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Eldership

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ABSTRACT

The author sets out to explore the topic of eldership as an existential possibility for older adults. By drawing on the personal experience of being accompanied by an elder, the article explores the literature on the concept of eldership, the principles which underpin the role and its potential for orientating individuals in the later stage of life. The author offers eldership as an opportunity through which older adults might continue to be active agents in the nourishing of self and communities. Finally, the article invites readers to consider the possibilities for encouraging eldership in their own professional and personal contexts.

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Thank you for the days
Those endless days, those sacred days you gave me. (The Kinks, *Days*, 1968)

The opening

These are the opening lines of *Days*, originally a Kinks' number, covered by several performers since it was first released. I play it occasionally to evoke the relationship I had with an old man, David. He was a farmer, of the old style, raised among cattle as a boy, taking on his first job as farm manager when barely a young man and running an outstanding farm in east Suffolk for the best part of 40 years. By the time I met David, he was in his seventies and ready to die. Recently bereaved of his wife and riddled with disease, he was full of sorrow, and a bitterness too. He had been moved from his farm manager's home to a small cottage just across the lane, to make way for incomers, folks from London who knew nothing of the country. Like so many elderly people in rural communities, he feared the isolation that comes with fading eyesight, the removal of the driving licence and, by implication, the demise of freedom of movement, and the probability of dying in a distant hospital many miles away from the landscape out of which they are born. And like some of the elderly, he was full of misgivings about his past; the pride which led to stiff rebukes of those not 'good enough', and a deep mistrust in whatever new terrors might be ushered in by a bleak future. My part in this tale is that of that city incomer. We were not aware of either his unwelcome move to the smaller cottage, or the recent death of his wife, although I soon saw the anger and sadness bound up in the old figure wandering up and down the lane outside our new home. It must have

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taken a month before he murmured a gruff 'hello', and several invitations to stay and talk, until we exchanged names.

There's a great article in the Adlerian journal, *Individual Psychology*, by George Linden (2007). Its main premise is that the pursuit in older age remains the objective of 'social interest', which, within an Adlerian frame of reference, 'means striving for a form of community thought to be everlasting … which signifies the ideal community of all mankind, the fulfillment of evolution' (Adler, 1979, p. 35). Despite the peeling away from much of what has formed life's purpose, Linden observes that with older age new challenges arise which individuals might choose to engage with, and in doing so experience eldership. My purpose in this article is to argue that we are in times where we most need elders, a secular eldership if you will, and that this hope lies, to some extent, with the elderly. In developing my ideas, I am drawing on a range of writing on eldership including Clarke and Dawson's (1998) developmental model and a final stage referred by them as 'toward death'; Plotkin's (2008) ecopsychological perspective on later adulthood; Mindell's (1995) consideration of eldership in contrast with leadership; and my own work on eldership in education (Barrow, 2016). Most important in this article, though, is the story of my neighbour David. It's a tale that combines elderliness, ageing and eldership, for it is this shift towards storytelling – or 'story-carrying' – that is such a vitalizing touchstone in the latter stages of a personal journey. To this end, my approach is to interweave David's tale with theoretical observations, and in doing so offer a way of framing the phenomenon of ageing as a period potent with gifting, grace and goodbyes.

Arrival

Perhaps the greatest challenge in ageing is acknowledging what Linden refers to as the 'prejudice of the young', which is arguably a familiar feature in Western culture and a worryingly gradual shift in some Eastern societies. Being old is neither valued nor vitally accommodated in industrial nations where the economic viability of individuals is seen to diminish with age. Notions of retirement, care-homing and 'pensioning off' are common terms that exclude and discount the value of a sector of the population who are associated with literal and figurative redundancy. This was certainly the state in which I first met David, and in being so he had lost sight of competence, confidence and personal capital. He had been subject to this type of prejudice through the ambitions of the young in the sense that having retired from managing the farm he was 'in the way' of a more lucrative initiative. Our arrival, for him, was poorly timed and accentuated the loss he already faced.

Accepting loss is ostensibly a major task for older adults. All of the writers influencing my thinking in this article recognize the necessary challenge that comes in responding to the many losses associated with growing old. Illsley Clarke (Clarke & Dawson 1998) refers to the need for 'approaching death as a natural part of living' (p. 242) and Linden (2007) discusses how loss refers not only to friends and partners, but also career, professional identity, good health and familiar tasks, and with this, the possibility of meaningful activity, work and intimacy. The fundamental challenge is existential: whether the individual can accept their mortality. In most respects, the literature on ageing 'well' is predicated on this basis, and where individuals resist the fact of their death, then as time passes they become less fully alive and are reduced to the idiosyncrasies of their personality, falling

into familiar, unresolving patterns of behaviour and embedded narratives of self. To accept death as natural, closer and inevitable frees the individual to live fully again in this later phase. The engagement with life at this point brings with it a different horizon with several new and pressing life tasks, and it is to this that I now turn.

While David was confronted internally by matters of loss, what he was presented with externally was a newcomer. I had arrived, in my early forties, successful in my own career but utterly new to the rural context. What is more, I was an unwilling arrival; it was against my wishes that the family had moved to the country, but here we were nevertheless. And it was from this reluctant position that I found myself trying to figure out how to make the best of a rented farmhouse in a dilapidated farmyard. In his integration of human development within an ecological sensibility, Plotkin identifies two phases of eldership that emerge towards the end of life, the first of which is about the role of elder as Master whose role is, in part, to identify those ready for initiation. Drawing on a looser, symbolic use of the term 'adolescence', he observes:

> Masters are naturally the village authorities on the initiation of youth because, in addition to having undergone the descent themselves, they possess the long view allowing them to fully appreciate where initiation leads and they hold a thoroughly nature-based perspective on life. The Master's ecocentric outlook informs them that if their culture is going to remain vital and continue to evolve, the adolescents must be initiated into their individual destinies. They appreciate the big picture of human development and see the deeper significance of the social and psychospiritual struggles of youth. (Plotkin, 2008, p. 396)

This is a rich passage in many ways, and in particular it draws attention to one of the ways in which the prejudice of the young might be overcome: through mentorship. Linden speaks of how 'elders can act as if their lives have had purpose and meaning. By so acting, elders can become exemplars and mentors, establish and maintain generational continuity, and create meaning in their lives and the lives of others' (Linden, 2007, p. 390).

It was probably after several months that David eventually came into the yard and approached me. We had barely held more than a few time-passing conversations, but on this occasion I was in the middle of erecting a polytunnel. He had passed by most of the weekend watching me digging deep ditches along the side ready to hold the sheeting taut. It had been hard work, although I had not appreciated the significance, in David's eyes, of my persistence with the job. 'I'll teach you everything I know about farming, while I am still alive', he said to me. I should say that by this point we had bought some hens, put a handful of sheep to graze in the meadow and were raising a couple of goats. At each stage I had caught him glancing over the gate, wandering on before giving me a chance to talk. However, now, here he was making the first step in offering eldership. It was also a first reach towards closeness with the younger generation, and an unfamiliar one at that. Frequently, both he and I would need to slow our speech to catch the dialect or understand an idiom – there was a literal sense of 'lost in translation' across the generations at times. More importantly, it was the openness to intimacy that I recollect. What internal power must it have taken for David to accept his aching vulnerability, which had come with loss and illness, and then to see the wisdom in converting it into invitation? And, perhaps even beyond this, I recollect now what it means to be chosen by the elder, to be regarded as ready for initiation.

So, arrival is a critical phase in ageing for the potential elder, but it has implications for others. To what extent is a community supportive of the concept of eldership? Certainly, in

the West the term is reserved for either specific roles in faith communities, or an aspect of indigenous societies in faraway places, often in the past. Preparing for eldership is as much a task for the young as it is the old. To what extent are we, the younger generation, prepared to be 'eldered', initiated? Can the notion of our inheritance be extended beyond money and assets?

Having accepted this invitation, David and I created what can be accurately described as an agricultural apprenticeship. As someone born and bred in south London, other than being named 'Giles' (as in the reference to the folktale character, Farmer Giles), I had no connection with raising livestock, working the land or understanding the seasonal cycles. David brought to the partnership decades of learning from direct experience, and he in turn had been taught by those who reached back into what in East Anglian terms is called by Evans the 'prior culture' (Evans, 2013). By this, Evans refers to a traditional folklore that pre-dates the First World War, which in the historical context of East Anglia means a root into Roman, and pre-Roman, ways of understanding the land, nature and life. In most respects, ours became an indigenous educational experience, with me learning through doing; from an understanding of the soil that can be traced back to pagan times. The gifting of his knowledge and skills taught me much more than the business of running a small farm. It involved me in a revision of what I understood about the relational aspects of teaching and learning; it taught me how to be a man through mid-life, and what it is to live on, and out of, earth. For my part, the gifting was one way – towards myself – but this was not simply the case.

Growth

After a couple of years, David was pleased to announce that his doctor was noticing a recovery in areas of his health. While David was already aware of a revival of energy and a reduction in some of his symptoms, the doctor was not able to explain the change. David, however, was very clear: 'I never thought I'd see livestock back in the fields again, or a tractor topping the grass. This has given me a new lease of life!' His revival was inextricably linked to the return of life on the farm and, as far as he was concerned, the opportunity to share what he knew. This is a vivid illustration of what both Plotkin and Linden describe in their work as being key factors in redeeming any existential despair for an individual moving into eldership.

Alongside the psychological and spiritual challenges of ageing, there are also the pragmatic. Beginning to let go involves the individual putting their affairs in order, meeting with those with whom there might be unfinished conversations, conflict and ill feeling: 'To prepare for death; to make conscious, ethical preparation for leaving … To reassess artificial barriers – the judgements that keep distance between self and others … [and to avoid] looking back upon life with regret, and doing nothing about it' (Clarke & Dawson, 1998, p. 242).

There is little doubt that these and other life tasks at this stage of human development present significant and, at times, insurmountable challenges. The onset of debilitating disease, failing sensory capacities, financial limits, mobility restrictions and loneliness can frequently combine and consign the individual to experience mostly old age and very little of eldership. Nevertheless, the new life tasks beckon, even if culturally denied,

and for those who respond to the dull ache for continued growth, eldership provides a guiding navigational point.

The concept of eldership is overlooked in many modern societies in part because of the disproportionate emphasis on leadership. Followership, leadership and eldership are symbolic terms for how people take part in groups, with preferential treatment given to leadership. Discussing effective followership must be set aside for another time, but eldership is a serious point for consideration in conjunction with leadership. Many older people will have held some kind of leadership role, in business, within the family, as part of a professional or civic group. It is also likely that having held such positions, the process of letting go of informal or formal leadership for the older adult has a finality to it. For most it heralds retirement, with the concurrent redundancy implications. Even where this might not be the case, the only prospect appears as a turning back to followership. When we need it most, eldership eludes us, and part of my purpose in presenting this article is to bring it to the foreground. Elsewhere I have offered a tentative separation of leadership and eldership roles, adapted from earlier work by Mindell (1995):

Elders have let go of personal ambition; leaders require it to drive and shape vision

One of the key indicators for eldership is to test whether the individual can walk away from the prospect of personal success. They are capable of ambivalence in relation to power, authority and status.

Elders are defined by who they are, not by an ascribed role

A further test is to see if the individual is able to hold their identity in the knowledge that they do not need to strive to 'be better'. They know that they are sufficient.

Elders uphold the wider community; leaders uphold the individual group or organisation

In their work, the over-arching concern of the elder is the integrity of the community. Whereas the leader's concern must be the more immediate survival of the group.

Elders are creatively indifferent; leaders cannot afford to be so

Elders' advice and insights may, or may not, have immediate value, or resonance for others. And having observations accepted is not the point of the elder's offerings. People are free to take or leave them.

Elders seek wisdom; leaders need to demonstrate 'know how'

Elders typically seek out a wider truth in whatever is apparently useful. Looking beyond the immediate detail for emerging processes and patterns is how the elder builds wisdom about the life of the group, community, organisation. Leaders are compelled to make use of what they know to inform action.

Elders resist agendas; leaders must pay attention to them

It is an enduring fact of leadership that political nous is crucial in building a sustainable and successful term of office. Elders will know agendas exist and need not pay them heed.

Elders always hold psychological leadership: leaders are obliged to be effective and responsible leaders

> I am referring here to the specific references to leadership developed by Eric Berne (Berne, 1966). Responsible leaders represent the public face of authority for a group or organisation. Effective leaders ensure that the group functions effectively. Psychological leadership is held by those who followers know are the most important to the survival of the group. Elders have laid down their responsible and effective leadership roles. (Barrow, 2016, p. 113)

In discovering his eldership, David demonstrated some of the social and existential challenges that must accompany the process. Eldership requires the individual to confront much of what may have sustained them throughout adult life. It is easy to idealize the concept of eldership, believing that it represents perfection or completion of sorts. In my observations, I notice several aspects when crossing this threshold:

- Elders are those who no longer matter so much in terms of getting things done. This is the prerogative of followers and leaders.
- Elders are those who no longer have to be listened to. Whilst we need to take heed of what leaders say, elder offerings are optional.
- Elders commit themselves to learning – they are primarily drawn to what remains uncertain. Leaders are often called upon to create certainty for the group.
- Elders remain in places of self-doubt; leaders are compelled to resist and reduce self-doubt.
- Elders have laid aside being judged by performance. It is the quality of their presence that now counts.
- Elders own their fallibility first, their qualities second. Leaders must safeguard personal qualities to remain credible and manage the impact of personal limitations. (Barrow, 2016, p. 114)

For his part, David learned to step back from tackling physical tasks for which he no longer had the strength. Significantly for him, he began to ask for help with domestic work. He also recognized the limits of his understanding of contemporary practices and culture, while recognizing the value of new developments.

In relation to another elder whom I have encountered recently, I noticed an additional challenge: accepting the frailty of personal judgement. There is an elderly member of a group that I belong to – Mary, let's call her. She embodies eldership and is also growing very old and suffers a range of infirmities. On one occasion, I was aware that one of the younger women in the group was struggling in her life. Mary and I both mentioned this in a conversation, and I had the idea that perhaps Mary might be able to provide welcome support to the younger woman. 'Well', Mary replied, 'Perhaps there was a time not so long ago when I could have done such a thing. But now, I am not so sure I would trust my own mind in such a matter'. I was so struck by Mary's humility and authenticity, and the good grace with which she spoke. It demonstrates the subtle task of speaking from vulnerability without being entirely subject to it.

Endings (and beginnings)

In all of the literature on eldership, the life passage is characterized as cyclic, often associated with reference to seasonal cycles. While the themes of belonging, attachment and relatedness occur throughout the life cycle, the tendency in earlier stages of development has an emphasis on the individual being connected to other people, the planet and self. For the elder, a new realm of connectedness emerges: the shift from being a citizen of the world to a citizen of the universe – 'the age of sacred learning' (McNally, 2009, p. 60). This

psychospiritual stage of development takes the individual into a place of stillness and quiet. Plotkin describes how the ecological and social activist Joanna Macy, one of the elders he interviews, spends hours looking out at the sky. She talks of how colours, landscapes and the details of plants now occupy her gaze for extended periods of time (Plotkin, 2008). David, too, would watch endlessly from his window, noting the infrequent passing traffic, the shift in the season and the quality of the light.

My own story took a dramatic turn when we were offered the chance to take on a derelict farm some four miles away. It took several months to arrange the move, throughout which David continued to listen to my plans, offer suggestions and the promise of being there to help me in the new venture. 'You are man enough to farm that land now!' he would say encouragingly. And on the day before we moved, David died, in his home, just across from the farm he had worked for most of his life and which he had seen grow again. The next morning, I stood overlooking the prospect of the new farm with its dereliction all about. As I wept for the loss of my elder, I recognized that it was only on the back of his teaching that I could be sufficiently audacious to tackle what lay before me. This is the gift that elders bring to a world that they will not see. By achieving the task of letting go, they remain alive, both in the literal sense for a while, but also metaphysically, forever in the memories of those remaining.

Summary

I have set out to introduce the concept of eldership, not to explain it. As an idea for our time, I believe it has much to commend it, but alongside other ideas, such as adolescence, natality and followership, the notion of eldership is counter-cultural, and it is arguably a mistake to rush to swiftly make comprehensive sense of what might best be elaborated collectively and organically. My purpose here has been to raise awareness, give words to felt, or observed, experience which appears at the edges of the contemporary Western imaginary of old age and ageing. In bringing this encounter to a close, I would ask of readers the following:

- Who are the elders closest in your work, family, community?
- How are they honoured? By others, yourself?
- To whom might you be an elder?
- What might need to be let go of? Welcomed?
- How will you contribute to building a cultural understanding of eldership?
- What gifts, grace and goodbyes might you attend to, for yourself and with others?
- Ageing is transformed into eldership by creating new stories born out of the old; what stories do you carry of eldership?

For my part, I hear that song and it takes me back to fields of gold, dull wintry skies and spring lambs, evoking a story of companionship, generational integrity, love and loss:

> Days I'll remember all my life
> Days when you can't see wrong from right
> You took my life
> But then I knew that very soon you'd leave me
> But it's alright

Now I'm not frightened of this world believe me
(The Kinks, *Days*, 1968)

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Giles Barrow is a freelance educator working with schools and organizations in the UK and further afield. In addition to being a qualified teacher with experience in all sectors of education, he is also a teaching and supervising transactional analyst in the educational field. Giles runs a smallholding in the east of England.

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