge of recognition. Something's happenin' here, but you don't quite know what it is. Men, I can only guess, but they tend to wrinkle a little later and don't have the more dramatic body changes that help women come to terms.

In any case, while the timing is individual, aging will cause one to take stock. Necessity causes a process of sifting through one's use of time and energy. Sometimes a kind of "bucket list" starts to form. In our Elders Salon we began to call the sifting "essentializing" because you simply can't fit in as much in a day or an hour, and the sands of one's life are dribbling slowly away. You feel like you'd better make your choices count. Getting down to essentials: discarding the more frivolous activities, household items that suddenly seem in the way, relationships that don't seem appropriate or productive, concerns that you find you've outgrown — this kind of essentializing leaves you with more time for activities that you care about, that have more meaning, and that feed you. Eldering toward wisdom can begin to set in.

## *Reduction and Nutrition*

It is also inevitable that this surrender of ways one has been in the past can feel like a reduction rather than a boon. The losses become more numerous. Loved ones have died; Life has weathered and scarred us; our bodies ache and we forget names. Yikes! But we are survivors! You don't get here without challenges and pain. Yet, here we are! We have survived! Some celebration, some gratitude, some awe about the journey can begin to creep in and the connection between grief and praise can dawn.



It is somewhere in this realm that our elders began to see “reduction” in a new light. Yes, we are reduced. It comes in many ways, both from inside or outside. My husband died, resulting in a loss of my home due to the mortgage crisis a few years ago and a loss of community in that we were living in cohousing. Everything went upside down. I even broke my right arm, followed by surgeries on both hands, which put a big kink in an existing art career I had been imagining I’d follow full-time.

A good cook knows a reduction in the production of much tasty food as a similar process to this elder phenomenon. There’s less of it but it is richer and more flavorful. It can be quite extraordinary, in fact. After that loss I was freed to more easily become myself and follow my own new inclinations in surprising ways, living more simply with little excess. The reduction made me take more care with all my choices, paring down relationships and pastimes. I soon began work to create the Elders Salon, enlisting Lucky as a cohort.

Like the wisdom growing inside, all this richness began to feed me, nourish me, and lead me into new areas of my own growth and understanding of what I could and wanted to contribute. I began to feel a kinship with the folks who came to the salon, reducing the distance and learning from the shared wisdom that we discovered together. The aggregate expression of others in our exploratory discussions was truly feeding me! More meaning was coming my way through the individual experiences that were shared.

I am not alone. Many of those who continue to connect in this way, as elders, notice similar effects. Sitting together as we offer deeper observations, personal discoveries and stories to the circle, a palpable buzz or energy often emerges. I would describe my sensation as a receiving of nourishment I hadn’t known I needed. I am being filled with some very necessary, unidentifiable kind of energetic food. We are caring about and for one another, becoming more resilient in the process. And many of us have found deeper self-acceptance and respect through our experiences and connections.

## *Dispensability*

More recently, when Nelson Mandela died, I discovered a new elder capacity that is related but different from the reduction above, though it follows on its heels. In an interview when Mandela was deciding to leave public life, he said that his decision was partly due to knowing that he was dispensable. The reporter demurred, trying to dissuade Mandela from his point. But, no. Nelson knew that it is important to make way for younger people and that to follow one's path into the farther reaches of elderhood means knowing when to surrender to new energy. It is also likely to coincide with one's own need to go further within, slowly losing attachment to worldly pursuits.

As we journey toward the far end of life we must each grapple in our own way with the knowledge of mortality. I like to think of a metaphor of life processes as akin to sprouting, maturing, blossoming, fruiting, ripening, then finally, making seed. I have reached a stage of engaging with seed making, wondering what ways I and my generation will find to become viable seed. I wonder what such seed may contain for me as I lessen my attachments to experiencing life in familiar ways. I suspect I am making way for the Mystery.



# Recognition

— *Lucky*

Old people respond to being seen. One of the hardest parts of getting old in this culture has to do with the loss of status. There is an invisibility cloak that seems to blanket the wrinkled and grey, rendering people to the periphery where they are unseen, devalued and demeaned. This is one important aspect of ageism. It hurts individuals, especially grey ones, and society alike.

Elder community provides a kind of antidote to the disabling force of invisibility. When old people see each other, they not only validate others but value themselves. This has a great salving effect. But, there is more possibility. Alexandra and I have found that old people thrive and often come more fully to life when they are actively admired, acknowledged, or recognized. There is a particular value in each of our lives. Admiration makes that unique value come alive.

So, just as some people are extolling the value of rites of recognition to properly note the achievement of elderhood, we urge you all to recognize and admire the old people in the midst of this community-in-formation. Recognizing each other is recognizing Creation at work here, locally, in all of our lives.

This is a significant part of what we as a community of old people have to give each other. Recognizing each other is recognizing oneself.



# Personal and Transpersonal

— *Lucky*

I'm fond of saying that community dances upon two legs. If, it gives too much attention to either, it falls over. The two legs, at least in my mind, are the personal and the transpersonal. Too much reliance on either creates imbalance; not enough of either creates a lame community.

By transpersonal I mean that which goes through and beyond each of us, the sense that there is some kind of spirit at work in our connection. This can be a feeling or some kind of other perception. It most often occurs in groups as a feeling of inexplicable interrelatedness. I tend to like it. It feels fairly rare. It can be a hiding place. One can refuse to meet the otherness of others there. Community can tip over with too much reliance on this aspect of who we are. It is possible for it to be too impersonal.

Therefore the personal is really important. Any real sense of connection arises from feeling known for and as oneself and being realistically cared about. Community cannot really support, challenge, contradict, or affirm anyone without this personal dimension. In my experience, this knowing is where commitment comes from. Too much emphasis upon the personal unbalances the other way though. People need to have the chance to show up voluntarily in their own way. This is where trusting in and knowing the transpersonal becomes a real necessity.

The tyranny that most of us have experienced in groups and communities has largely been because of the rigid overemphasis upon one or the other.

The experience of community has to do with the feeling of caring that is going around. This caring is a hallmark of an elder community. It may not arise at first in a general way, that is, as a widespread feeling while being with the group. It could happen at first, like it did with our original Elders Salon, with a specific feeling of caring for a single person. In our situation it was the open-heart surgery and recovery of one of us that helped us realize what had changed in our hearts.

Caring is often a gift of the old. All of the growth that comes with hardships, expanded perspective, and relationship make it possible for us older folks to care as never before. What we have held primarily for our grandkids or the Earth, we can give to each other. Community and caring in general arise out of the vulnerability of being human together. The public revelation of our shared vulnerability is galvanizing. Risk being true to yourself, and you will find you are not alone in caring about the risk of living with your heart open.

Caring is palpable. People don't need to guess about it. It is a feeling, which means it can be felt. Connection with significant others is a gift, a gift that often comes in strange forms. To receive it one often has to open oneself through pain and disappointment. It takes courage to care, or to allow oneself to be cared about. This kind of courage sometimes is years in the making and is encouraged by the proximity of death. It is more likely amongst us old folks. Never the less, caring must be earned. Open up — not just the easy parts; give each other the hard parts to hold. Oddly, community caring comes about when enough people show their tender hearts to each other. Old folks know more than most what this entails. Elder community arises because the old practice revealing themselves to each other.

In a real community, the tide of caring rises and falls. The transpersonal, by virtue of it being bigger than the individual, is more unconditional. It is often perceived as a spiritual kind of caring, based upon the fact of existence. Personal caring is more conditional — often based upon how one exists.

Both are necessary. To feel really cared about one has to feel known (the personal). To feel cared about, no matter what, requires a sure sense that one is valued for one's existence (the transpersonal). Caring rises and falls as the personal and transpersonal are balanced and re-balanced. Elders know something about self-care, (these two elements need to be balanced within too) and paradoxically that's what gives elders the capacity to care for others.

The real benefit of creating elder community together, of caring about each other, is that there is no better way to discover the potential that

resides in the human heart. When one directly experiences connection, when one knows in a palpable form the truth of what binds us to ourselves, one another, and this earth, then one is confidently free. This freedom comes from within and is demonstrated without. With freedom one can be authentically true to oneself, to Life, and to others.



# Paradox

— *Lucky*

This little piece is not really about growing an elder community. You may have noticed that much of this handbook has to do with acknowledging elder skills. There is a whole lot about elder life that isn't known or appropriately understood. This ignorance about the potentials of the old, much of it cultural, limits the way old people see themselves (and their possibilities), each other, and the world. An important piece of how awareness changes with age is the advent of paradoxical awareness.

Connection has a more fluid feel at this stage of life. Things are both discrete (clearly themselves) and permeable (melted into each other). There is a greater complexity that has become a greater simplicity. The rational and the irrational exist side by side. Life flows with a vitality that moves in ways that are unimaginable. Reality has a life of its own. The transcendent speaks through paradox in ways that delight and mystify. The elder knows him or herself as a grown child. Innocence has more shrewdly returned.

Life in the paradoxical lane is more expansive for having its limits. This sense slowly infiltrates the awareness of the old — changing everything — and leaving everything alone. An increase in perspective, in behavioral options, becomes available, but in no way like before. Life enters more fully and seems to have its own language, and paradox is a part of it. Life includes a strange sheen of meaning that defies thought, and compels wonder. Reverence and humility reveal how much this aspect of Life has entered awareness.

This is an experience one cannot conjure up. No amount of years, workshops, spiritual practice, meditation, or effort can achieve this awareness. It is part of human potential but is only activated by Life for its own reasons. Lightning falls on the heads of some who, like or not, are selected as emissaries, the most ripened fruit. Paradox is a form of lightning — one that quickens the mix. Some old people are blown open in this way. They become elders, but really they are Evolution incarnate.

As aging proceeds, for some people a kind of grace takes over. Something larger moves, and one is incorporated into a new, very different, reality. All is changed. This shift may have been years in the making; it may have seemed highly unlikely and random; but here it is, right on time. The world comes to Life in a new way, and the miraculous suddenly becomes palpable.

Some old folks become elders. They have no claim on anything. They are broken down, sickly, weak, and addled, yet they see very clearly. Some kind of larger mind now occupies them. This isn't the invasion of an alien awareness; this is the best of what it means to be human. They have pulled off the seemingly impossible. They have become themselves *and* the Universe, all at once. Or, so it seems. But, in fact, they are aging into it, ripening, and little by little becoming quintessentially what we all are.

This shift doesn't happen overnight. It takes the vagaries of Life, hardships, a great deal of paradox, and a long ripening time. The miracle is that just as the caterpillar enters the chrysalis and the butterfly emerges, an old person can be transformed too. Add to that miracle — the rebirth of Life — a transformed perspective, and you have a rare kind of metamorphosis, the kind that can change a whole species.

As I've said, aspects of elder awareness do not appear all at once; they slowly emerge. A growing appreciation for paradox accompanies the advent and development of this change. There is also a strong sense of relationship that can mark the beginning. This can start with an increased attachment and identification with grandchildren, but quickly advances to others' grandchildren and on to young people in general, other humans, and nature. Just as wrinkles, weight, and greyness slowly appear, this new and strange perception takes its time. It is a surprise that until now hasn't been seen and appropriately valued — by greying individuals or by our culture. Let us hope that this time of terrible waste is now over.

I've tried to make the point that a new possibility is on the horizon. The greying of the populace is likely to remake the world. The shift in the populace is going to throw us. The qualitative shift in awareness is going



to transform us. *How* remains to be seen, but I think it fair to look at the qualities of this new form of awareness for guidance. Remember, what is emerging is more connective, paradoxical, emotional, and experiential. These attributes offer us cues. The future is unfolding.

Ultimately, the reason for this section is that elder community is a natural incubator for new kinds of consciousness or awareness. These developments are needed both for us old folks and for a world that is suffering from our species' immaturity. The old, if they can awaken their capacities for connection, offer a form of maturity that is sorely needed. This awakening is natural. It happens as we age. If one participates in the birthing of an elder community, one will see it for oneself. Paradoxical awareness shows up.

Elder community is a place where the miracle of “hatching out” takes place — a bunch of grey youth are born. This is, in itself, a very paradoxical happening, but it isn't the most paradoxical thing. It marks the beginning of what could be a larger transformation. The greater paradox becomes visible in an elder community. There one can see that Life reduces us through sickness, aging, and all manner of hardship, while simultaneously enlarging us. Life, while corralling us with our limitations, draws out of us what is greatest and most essential in our nature. Alexandra and I call this phenomenon reduction, though it is really Life growing us, improving its product.

Happiness and elder fulfillment are a more widespread possibility. Just rubbing shoulders with old people regularly and knowing what to look for, frees us and makes for some new possible ways of being older. Life has cooked up this paradox, one that releases new meaning. Now Life could use our help to midwife this transformation.



# At the Center

— *Lucky*

There is another thing that should be alluded to. Words cannot really convey the significance or power of this phenomenon, but it cannot go unreferenced. As a group begins to form, as people begin to bond, something else is at work. It is the thing that calls together a group and makes it jell. I am referring to an invisible, but palpable, presence, which acts like gravity and pulls everything together. Something sits at the heart of all communities.

I'm not writing this to be dramatic or to be mystical; I'm writing it to be real. Any forming elders' group is going to be aided by an invisible force that exists in some way. Who gets pulled into the circle is never random. There is an intelligence that forms as the group does. It constellates as the group takes shape and acts to assist in a group's development.

So far I have managed to avoid spiritual terms, though some people who read this may already be going in that direction. Those kinds of reverential attitudes make sense to me, but I am loath to reduce this phenomenon to that alone. This may be a natural phenomenon, brought on by our social nature. There is something that actively participates in the evolution of community. Something that has power, that seems to care, that uses all interactions, no matter how small and seemingly inconsequential, to help growth and evolution occur.

I think of it as a collective life form, made up of all the aspiration, feelings, savvy, heartaches, and other vivid experiences of the participants in the group. I tend to think of this mystery as a greater social being, more tuned in to the big picture than any one of us can be alone. Whatever it is — call it a mystery — I have learned that it exists at another level. I believe this power can be relied on; it will work to make a group of strangers into a viable community.

Along the way it needs to be fed, like all organisms, but because it is a collective being, composed of human qualities, its food is us. Paradoxically, it feeds us in return. We feed it by going beyond ourselves,

by being vulnerable, by showing our quivering, naked, humanness to each other. It feeds us by giving us back to ourselves, enlarged, more connected, and more filled with life. Community and elders thrive when this interaction is takes place.

So, there is something, some would say some kind of spirit, that resides at the very center of a community. I tend to think that this “being” is what makes a community a healing, wholing place. Honoring what is, constellated by coming together, empowers what happens, which then rebounds to the benefit of all and our larger world. In the final analysis, one of the reasons I believe that growing an elder community takes no special skills is because there is something greater than any one of us that is doing the real community-building.

### *A Note on Spirituality*

— *Alexandra*

Ritual, spiritual practices, and the like are inherently part of our experience as we age, but they must be separated from belief systems in a differentiated population. This can be awkward and difficult to accomplish because individual language, belief, and religious thought are idiosyncratic to such a large degree. In creating group experiences that can be acceptable to an elder community, specific systems must be avoided at the same time reverence, gratitude, and acknowledgment of something of the unknown or Mystery, as I sometimes identify it, is included.

I particularly like the use of “Life” as a term for the motivating force because it clearly is present in us all at the same time as it clearly springs from something greater than the individual. This avoids the problem of theistic identifications and can be acceptable to an atheistic point of view and a nondual or theistic view as well. I am grateful to Lucky’s book *Embracing Life* for this noncontroversial way of holding what might otherwise be called God, the Unknown, or the Mystery.



# Free and Freedom

— *Lucky*

Alexandra and I stumbled upon something, which has turned out to become one of the most important facets of the Elder's Salon. By virtue of having a public place to meet that was large and accommodating and that we didn't have to rent, we learned, over the years, that having the meetings (and peripheral activities of the salon) be free of cost has impacted the likelihood of creating a caring community. Being free has done several things for the development of trust, comradery, and brought home the transitional nature of what we are doing. The absence of money has made the real value of an elders' community more evident and accessible.

The fact that no one profits (in monetary terms) from our getting together has set up some important dynamics. One of our members said it best: "Caring is our currency." The salon has become the home for an extra-economic valuing — of ourselves, each other, and what we are doing together. Happily for all of us we discovered this way to go beyond cultural values to real values. This is the heart of the transitional nature of the salon. Right now, community is being built through caring, voluntary feelings aroused by real situations and real people. The goal of increasing community resilience, a Transition value, we have learned happens best when people feel known and cared about, when their bonds are emotional not economical. It also helps to prevent a hierarchy among us, making our sense of being peers more palpable.

This economic independence fits nicely with the surge toward freedom that comes with growing older. Old people need to become themselves — it's now or never! Death is coming into view; there is little time to waste. Interactions now must satisfy a hunger for meaning, not just cognitive meaning. A good lecture is only partially satisfying; but now, by virtue of aging, the hunger is for the meaning of personal existence. For this sense of meaning to unfold, old people need to be free; they need to discover themselves for themselves. They need to find out what is within them.

Throughout this handbook we emphasize the importance of freedom, especially for older folks. There is a drive that comes from within (I call it evolution), to fulfill oneself. And fulfillment is entirely idiosyncratic. There are similarities in the growth patterns of old people, but each one has his or her own form. Building a community that honors this full range of diversity is challenging and highly rewarding. Freedom makes it work.

The door must be open. Folks need to be free to come and go. People need to know they can be different — because, in fact, they are. Inclusivity must permeate the atmosphere. By emphasizing the freedom to be and discover oneself, old people gravitate toward a social environment where they can share the experience of being older, experiment with freedom, and discover themselves, often through one another. Old people become elders through knowing themselves, each other, and Life well. The gift that each is, can only freely be given, and life in a community where diversity is honored empowers that giving.

Every social organization that tries to be congenial to freedom is confronted with the same challenge. All social organisms require structure, but structure can be the enemy of freedom. Most of us have found ourselves captured by, or caught outside of, these structures. Boundaries are essential to community, and they threaten freedom. How this paradox is handled will determine how congenial any community will be.

The urge to be true to oneself has proven to be complicated in the past. There has been too much conformity or too thorough a rejection. This means that when a group of older people are brought together, there must be some diligent effort made by the hosting team to demonstrate balance. The group defines boundaries for itself and becomes the community of its choosing. The host team's job is to keep the group creating a structure that ensures inclusivity, the freedom to be oneself.

Freedom has not often been the goal of most communities, but to serve the developmental needs of old folks and to increase the probability of the old becoming elders, then freedom has to be a core value. The

evolution of elder community depends upon it. The freedom to be oneself is the building block that allows caring about others to evolve. There is no caring about others if there is no caring about oneself. The freedom to discover and be oneself, therefore, is intrinsic to caring community.



# Play

— *Lucky*

The attitude of play (playfulness) is available to old folks in a way that it has never been before. This is some kind of miracle because it can ensure happiness, but the miraculousness of it is not readily apparent. Childhood had its moments of play. They were important. It has even been said that “play, is a child’s form of work.” So much is learned there about the environment, cultural roles, fun, and being human. Play, especially in children, looks frivolous, but isn’t. All of our mammalian ancestors played — for good reason. Play seems to be one of the most effective and fun ways to express, and then discover, the self’s capabilities. It is nature’s way.

Old folks go through some important phases in their development that are like childhood. One psychologist referred to being older as a time of “emancipated innocence.” Play is as important to elder becoming as it is to kids. However, play has a bad reputation for adults. Even though substantial developmental work is happening, under the cover of fun — play is often looked down upon. This has the effect of making play, an instinctive way towards growth, a complex experience for adults.

Older adults often suffer from the same kind of play prejudices that prevail in our culture. Play is too often viewed as frivolous, unproductive and a waste of time. These prejudices, I (Lucky) believe, lie on the same continuum of prejudice that includes ageism. Both old people, and play, are seen as unproductive and valueless. This view of play (and the old), which unfortunately, prevails in our culture, makes play (and ageing) a complicated and ambivalent experience for many adults.

The way towards freedom for elders, however, is through play. The liberating effect of being able to try out a variety of roles, coping strategies, and ways of being that are fun, is enormous. When one cultivates an attitude of playfulness, it is easier to meet each situation creatively, looking for the opportunity for fun and self-expression. Self-discovery accompanies play. So, endeavor to cultivate an attitude of play.

Play, despite cultural assumptions, comes pretty naturally to old folks. Play is the way our natural selves manifest. It is noticeable in the way old people interact, inquire into differences, joke, and seek meaning together. Encourage this. Enjoy! Praise it when you notice it. Participating in the emergence of elder community is fun. So is being free to be yourself. Play at it! Enjoy the moments when it is really clear how good it is to be alive, and growing older, in this confusing era.

### *On Playfulness*

—*Alexandra*

I'd like to add a few thoughts here. Play is one of the very best ways to make new discoveries, whether as a child, an inventor, an artist, or at any age. It opens and relaxes the mind, enlivens the spirit, releases tensions about performance, improves one's attitude, and frees one up generally. It teaches and entertains. No wonder healthcare folks tell us that laughing is curative!

One caveat is that a non-rule of successful play is that there can only be rules that are agreed to on the spot by the participants and that one can't be forced to play and still call it "play." It must be freely engaged in. So, I'm engaged in a playful endeavor to discover just what it is that elder play is made up of. So far it seems to have a range from foolishness to seriously, playfully, deep inquiry, mostly centered in verbal interplay, but not excluding some slapstick.

It's difficult to overcome cultural biases against play for adults: for example, a member of a younger generation may say of an older person, "S/he is going into a second childhood!" Playfulness and foolishness can result in negative branding unless the recipient is savvy enough to turn the tables, not take it personally or be emotionally reactive, possibly get playful in response, or in some way just not allow "crooked thinking" (as my father would call it) to hold sway.





# Taking Care of Oneself

— *Lucky*

There is wide-spread awe and fear of the effects of our culture. Some people talk about it as a toxic culture, meaning that it necessarily has a corrosive effect upon everyone. While I might agree with seeing our present-time culture in this way, I don't agree with the sentiment that follows. It is possible to develop a kind of immunity to the prevailing zeitgeist. In fact, this is a major benefit of development.

Growing more complex and capable than what passes for the norm in one's culture-of- origin is an attribute of Life. It is one goal of growth and development. Despite the popular notion (which is made from earlier stages of development) that what is external — like family or culture — defines one's possibilities, Life disagrees. The inner life — particularly growth and development — provides freedom from culture and immunity to its siren call.

The real issue in this culture, western industrialized society, is that there is little support and awareness for the value of learning to take care of oneself in relationship. Many people don't even know this is desirable or possible. Taking care of oneself in relationship doesn't seem relevant in a fragmented world. The assumption that the fragmenting effects of modern culture outweigh the constant relatedness of Life and eclipse connectedness leaves too many people unprepared for the real complexity of Life and unaware of the capacity (and need) to take care of oneself in relationship.

Psychology has worked hard to show the value of boundaries in the process of growing a self of one's own. Unfortunately, this has been primarily interpreted to be about safety. Again, an earlier form of development (mostly one focused on minimizing the risks from outside sources) has shaped the worldview that prevails in our culture. This is only partially true. Boundaries are at least as important for self-definition and self-regulation as they are for moderating outside threats.

At later, more self-regulating stages of development, boundaries are for the originator rather than for others. Boundaries at this level are for facing and acknowledging one's own limitations rather than another's. Without self-knowledge and self-regard it is impossible to take care of oneself relationally. Boundaries transform themselves from being about safety and fear to being about self-growth and love. The better one can take care of oneself in relationship, the greater one's capacity for loving.

Learning to take care of oneself in a community is like learning to take care of oneself in any social situation or the world. The diversity and size of a community means that at any meeting one is likely to experience the "unknown other." This is the person, or people, one is most likely to project fear upon. That stranger, or the one who seems most dangerously like the one who previously delivered hurt, will most likely represent one's anxiety. When these "others" are seen or otherwise experienced, one tends to clench up or otherwise disappear.

This is one of those moments when one is likely to give up or lose oneself. This is also a moment when one has learned to be afraid and to take care of oneself badly. Thus, community offers a place that is uncomfortable in just the way one needs to learn how to take care in.

This is one of the saving rigors of learning community. It has within it the kind of support one needs to be true to oneself, meaning the right level of social affirmation, while providing one with the exact level of challenge one needs to prove to oneself that one can stay true to oneself. The situation of social diversity that an open elder community provides serves to deliver the exact amount of challenging "otherness" that facilitates development of self.

This is where one's freedom to be true to oneself lies. It is the place where one can, if one has the courage and desire, learn to take care of oneself. This is a revolutionary act. Culture, no matter where one came from, is no longer king. Activism, of all sorts, becomes loving instead of reactive and full of fear. The world we live in is transformed. The possibility that love and sanity can prevail in an insane and seemingly loveless world is now afoot. The world is cared for better when we learn how better to take care of ourselves.

If one can be free wherever one is, then one can be as loving as one likes. If one has it within them to always, in all circumstances, be true to oneself, then Life is not a problem to be solved — it is a miracle to be experienced. Taking care of oneself in relationship opens many doors. Elders can surprise the world by walking through some of them.



# Becoming an Elder

— *Lucky*

How is it that an old person becomes someone rare, an elder? Elder community is designed to assist one into maturing. Through interacting with one's age cohort and sharing how time and Life have changed one, a discovery can happen of what nature has wrought within. This discovery begins the transition, a metamorphosis that alters one's outlook and choices.

An elder is grown. Like sperm cells on the way to the ovum, they are the few that have run the gauntlet of Life, and been altered. They are blessed by hard-won experience, hardship, and perspective, not because they survived (as many an old person does), but because they learned to thrive. Elders are amongst the precious few who have lived through the spectrum of Life and become the ripest of the ripe.

How is an elder different from being a merely old person? An elder is not defined by age. He, or she, is old, but they are not subject to time in the same way the majority of us are. They have a repertoire of responses to it and capacities that reveal what they are made of. Here is what I mean.

Elders arrive at old age differently than the average old person. They are more self-possessed, more interested in others, less emotionally reactive and judgmental, more compassionate, and eager to serve the larger communities they feel themselves to be part of. They are motivated more from the inside out rather than the outside in. They are more self-confrontive and treat themselves and Life better. They know what their purpose is. Elders are humble; they know they are older and wiser because of life experiences and hardships. They are who they are because Life made them that way. They are the ones who have learned the alchemical trick of turning lemons into joyous lives.

Elders embrace challenge because they recognize its role in Life. They are familiar with loss, hardship, and pain. They have been grown by what they have been through. Life has treated them roughly, and they

are better off for it. As a result they have a different outlook on difficulty and a different capacity for dealing with it. They can feel confident about Life because it has put them to the test.

They have a rare ability to respond that sets them apart. Unlike others, elders consider and take responsibility for the groups they feel part of. They know that the challenges of Life coax out of us, as individuals and as groups, the ability to respond. They personally increase a group's ability to respond by changing themselves.

Growing is organic. There is an inescapable storm-surge that runs through all of our lives. Change is ubiquitous, it is always happening. Our best-laid plans, the well-ordered lives we imagine for ourselves, the world we thought we lived in, all morph into something else. Our grip is slippery. Life twists and turns, and we are whiplashed around. Change seems to happen for its own sake. In fact, this is true. Evolution is shaking things up. It is looking for new combinations which will allow it to complexify, to become more functional, and even more greatly creative. In the meantime, we get buffeted around.

Elders, however, have the winds of evolution behind them. They have extraordinary experiences of transcending themselves. They go beyond the ruts, old ways, and attachments that have previously defined them. They have the experience, not always voluntary, of having given up control. They know that death awaits them and that it can take many forms. They have adjusted to the restless and ever-changing nature of Life. They are distinguishable from the merely old because they have not become rigid. They know how to dance amidst transition. They have made friends with change by expecting it, celebrating it, and leaning into it.

Elders have gained access to the wisdom of the ages because Life has had its way with them. They are evolution at work. Becoming an elder is not simply done. The journey to elderhood is made purely at Life's discretion. There are broader laws to adhere to, community to be responsible for, and a relationship with the larger mystery to maintain. All of this is an extension of human capacity. But, the way there isn't rational or even logical.

All one can do is position oneself to be selected by Life. Until now this has been a kind of random process, at least on the human side. Some show us, however, another possibility. This is the most important reason elder community exists: so we can learn from each other, as we age, the attributes that make a human life nutritious to the whole. The big picture, a larger reality, comes into view in the latter stages of life.

Occupying this world as fully as possible (and bringing along one's community) is what life is all about. Evolution proceeds by its own reasons. Some folks have learned to trust this apparent randomness as an expression of Life's wisdom. They have become elders, and they are the way-showers, the ones that reveal our possibilities.

Blossoming, fruiting, and becoming seed — this is what old people can do. A community of those on the same trajectory is more than just helpful. The relationship capabilities of the old are not just a convenience that enriches life. These capacities serve to help old people become fully ripe human beings. A community of elderly people can become a nutrient-rich container that sensitizes, fertilizes, and grows a rare experience of purpose. The old contain the wisdom, experience, and perspective that can enable change.

Becoming an elder is a ripening process, a privilege given to one by Life. By becoming the grey fruit of the Tree of Life, one seeds the future. This is not an intentional act. This is an outgrowth of Life having its way with us. Elders know this, and are therefore humble and vulnerable. They are distinguished from the merely old because they have given their lives to the whole of Life. Community is the place where one discovers and practices being oneself while learning how being oneself is exactly what is needed now.



# Summary

— *Lucky*

Writing down something as important as how we old folks connect is a real challenge. When I started out with the salon I had no idea these strangers were going to affect me so strongly. Now, I'm so grateful they have. I want to do right by them and what I have learned with them. There is so much I didn't know: about me, others, and the world. Congregating with and caring about old folks has awakened me. So, writing this handbook has been educational. Reflecting on the journey, I've been made clearer about what a boon old age is to old folks and, even more, to a world desperately needing perspective.

I'm getting excited about this handbook. It seems very different to me, different from all the other "elder" books, because it affirms the fact that we as old people can create a way of being together that is free from culture, expertise, and all the do-gooders who are ready to give us their formulas on who we are and can be. Wisdom resides in our experiences, not in things outside us. Let's relate and find out for ourselves.

It is my lasting pleasure to be so engaged. Old folks on the way to becoming elders; this is an incredible resource. The word has gotten out. There is a longevity revolution happening, and it is combining with a demographic shift (the baby-boomers are coming), so there is a fairly large supply of people who are excited and want to tell us old folks how to be. But we aren't done becoming yet. The wheel is still spinning; evolution is still shaping our possibilities; it is too soon to settle. We need each other to find out what is possible with us. Elder community is a path to freedom, to becoming truly ourselves, and I hope some folks will feel moved to care about what we can be for each other, the world, and ourselves.



# My Last Word

— *Alexandra*

This has been one of the most surprising rides of my life, these last few years since I suffered the loss of my husband, my home, my life as I had been living it. All this has successfully grown me into a far more emotionally intelligent, less reactive, more caring, better differentiated person. This began with me speaking very gently and sweetly to myself when I made mistakes or lost track of things shortly after his death. I began to care better for myself, which then made it easy to care for everything in a deeper way.

That this time of my life surpasses any other period for sheer ongoing happiness seems impossible! It hasn't had the thrills, the ups and the downs of younger life; it's a much quieter inner experience of satisfaction, peace, feeling that I fit in, that my life has meaning. This is due in large part to balancing my own solitude with the richness of a community life peopled with many older, wiser beings than I'd ever stopped to encounter previously.

Therefore, my hope for you readers is that you will find your own peace and delight in your wisdom years, challenges and all, and that what we've shared with you here may help you discover more riches and contribute to a more fully developed life.

My great hope is that this unusual convergence of people with a longer life expectancy combined with the demographics of so many elders alive at the same time may begin to tip the balance toward wisdom, and shift our world culture toward caring more deeply and more wisely toward all Life.





# RESOURCES

*It is not by muscle, speed or physical dexterity  
that great things are achieved,  
but by reflection, force of character and judgment;  
in these qualities  
old age is usually not only not poorer,  
but it is even richer.*

— Cicero

## FACILITATION RESOURCES

*As for old age, embrace and love it. It abounds  
with pleasure if you know how to use it.*

*The gradually declining years  
are among the sweetest of life....”*

*— Seneca*

# Practices from the Four-Fold Way

—*Lucky*

Our host team recommends these four practices from Angeles Arrien's work as the backbone of building a rapport with others that allows the fullness of our individual gifts and helps convert them into precious collective capabilities. The Four-Fold Way is briefly:

- *Show up and be Present*
- *Pay Attention to what has heart and meaning*
- *Tell the Truth without blame*
- *Surrender Attachment to Outcome*

I refer to them as practices much like movements in martial arts. If given a chance through practice, they will deliver one to new levels of mastery and connection. When practiced together, they have the uncanny power to create social synergies that deliver groups to finer and finer sensibilities.



# Some Sample Elders Salon Agendas

## 2010 – 2013

3/2010 First time –agenda is under “Getting Started” in main section, page 9.

4/2010

What do the terms “Elder Insurgency” and Rozak’s “Longevity Revolution” evoke for you? Do you tie this in to the idea of Giving Back? Is creating a compassionate society part of this? What does that mean to you?

5/2010

What does “Making a Difference” or “Giving Back” mean to you? How can this group help you create more of a sense of purpose in your life? Support, action, as a sounding board, contemplation of current times or the future, creating subgroups for particular purposes, as a launching pad, OR?

6/2010

LOSS & NEEDS (their Gifts later)

Anticipation of the creation of a Caring Presence within the group; how do we create that, how can we be there for others?

What gifts have come from going through periods of Loss & Need? How have they made your life richer? What wisdom has been gained?

7/2010

Popcorn: WHAT ARE YOUR BIGGEST MONEY CONCERNS now or for older years? Do you have enough to see you through to 90 or 100?

If you still have living parents, is that becoming a financial or time issue?

Are health issues a threat to your financial security?

If you’re on Soc. Sec. with no retirement fund or pension, can you manage?

Are you interested in time banking?

8 & 9/2010

WHAT CHANGES HAVE MADE YOU WHO YOU NOW ARE?

Having only scratched the surface in August, we’re diving more deeply into the subject of Change — to see what kinds of events shape us and bring us wisdom.

11/2010

HOW IS BEING ONESELF SUBVERSIVE? What is the difference between an Old Person and an Elder? Back to large circle to explore how being authentically ourselves is a radical or subversive (of current cultural attitudes) act.

1/2011

ELDERING AS SELF-INITIATION, Part I

HOW OLD ARE YOU NOW, AND WHEN DO YOU THINK YOU BECAME AN ELDER, if ever — or were willing to claim some degree of wisdom? When did you know you were no longer what you had been? What are the signs, the markers; what about it is important or distinctive? Is it still

going on? Our definition of elder: Did something die in the process? Are you willing to claim your wisdom? To be wise? Share your process.

2 /2011

#### ELDERING AS SELF-INITIATION, Part II

Shifting from responsibilities of the past to exploring present and future “response-abilities”. It’s an Inside Job.

The IN BETWEEN — the Quest, the Liminal.

How these cycles go on all the time in smaller or larger ways. The losses of health, friends, wealth and power make room for the unexpected.

This is where the self-confrontation, reclamation, and reformation occur. Discoveries come as gifts of loss, from forgotten areas of the self, values left behind, changes. In the In Between we can break down routine habits, grapple with the unfinished, face old fears, break with social conventions, and integrate innocence and wisdom. A reclamation of wonder and delight await!

3/2011

#### ELDERING AS SELF-INITIATION, Part III

- 1) What we, individually and collectively, as an Elder Generation want to hand on to those who follow.
- 2) What we’ve learned, pitfalls and successes; what we would still like to contribute, and insights from our experience.

4/2011

#### INTEGRATING ELDERHOOD:

So far in 2011 we have explored Self-Initiation and what we, individually and collectively as an Elder Generation, want to pass on. Has this been enabled and is further integration desired?

Dyads: If you feel integrated into Elderhood, what enabled you? If not, what do you need for completion? Initiation is a self-revealing process. Where are you in that? Ask yourself “How can I actively move ahead in this process?”

6/2011

PERSONAL STORIES about how our needs and desires for connection change as we age and about times when we have been well met in a connection. How has what I want from connection and relationship changed as I grow older? Have I wanted something more in/from my relationships? Stories of a profound moment of connection and what made it possible.

7/2011

WHAT WISDOM DOES THIS SUGGEST: “Take your well-disciplined strengths and stretch them between two opposing poles, because inside human beings is where God learns.” —Rilke

The poles may suggest Paradox. What role does paradox play in the wisdom of Elders?

9/2011

AN EXPLORATION OF ELDER GRIEF, COMPASSION & PRAISE.

Grief is the Mother of Compassion. —Rumi

When you grieve the thing you lost, it means praise and when you praise the thing you lost, it means grief! —Martin Prechtel

I saw that pain is part of beauty — that inside of all that music, all that love, all the moonlight and sunlight, are shafts of pain, and we are meant to bear it all. —Rebecca Wells

10/2011

Claiming Your Growing Elderhood;

Groups of 3-4: Who are the elders you've known and admired; what have you learned about being an elder from them?

Come back to large circle – Claiming your growing Elderhood, what does it mean to you?

11/2011

GENDER, NOW AND THEN:

Opening: Names & Call in a GENDER Trait to be present

Go-Round: Short expression of when gender issues were most problematic in your life

FISHBOWLS: Spin bottle for men or women first. Use stories if you like  
What are/have been the main experiences of gender/gender issues in your lives? Two fishbowls – one men, one women. Switch to other gender.

Call back to big circle: WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN TO US NOW?

12/2011

SOLSTICE & the TIPPING POINT:

Opening: Names. Light a candle with what you hope for in the new year: personal, family, community, world OR toward pushing the Tipping Point toward higher global (or other) consciousness

Big circle: What new initiatives will help us embody what we want in the coming year? What do we elders have to bring to the Tipping Point?

1/2012

WINNOWING & ESSENTIALIZING:

Groups of 4: Weeding out or dropping activities - aspects of winnowing. Paring down, becoming more efficient toward focusing on what really matters.

Large circle – Essentializing: What IS becoming essential? This isn't because you have to (energy), but because you want space for something that feels important to come in – to help you occupy yourself. What does the sacrifice from the winnowing make possible? You're giving up ... in order to have ...

3/2012

HOW OUR PERSONAL DILEMMAS CONNECT to the

PLANETARY DILEMMA: Opening: In a word or two, what is your first reaction when confronted with a dilemma? One group of 4 or 5, fishbowl-style, Lucky in to work with them to identify a growth-dilemma in each of their lives.

Organize group into smaller groups of 4 to do the same  
Large Circle to continue with the direction, and with last month's question about what kind of consciousness is needed for growth, bigger dilemma and personal dilemmas

4/2012

### CAN PLAY SHIFT OUR DILEMMA?

Start to drum – pick up a rattle/drum & begin to move to the beat if you like  
Dance & begin to play with & against each other Start to drum – pick  
up a rattle/drum & begin to move to the beat if you like  
Dance & begin to play with & against each other  
Acknowledge each other; let your feelings show  
As you move, begin to make faces, let your imagination guide you  
Know yourself and each other as part of the greater pattern, the web  
Begin to notice the colors and shapes around you – find something brown  
and touch it with your left hand – for instance...  
Something red and touch with the back of your right hand  
Put an elbow on something in the purple family  
Back up to something in a print  
Touch your cheek to something blue  
Put a knee up to something green  
Shoulder to something grey  
Etc,

Remember that we humans are animals — begin to mimic one of your choice  
And another  
Mimic one of your favorite endangered species  
Begin to come to a quiet place – choose a partner and hold and feel each  
other's hands (Lucky will take us from here)

Dilemma Story read again  
Large circle

5/2012

### COMMUNITY — THE DIFFICULT SIDE

Open with intros and an honoring go-round  
Small groups: Biggest pains received in community settings  
Large circle: Biggest obstacle in yourself to joining with community

6/2012

### WHAT ARE OUR OBSTACLES TO CONNECTING?

The honoring greeting of kissing the hands of others we meet while milling  
Small groups with unnamed topic, possibly the kissing hands above  
Large circle: Did you learn anything about yourself and the obstacles you  
have in connecting with others?

7/2012

### MONEY – CONCERNS?

What is your relationship to money now? Has your relationship to money matured with you? See walls and handouts

POPCORN: WHAT ARE YOUR BIGGEST \$ CONCERNS now or for older years?

Do you have enough to see you through to 90 or 100?

If you still have living parents is that becoming a financial issue?

Are health issues a threat to your financial security?

If you're on Soc. Sec. with no retirement fund or pension, can you manage?

Are you interested in time banking?

*FYI*

This was one of our least interesting or effective meetings.

Suggested Next TOPIC: Living more simply; What you know about from your younger years that could be useful in case of a general emergency, such as no fuel;

Reducing carbon footprint;

What are the characteristics of OUR Elder Culture?

8/2012

### RELATIONSHIP — WITH OTHER

Intro/names / Who has been your most important relationship — name & relationship (mother, brother, husband, wife, friend, teacher) no story

The Fragile Bond - Dyads: What has this (important relationship) and relationship in general taught you?

Bring back to large circle: What do you want NOW from your relationships?

How is what you want and how you “do” relationships different now?

How is the way you relate to yourself and to others the same/different now?

9/2012

### MORE RELATIONSHIP — WITH OTHER, DEEPER IN

Intro: My name is ...; the longest gap between intimate relationships is ...

Dyads: Mirrors – Looking at self and owning attitudes – other-defined and self-defined

How has your relationship ability changed?

What do you want NOW from your relationships?

Do you still have the same patterns or have you grown?

How is the way you relate to yourself and others the same or different now?

10/2012

### RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER III

Milling exercise (eye gazing?)

Large circle for duration: Relating to difference



11/2012

IN THE SOUP & EMERGING: Are we “younger” now?

Ask new people to introduce themselves, they point to one person to do the same. Rest of us say our names. If no new, we all pull faces at each other and group, no names (OR, we point to someone, then they point to someone until everyone is in)

Four small groups . Gor tells the story of the chrysalis or cocoon (we call it “soup” or goo because the caterpillar turns into a goo and comes out transfigured)

Talk about personal experiences with the soup

Large circle: Reflect as moved

12/2012

A version of last December agenda – candle ritual.

1/2013

About here we stopped writing up agendas because we began to have more or less regular ways of doing things and the agendas were sufficiently simple and we were sufficiently confident to not do so.



## More Useful Resources and Links

1. To read earlier articles about the Elder Salon, go to [www.elderssalon.blogspot.com](http://www.elderssalon.blogspot.com).
2. To hear and learn more about our radio program, *Growing an Elder Culture*, go to [www.elderculture.com](http://www.elderculture.com).
3. To read excerpts of *Embracing Life: Toward a Psychology of Interdependence* or to order it, go to <http://www.davidgoff.net>.
4. To enlarge upon the material in this Handbook, by about May, 2014, you will be able to purchase either an enlarged paperback version of this document or an ebook from Amazon.com by name of *The Age of Actualization: A Handbook for Growing Elder Community*. This document is a pre-publication version intended for the participants in the Transition U.S. telesalon of December 5, 2013.



# Acknowledgements

— *Lucky*

I have been blessed by three things, which have motivated me to give words to the phenomenon of elders' community. The first is the many old people who have touched me in ways that have helped awaken me to the miracle we can be for each other. The second is the relationship of friendship and love between my partner Alexandra and me. Throughout growing the Salon, and now this work, I have been heartened and encouraged by the living example of a caring love. Finally, the Great Mystery has led me into many places, some of them very dark, but has always educated and fed me. The holding I'm receiving is being passed along. Thanks to all, and may you all find your heart's desire.



— *Alexandra*

I must give Lucky all the credit for this Handbook being anything more than a kind of nuts-and-bolts listing of what we learned as we created the Elders Salon rather than this much deeper and, I expect, more valuable piece about the abundant wonders and surprises possible while growing into elderhood. He is much more of a writer than I, and he has grown into a philosopher before my very eyes. It was, in fact, sharing pieces of his then-unpublished manuscript for *Embracing Life: Toward a Psychology of Interdependence* that captured me.

A much longer, more comprehensive version of this PDF will soon be available through Amazon under the name of *The Age of Actualization: A Handbook for Growing an Elder Community*. In that book, the section which is here called "Resources" contains materials from other of Lucky's writing about community and more of our discoveries about the potential of the large numbers of older people who will be alive at the same time in the coming years. We expect to have it available both as an *e*-book and in print.

Additionally, the members of our Salon and its satellite activities are the true heroes and heroines of our discoveries. In particular we owe a

debt of gratitude to the six elders who serve on our Guidance Council: Sandra Scotchler, Trymon Hunter, Dianne Monroe, Jeff Rooney, Gor Yaswen, and Bertha Jean Schmidt.



## About the Authors

### *David “Lucky” Goff, Ph.D., M.F.T.*

David served as adjunct faculty at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, where he employed large group processes to promote community and personal development. David also assists organizations, including therapeutic and spiritual communities, in their quests to create and sustain genuine community. His research into the “psychological sense of community” is the first to examine and describe the conditions that facilitate collective consciousness.

In 2003 David had a brain aneurism. As a result of his stroke, and the onset of a rare brain syndrome, he nearly died and ended up permanently disabled. This experience had a transformational effect on David, which made him “Lucky,” and cued him into how radically connected all things are. This broader awareness now informs his approach toward what it means to be human.

He maintains a psychotherapy practice specializing in psycho-spiritual development. He also writes extensively about a psychology of interdependence (see *Embracing Life: Toward A Psychology Of Interdependence*), community, elders and the conditions that lead to a social and ecological sense of connection. He can be reached at <dg1140@sonic.net>.



## *Alexandra Hart*

Alexandra was born in 1939 and has, therefore, had time to do many different kinds of things, though she identifies chiefly as a fiber artist, designer, and writer-editor. Pertinent to this work, she was editor of the Association for Humanistic Psychology for several years, designed books, and is still involved in many community-building activities as facilitator and participant. These include women's groups, mixed gender councils, and cohousing development in addition to many Transition Sebastopol Elders Salon activities.

Under the name of Alexandra Jacopetti or Alexandra Jacopetti Hart, she wrote *Native Funk & Flash: An Emerging Folk Art*, originally published by Scrimshaw Press, 1974, and recently reprinted in a third edition. It can be found on Amazon or Barnes & Noble or checked out at <nativefunkandflash.com> or <facebook.com/NativeFunkFlash>. Her work in this area is collected and shown by museums as evocative of those times.

Another aspect of her fiberarts career is expressed as a co-founder of the clothing pattern company Folkwear Patterns, begun in 1974. The remaining major area of her artwork is as a tapestry weaver. Large-scale tapestries hang in many homes and in corporate settings. Her macramé playground was the subject of an NEA-funded movie "The Saga of Macramé Park" filmed by Ben Van Meter. She can be reached at <ahart@sonic.net>.

