

Center for the New Elder
Passion, Power & Purpose in the Third Age
www.neweldercenter.com

Way of the New Elder:

A Guide To Growth & Meaning In The Third Age

Summary and Resource Guide

By Paul Severance



Acknowledgement: My deep gratitude for inspiration and mentoring by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, author of the ground-breaking book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older* and Richard Leider, author of a number of valuable books, including the newly revised *The Power of Purpose*.

Section I. Introduction

This Outline and Resource Guide is a companion to the Center for the New Elder introductory program: *Way of the New Elder: An Introduction to Passion, Power and Purpose in the Third Age*. This free presentation seminar is offered “in person” through sponsoring organizations, primarily in Central Indiana, and in teleseminar format to people around the country.

The Center for the New Elder offers a full ***Way of the New Elder Seminar*** consisting of five 90 minute sessions on successive weeks (in person or teleseminar) or a two day weekend retreat. For more information on this program and other services of the Center for the New Elder, visit www.neweldercenter.com

The purpose of the *Way of the New Elder* program and this Outline and Resource Guide is to explore the role of elders in society - what it has been, what it is now, and what it is needed to be.

And to discuss how we can meet the challenge put forth by Richard Leider:

“Now, more than ever, we need new elders among us. New elders are natural resources that are needed today by the family, the community, the organization, and the Earth. We can’t wait for the wise ones to come. We need to become the new elders.”

Richard Leider

I. (A) Elders in Human History

Throughout the vast majority of human history, elders have been treasured members of societies all over the Earth. Elders played many roles in these human societies, including:

Advisors to the tribal leaders. The elders’ advice was deeply valued and generally followed.

Wisdom-keepers. The elders kept alive and passed on the stories and traditions of the tribe.

Mentors and Initiators. The elders mentored the youth and initiated them into adulthood.

Voice for future generations. It was the elders who most often spoke for the interest of future generations in tribal councils.

An Inspiring Example

The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederation of North America included (and still does) this principle: *"In every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation..."* And it was the elders, especially, who were expected to raise this principle during tribal councils.

I. (B) Elders Today

As we all know, the status of elders in modern Western society has been greatly diminished. Ageism pervades our culture. Those who have reached the age of "retirement" are thought of as "over the hill," "out of touch," "irrelevant," "a drain on society."

Sadly, this rubs off on us, and we may begin to think of ourselves that way, or at least have very limited expectations of ourselves.

I. (C) Effects of the Loss of Elder Status on our Society

The loss of respect for elders which is endemic in our society has significant impact on us all. That impact includes:

Short-term thinking. It's almost unimaginable today that our policy-making would involve thinking seven generations ahead. Our time frame seems to range from the next quarter to the next election cycle.

Failure to learn / remember the lessons of history.

Predominance of immature attitudes / behavior: blaming; selfishness; failure to take responsibility; lack of integrity;

unwillingness to pay our own way (rather creating debt for our grandchildren and their children to pay for our needs); engaging in finger-pointing rather than dialogue. ETC.

I. (D) The New Elder

The term New Elder, made prominent by Richard Leider, means a couple of different things to me:

The New Elder is in effect a rebirth of the old elder: one who has developed the qualities of the wise elder (or sage) who used to be so respected in human societies.
(See the next section for a list of some of those qualities)

The New Elder is unlike the old elder in that her tribe is humankind, not a particular tribe and particular culture. We are a global community now, and if our grandchildren and the seventh generation are to have a good life, **the New Elders must lead us to a global community that respects all humanity and respects the Earth we live on.**

I. (E) Characteristics of the New Elder

- ◆ Dedicated to future generations
- ◆ Focused on legacy; wants his life to have meaning, make a difference
- ◆ Has perspective, the long view
- ◆ Compassionate, loving
- ◆ Provides acknowledgement and blessing, especially to the young
- ◆ Lives with integrity / honors her word
- ◆ Subordinates ego needs to a desire to serve
- ◆ Leads by example
- ◆ Lives in the present, with appreciation & gratitude
- ◆ Quickly lets go of hurts and judgments

- ◆ Committed to his own growth, doing his work
- ◆ Open, inviting, receptive to new ideas
- ◆ Aware: of self, others, environment
- ◆ Patient

Section II. The Inner Path: Sage-ing or Conscious Eldering

Years of life experience are necessary to developing the characteristics of the New Elder outlined above - *but years of life experience alone are not enough.* Most likely we have all come across old people who are closed, resentful, bitter, self-centered: far from the New Elder we would like to become.

So we must consciously cultivate the qualities of the New Elder. It probably came a lot more naturally to those elders of earlier societies - because everyone expected them to develop that way. For us, more conscious self-development is necessary.

People don't automatically become sages simply by living to a great age. They become wise by undertaking the inner work that leads in stages to expanded consciousness.

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

Here are some of the tools available to us for that inner work:

II. (A) Life Review

The purpose of life review is to consciously review your life experience in order to harvest all the wisdom - the lessons - to be gained. It is true that some of life's lessons sink in whether we reflect much on our experience or not. But we certainly do not learn a great deal of our life's lessons without conscious reflection. After all, most of us repeat some of the same mistakes over and over again - we haven't learned the lesson.

By life review, I mean reflection on your life and the lessons it has to teach you, *for your own learning*. That most often is somewhat different than writing your life story so that you can pass it on (covered later in this Summary). It could be the same if that's what's comfortable for you - the key is not to censor what you write in your life review, which would seriously undermine it's purpose.

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and other sages have suggested dividing your life into seven year segments for the purpose of life review.

Here are some of the questions to ask of each seven year period:

- ◆ *What were the significant moments and events of this life phase?*
 - ◆ *Who were the people that guided and influenced you?*
 - ◆ *What did this phase contribute to the continuum of your life?*
- **

Resource: ** These questions are from *The Sage-ing® Workbook*, available from the Sage-ing Guild.

Many of us also engage in harvesting the wisdom available from our experience on a more current basis. **Journaling, either on a regular basis (daily or weekly) or periodically when we're facing a problem, feeling stuck, having relationship issues, etc. can help us reflect on our lives and learn our life lessons in real time, so to speak.**

Resource: There are hundreds of books available on journaling that can be useful at helping you get started, overcome "pen freeze," etc. One that I particularly like is:
Journal to the Self: Twenty-Two Paths to Personal Growth - Open the Door to Self-Understanding by Writing, Reading, and Creating a Journal of Your Life, by Kathleen Adams

II. (B) Healing the Past

When we carry hurts from the past which we avoid dealing with because we don't want to revisit the pain, we wall ourselves off from the wisdom we could gain from that valuable life experience. Part of the reason it can be so painful to go back to difficult experiences is that we get triggered back into the emotional space of that younger, vulnerable person we were at that time.

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi recommends a practice he calls *recontextualizing*, which involves revisiting painful aspects of your past while consciously staying in the space of your current adult self, with an attitude of inquiry, to learn what you need to learn from that experience.

Resource: *The Sage-ing Workbook* contains an exercise called Testimonial Dinner for My Severe Teachers, which entails this kind of recontextualizing, and can be done either as a journaling exercise or as a contemplative exercise.

Forgiveness is another aspect of healing the past and thereby accessing your full wisdom. A couple of **misconceptions** are common barriers to forgiveness:

- ◆ Misconception #1: *Forgiveness is something you do for the person who hurt you.* In reality, when you forgive someone, it may or may not be important to that person. **But it definitely is important for you, lifting a burden you have been carrying.**
- ◆ Misconception #2: *Forgiveness is condoning the behavior which was hurtful to you.* Forgiveness is first and foremost a letting go of your anger and resentment, and does not require condoning the offending behavior. **It may involve reaching a greater level awareness of human frailty, without in any way condoning behavior.**

Resource: The 2006 documentary film, *Forgiving Dr Mengele*, is a fascinating examination of the meaning of forgiveness, which does not sugarcoat the painful difficulties.

II. (C) Coming to Terms with our Mortality

Being in denial about our own mortality also cuts us off from some of the wisdom we are capable of. Life is more precious to us when we are aware of its brevity. **That awareness and the resulting appreciation of the value of our moments and days is an important part of the wisdom of the sage and the New Elder.**

So how do we overcome the death denial which our culture surrounds us with?

◆ By dealing with the practicalities

One approach is to deal thoroughly with the practicalities surrounding preparation for death. I have found that the majority of older people I have worked with have a basic will regarding disposal of their assets, and a living will - which takes a few hours at most for both, after which they think they have taken care of everything that needs to be taken care of.

As one who spent many years working in the fields of aging and health care (before becoming an elder myself), believe me when I say that inadequate time and attention to the practicalities of death and dying not only rob you of the wisdom to be gained, but often has tragic consequences for you and your loved ones.

For instance, a living will by itself is a terribly inadequate instrument, covering only a very limited set of circumstances. Many who have had living wills have found themselves literally trapped in the health care system, which (understandably, I suppose) takes its own legal liabilities as its first priority. As a result, the patient's wishes may be shoved aside and instead of being allowed a peaceful death, they can be subjected to what I can only call imprisonment and torture.

The answer: hours with a good elder law attorney (not any attorney - a specialist, who is a member in good standing of the National Association of Elder Law Attorneys). Yes, that's going to cost some money. And it's very high on my list of priorities for my budget. That elder law attorney should spend a good amount of time with you, talking over the many different circumstances you could face, and getting a good understanding of your wishes. She should also bring in your key family members and others you designate to make sure they understand your wishes, the responsibilities you may delegate to them, and how they can get the support they may need.

And that's not something you do once and forget about. Your circumstances change, your attitudes change, the laws change. I have reviewed all that every 10 years, but now that I'm in my 70s, that's going to be every five years.

OK, thanks for tolerating that long rant. You can tell it's a topic near to my heart.

◆ **By having conversations**

Talking about death, yours and theirs, with the people you care about in your life is important (of course, you'll have to assess their willingness to engage in those conversations). **Sharing your own thoughts, fears, concerns about death brings it out of the shadows into more awareness.**

Resource: *Five Wishes* is a tool which many have found useful both for thinking through their own wishes, and for discussing their wishes with family members:

www.agingwithdignity.org/five-wishes.php

The legal value of a Five Wishes document varies from state-to-state. It is *not* a substitute for doing your work with an elder law attorney.

- ◆ **By taking time for quiet reflection, and deep connection with your mortality.**

Resource: *Scripting Your Last Moments on Earth* is a guided meditation which many have found valuable in getting in touch with their own death. It is found in *The Sage-ing Workbook*.

II. (D) Clarifying our Values and Beliefs

This is a practice which both aids in our personal development as a new elder or sage, and helps prepare us for our service to the world.

When we consciously work on defining our values and beliefs (often by extensive writing - or whatever works for you), we find that the process helps us develop and refine those values and beliefs: the process magically calls our inner wisdom into play, and grows that wisdom, while informing our values and beliefs. Now there's a win / win for you!

There are also some tools which you may find valuable:

◆ **Values Clarification Exercises**

An exercise which many people have found valuable is to work with a list of values, and then gradually pare the list down to your top five and top one. This can be easy at first, but when you get deeper, and are forced to choose between values you really care about, it gets very difficult. And the process of making those difficult value choices forces you to get clear about which are **most** important to you.

If you google "values lists", you will find a several you can download for free, and work with.

Resource: If you're willing to spend a little for this exercise, you can go to Richard Leider's Inventure Group website: <http://inventuregroup.com/> and in the Store section, you'll find *Calling Cards: A Journey of Discovery*, which consists of a deck of 52 cards each representing a value, with instructions for a process for determining your top value(s). Richard's values are more specifically defined by actions you value taking in your life than the other lists I've seen. And the cards are easy to use, and can be used over and over again. He also suggests using this as a relationship-building tool, by having both you and a significant other do the exercise for the other, and see how well you each understand and what you learn about the other's values.

◆ **Beliefs Clarification Study: Philosophy of Ethics**

As we've said, simply writing about your beliefs and your reasons for your beliefs is a great way to add greater clarity.

For those who want to go deeper, **studying the philosophy of ethics can be a fascinating way to examine your own beliefs around ethical standards and right behavior.**

There are many books and other resources available for such a study. Here are two that I recommend:

Resource: *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, by James Rachels, is an excellent introductory textbook on the philosophy of ethics. (Available in paperback at a reasonable price)

Resource: Podcast - Michael Sandel's Harvard University course on ethics entitled *Justice*. One of Harvard's most popular courses, *Justice* is available as a free podcast download from iTunes.

II. (E) Spiritual Practice: Accessing and Growing Your Inner Elder

Arguably, the corner stone of conscious development of the qualities of the sage is spiritual practice. Through regular spiritual practice, we quiet the chatter of the mind and both access the inner wisdom (call it intuition) that we have, and we grow that inner wisdom. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi points out that today each of us has a large array of options for spiritual practice available to us. That can be a great asset - it enhances the potential for each person finding something that works for them. And it can be a barrier, in that we can become immobilized by all the choices, or we can become dabblers, without ever really engaging in anything.

I am going to leave it at this: It's probably more important to **have** a regular spiritual practice than what it is.

Section III: The Outward Path - Serving the World as a New Elder

Growing our inner elder, developing the qualities that will enable us to make the contribution we are meant to make, is obviously just part of our task.

Each of us needs to create our own unique legacy. Here are just some of the aspects of being a new elder in the world:

III. (A) Attention to Who We are Being in the Moment:

- ✦ **Mentoring:** Many New Elders serve as mentors to younger people. The impact of this gift is unknowable, but most likely far beyond what we imagine.
- ✦ **Blessing:** Many New Elders bestow blessings on people around them, perhaps especially younger people. Blessings can take many forms - and I love Don Jones' definition of blessing: ***Seeing** the gold in a younger person and **naming** it to him/her.*

- ◆ **Listening:** Listening, *really listening*, to another person is a great blessing in and of itself.
- ◆ **Purpose Moments:** Richard Leider talks about the idea of purpose moments - those opportunities that come our way each day to make a difference in someone's life - opportunities which in the busyness of most people's lives may go by unnoticed. The New Elder looks for those opportunities and makes the most of them.

III. (B) New Elders as Teachers

- ◆ **Leading by example:** One of the ageist stereotypes of old people is that they are always preaching to younger people about everything that is wrong with them. New Elders know that the most powerful lessons are those which are taught by example.
- ◆ **Sharing your Life Story:** New Elders also know that stories have great power, and they share their life stories and the lessons they have learned.
- ◆ **Sharing your Values & Beliefs:** Similarly, New Elders are more likely to share their own values and beliefs than to tell others what their values and beliefs should be.
- ◆ **Ethical Wills:** Ethical wills are a particular way of sharing your values, beliefs and blessings with those you will leave behind on this Earth.

Resource: www.ethicalwill.com/

- ◆ **Ethical Letters** are similar in intent to ethical wills, except that they are directed to specific person.

III. (C) Legacy: Purpose and Mission

Now we turn our attention to the bigger picture of the role of New Elders in the world: your purpose in your third age, and your mission(s). I am using the terms purpose and mission in a specific way: **Purpose** meaning your sense of what this stage of your life is meant to be about. And **Mission** meaning (like Mission: Impossible) a very specific task to be completed or goal to be accomplished.

◆ Discovering Your Purpose

Studies tell us that achieving a clear sense of purpose is illusive for most people, and especially for people whose family-raising and primary career orientation is over. So for many of us, our choice is to devote significant time and energy to developing that sense of purpose, **or** to live without a sense of purpose - which can leave us without a feeling that our lives have meaning, a feeling of emptiness.

I believe that there are four sets of questions which together can help lead us to a clear sense of our life's purpose at this stage of our lives:

- (1) **Passion:** What do you love to do? Who do you love, care about (not just individuals)? What makes you feel proud? What makes you angry (healthy anger)? What makes you want to "do something about it"? What have you & do you dream about having, accomplishing, being?
- (2) **Gifts:** What are you really good at? What comes easy to you that may be difficult for others? What would people who know you say they admire about you?
- (3) **Values:** What principles, qualities, ethical standards are most important to you?

(4) Vision: If time, money, personal resources were not an issue, what would you like to accomplish in this world? What would you like your obituary or tombstone to say?

Pondering these questions, perhaps journaling about them, and then letting go and just listening, accessing your inner wisdom, may lead you to a strong sense of your purpose: a direction for your life that encompasses all four of the elements above. And that could take some time. Don't try to force an answer within some arbitrary timeline. This is soul work.

Here's what I came up as a result of my pondering process:

My purpose is to inspire and empower elders to make a difference for future generations.

Writing that purpose statement still gets my juices flowing - it feels like that's what I'm meant to do, it speaks to the value I am most focused on at this stage of my life: Doing what I can do for those who will be coming after us. It speaks to my fear that we, in our selfish pursuit of more and more consumption, are going to create huge problems that will negatively impact the lives of my great, great grandchildren. *And it speaks to my conviction that elders have the potential to make a big difference for those future generations.*

◆ **Defining a Mission**

Once you have a sense of purpose, it is time to think about what specific mission(s), should you choose to accept them, will help fulfill your purpose.

Missions, of course, will vary hugely. And in forming your specific mission(s) it will be valuable to consult with persons who have been successful in carrying out missions in your arena of interest.

My specific mission arena for most of my adult life has been in the political realm - I don't mean partisan politics, but rather seeking to make a difference in people's lives through governmental processes.

Some of the lessons I have learned through that experience should be useful for persons interested in missions in that arena, and may be useful in other arenas:

- (1) Think big:** As a community organizer for nearly 40 years, my biggest challenge was that people didn't believe they could make a difference on important issues. Clearly there are things that at least initially are beyond the capacities of a small group of people to accomplish. **But my experience is that 99.5% of the time people underestimate what they can accomplish - usually by a huge margin!**
- (2) Think globally, act locally.** I think there is a lot of wisdom in this bumper sticker slogan. Today, if we are concerned about the seventh generation, we are concerned about global issues, which seem way outside our ability to impact. But if we bring our global concern down to the local or state level, a small group can have a big impact.
- (3) Build a team.** When you go from one person considering a mission to a group of five, your potential for impact increases way more than five times.
- (4) Find allies.** Some potential allies may be obvious. Others will not be so obvious. This is where the creative thinking of your team comes in. Brainstorm potential allies, including those who might be interested in the success of your mission for totally different reasons than yours.

Never forget that a small group of thoughtful, dedicated people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Meade

Prime Resources:

- ◆ ***From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision for Growing Older*, by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi**
- ◆ ***The Sage-ing Workbook*, available through the Sage-ing Guild: www.sage-ingguild.org**
- ◆ **Richard Leider books:**
 - ***Claiming Your Place At The Fire***
 - ***Something To Live For***
 - ***The Power of Purpose***

Resource: The Center for the New Elder's full seminar ***Way of the New Elder: Passion, Power and Purpose in the Third Age*** provides an in depth, interactive experience with all of the elements covered in this Outline and more. We have a no-questions asked, money back guarantee policy - if you say you didn't get more value than what you paid, you get your money back. If you are interested in being notified of the next full Way of the New Elder: Passion, Power & Purpose in the Third Age, email me at paul@neweldercenter.com

Resource: The Center for the New Elder's ***New Elder Mission Mastermind Groups***. Are you:

- ◆ Unsure of your life purpose, and would like to work on that in a group for sharing ideas, giving each other encouragement and energy, keeping each other on track?
- ◆ Stuck on creating specific mission that make a real difference in alignment with your life purpose?
- ◆ Working on your New Elder Mission, but having some frustration with the pace of progress?

In our ***New Elder Mission Mastermind Groups***, each member gets time at each meeting to ask the group for ideas, encouragement, inspiration, and to make a commitment to the group on what they will do to move their mission forward in the period before the next meeting (most commonly two weeks). This usually makes a dramatic difference, both in the quality of the experience you have working on your project, and in the results you get.

If you are interested in participating in a *New Elder Mission Mastermind Group*, email me at paul@neweldercenter.com.

Thank you for your interest in the Center for the New Elder. We are always grateful for any feedback, comments, suggestions, criticism, compliments.

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