

# **Elderhood and Spirituality Reflection and Discussion Guide**

**Eight-Session Adult Religious Education Program**

***From Age-ing to Sage-ing*© *A*  
***Profound New Vision of Growing Older*  
*by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi  
and Ronald Miller*****

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**Elderhood and Spirituality  
Reflection and Discussion Guide**

## *Acknowledgements*

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## INTRODUCTION

*The model that I'm proposing does more than restore the elder to a position of honor and dignity based on age and long life experience. It envisions the elder as an agent of evolution, attracted as much by the future of humanity's expanded brain-mind potential as by the wisdom of the past. With an increased life span and the psychotechnologies to expand the mind's frontiers, the spiritual elder heralds the next phase of human and global development.*

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

All of us – children, adolescents, young adults, middle-aged, seniors and beyond – recognize that we are a part of the process of aging. Until recently most Americans accepted and understood aging as a process of gradually increasing personal diminishment and disengagement from life. Schachter-Shalomi's book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*© proposes a new model of late-life development – called *sage-ing* – a process that associates old age with self-development and spiritual growth. Sages, he claims, draw from the growth techniques of modern psychology and contemplative spiritual practices of the world's wisdom traditions. Schachter-Shalomi's model of spiritual eldering draws on three sources: models of the traditional tribal elder whose wisdom guided the social order for thousands of years; state-of-the-art breakthroughs in brain-mind and consciousness research; and the ecology movement, which urges us to live in harmony with the natural world.

This Reflection and Discussion Guide to Schachter-Shalomi's book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*© invites participants to deepen their understanding of aging and elderhood. Part One "The Theory of Spiritual Eldering©" consists of two sessions and provides exercises to increase their understanding of the concepts and historical perspectives of elderhood. Part Two "Spiritual Eldering© and Personal Transformation" includes four sessions and covers the corresponding four chapters in the book. Using psychological and contemplative tools, participants gain an understanding of elder consciousness and the skills of life review and repair. Part Three "Spiritual Eldering© and Social Transformation" consists of the last two sessions and focuses on becoming a mentor and healing the family, community, and the Earth through elder wisdom.

The goals of this Reflection and Discussion Guide emphasize the hope of author Zalman Schachter-Shalomi: to recontextualize aging as the anticipated fulfillment of life. The four goals for participants are:

- To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering
- To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood
- To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation
- To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder*.

This eight-session series of adult gatherings is designed for groups of eight to twenty participants. During the two-and-one-half-hour sessions participants explore their

life journeys and elder consciousness through discussions of various chapters of Schachter-Shalomi's book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. Each participant needs to have his/her own copy of *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. The primary objective is for each person to gain a deep understanding of spiritual eldering through experiences of reflection and discussion, journal writing and socialized meditation.

Leaders of these spiritual eldering gatherings need to create a supportive, safe, and respectful environment in which participants can risk feeling vulnerable and can experience and share from their deepest levels of meaning making and faith commitment. As participants reflect on their elder consciousness and listen/share from their spiritual eldering work, they bear witness to their own personal transformation and to their communal transformation. All these experiences will strengthen your religious community and nurture spiritual elders throughout American society.

# **Elderhood and Spirituality Reflection and Discussion Guide**

## ***From Age-ing to Sage-ing© A Profound New Vision of Growing Older***

***By Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller***

### **Introduction**

#### **Theory of Spiritual Eldering©**

- I. Elderhood: Re-memorying and En-visioning**
- II. Becoming a Sage**

#### **Spiritual Eldering© and Personal Transformation**

- III. Art of Life Completion**
- IV. Tools for Harvesting Life**
- V. The Eternity Factor**
- VI. Conscious Transit at Death**

#### **Spiritual Eldering© and Social Transformation**

- VII. Mentoring**
- VIII. Elders as Healers of Family, Community, and Gaia**

### **Resources**

- Handout 1** *The Sin Qua Non of Spiritual Eldering© Work*
- Handout 2** *Our Lives as a Cycle of a Year*
- Handout 3** *Hindu Life Stages*
- Handout 4** *Prayer of Forgiveness© (Schachter-Shalomi)*
- Handout 5** *Wisdomkeeper (Audrey Shenandoah)*
- Handout 6** *Mustard-Seed Medicine*
- Handout 7** *Elderhood and Spirituality Bibliography*

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## **SESSION ONE: Elderhood: Re-memorying and En-visioning**

### **Goals for Participants:**

- **To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering**
- **To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood**
- **To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation**
- **To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder***

### **Preparation**

- Beverages and snacks for each session
- Candle or chalice and matches
- Display of resource books
- Handout 1 *The Sine Qua Non of Spiritual Eldering*© Work and Handout 2 *Our Lives as a Cycle of a Year* for each person
- Journals or writing paper and pencils

### **Notes to Leader**

Within the two-and-one-half-hour session time build in a 10 minute break when appropriate and plan on an after meeting socializing time. The Opening for Session One will take 45 to 60 minutes. The initial sequence of Introductions, Course Overview, and Ground Rules is an important foundation for the following seven sessions in community building, course clarity, and mutual respect. Encourage participants to engage in further journal writing and spiritual intimacy dialogues between meetings. Adapt the format to fit your group of participants and allow for different ways to process the concepts and spiritual learnings.

### **Session Plan**

#### ***Opening***

- A. Light your chalice and begin the session with these words:

*Elderhood is a time of unparalleled inner growth  
having evolutionary significance in this era of  
world-wide cultural transformation.*

*It is a call from the future,  
a journey for the health and survival  
of our ailing planet Earth.*

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

- B. Introductions

Welcome each person and introduce yourself with name, age and brief comments about what you hope to experience in this group. Invite each person to introduce him/her self in a similar manner. Allow 3-4 minutes per person.

- C. Course Overview ***The Sine Qua Non Of The Spiritual Eldering*© Work**

Distribute Handout 1: *The Sine Qua Non of the Spiritual Eldering*© Work and talk about each of the ten points as a guide for this work.

#### **D. Ground Rules**

Talk about some basic guidelines for group sharing, such as being honest with one another, hearing from all participants, honoring times of silence, listening for the voice of the Spirit. Establish ground rules for the group, such as attendance and homework, confidentiality, and mutual respect with right to pass and no put-downs.

#### **What / Who are elders?**

##### **A. Review Old Images of an Elder from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.**

1. Shakespeare (*As You Like It*): *a second childishness and mere oblivion/ Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything*
2. Bible (Ecclesiastes 12): *Then comes the creaking days. Years creep up in which one feels like saying, 'I have no taste for them.' For the sunlight darkens in the eyes; dimmed is the light of the moon and stars; and the vision is patchy like a cloudy sky after the rain. The hands and arms, the guards of the house, begin to tremble. And the legs, like battle-tired soldiers, are unsure in their step. The grinding mills, the teeth, are fewer, and the windows of the mind fog up . . . The back is bent and the urge to mate is weakened as a person walks to his eternal home.*
3. Simone de Beauvoir (*The Coming of Age*): *The vast majority of mankind looks upon the coming of old age with sorrow and rebellion. It fills them with more aversion than death itself.*

##### **B. Review New Images of an Elder from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.**

1. Gay Luce (*Longer Life, More Joy*): *Elderhood is a time to discover inner richness for self-development and inner growth. It is also a time of transition and preparation for dying, which is at least as important as preparation for a career or family. Out of this time come our sages, healers, prophets, and models for the generations to follow.*
2. Jean Houston (*The Possible Human*): *They are lured by the prospect of their becoming harbingers of the possible human.*
3. The Live Oak Project (El Sobrante, CA):  
*An Elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner,  
Still with potential and whose life continues to have  
Within it promise for, and connection to the future.  
An Elder is still in pursuit of happiness, joy and pleasure,  
And her or his birthright to these remains intact.  
Moreover, an Elder is a person who deserves respect and honor  
And whose work it is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience  
And formulate this into a legacy for future generations.*

**C. Summarize Models of Aging: Symphony in Three Movements from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* (pages 57-60)**

1. First Movement precedes the Industrial Revolution and elders have honored roles in society as spiritual leaders, political advisors, and teachers of the young.
2. Second Movement begins with the Industrial Revolution with its emphasis on the production and consumption of material goods and the elders lose their esteemed place in society.
3. Third Movement is the modern world and people are searching for new myths and models to revive and ennoble the experience of old age by drawing on therapeutic and contemplative techniques from humanistic psychology and the world's spiritual traditions.
4. We are now considered to be in a post-modern world. From your understanding, how do the themes of Spiritual Eldering© fit into this world view?

**D. Journal Writing**

Journal writing is important to Spiritual Eldering© work for many reasons. Journal work invites you to become better acquainted with the many parts of your Self and to get in touch with your deepest feelings and relationships within the safety and privacy of your own writing, at your own pace, and in your own time. Engage participants in the following exercise.

*Journal Exercise*

- *What words come to mind when you hear/see the term **aging**?*
- *What are your feelings about aging?*
- *What do you look forward to?*
- *What don't you look forward to?*

***Models of Elderhood***

**A. Spiritual Models**

1. Distribute Handout 2 *Our Lives as a Cycle of a Year* and review
  - January Infancy and Early Childhood
  - February Puberty and Adolescence
  - March 21 Years and Beginning Adulthood
  - April Building an Adult Personality
  - May Settled into Career and Family Life
  - June Social Identity and One's Place in the World
  - July Stage of Responsibility Mastery and Contacting Inner Self
  - August Fullness of Power of Leadership
  - September Custodianship of Institutions
  - October Time for Harvesting
  - November Reflecting on Achievements and Contributions
  - December Finding One's Place in the Universe
2. Review the Four Ashramas in Hindu Society



- ◆ *Brahmacharya* student stage where young people acquire the intellectual, spiritual, and moral tools to prepare for adult life.
- ◆ *Grihasta* householder stage where people marry, have children, work hard to acquire wealth, and take part in social affairs.
- ◆ *Vanaprastha* forest-dweller stage where people begin detaching from their families and social identities to devote time to spiritual studies and meditation.
- ◆ *Sannyasa* renunciation stage where people transcend all limited identification with family, religion, race and nation and become citizens of the world devoting their time to spiritual instruction and selfless service to society.

- B. Review Elder Psychology Models from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.
1. Carl Jung *The Stages of Life*  
Afternoon of Life (Second Half of Life) using contemplative tools of dream analysis and archetypal images to bring us to individuation and wholeness.
  2. Erik Erikson *Childhood and Society*  
Eight Ages of Man with the challenges of the Seventh Stage – *generativity versus stagnation* – and the challenges of the Eighth Stage – *ego integrity versus despair* – to bring a sense of completeness and self-acceptance.
- C. Review Social Models from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.
1. Gray Panthers and Margaret Kuhn  
Elders have five appropriate roles to play: *mentors* who teach the young; *mediators* who resolve civil, racial and intergenerational conflict; *monitors* of public bodies who serve as watchdogs of city hall and Congress; *mobilizers* of social change; and *motivators* of society who urge people away from self-interest and toward public good.
  2. Elderhostels and Marty Knowlton  
Programs of education and travel for people of retirement age
- D. Invite participants to brainstorm Media Models examples of aging from the arts, literature and film including the following:  
*Death of a Salesman* (Arthur Miller), *The Fountain of Age* (Betty Frieden), *On Golden Pond*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*. *About Schmitz*

### ***Reflection and Dialogue***

Invite participants to choose one of the following activities:

- A. Journal exercise: *Cycles of Our Lives*  
Divide a sheet of chart paper (or a page in your Journal) into four columns: in the first column list the seven year cycles of your life (January 0-7, February 8-14, and beyond); in the second column note the significant events in this period; in the third column name the people who

guided/influenced you during that period; in the fourth column capture what this phase contributed to your life.

To deepen your re-memorying of people and events you may want to devote separate pages to various time periods.

**B.** Dialogue      *Spiritual Intimacy*

In pairs, participants are invited to share what they value most in life. They are encouraged to speak out of the need to know and to be known on the *being* level. Each person speaks with complete honesty and listens very deeply to the other. The intent is not to analyze each other's experience nor to give advice, but rather to become compassionate witnesses for each other. Each person in turn offers the other deep blessings of silence and remains open for the sharing. It is engaging one another in what Martin Buber called the "I-Thou" relationship. Encourage participants to use the following questions to guide their dialogue.

*Which model of aging currently has the most power in your awareness - Spiritual model? Psychological model? Social model? What are some of the positive opportunities and experiences that the model opens to you? Are there parts of yourself that are limited or shut off by this model of aging?*

**Closing**

**A.** Share these words of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi:

*A person has to be serious about wanting to harvest a lifetime. Most people are depressed when they get old because they have nothing to look forward to. And people are not wanting to face their mortality. So there is homework.*

*You can't become an elder without doing the homework.*

**B.** From the experience of this session, ask participants to name one homework assignment that they give to themselves today. Ask participants to review *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* chapters 1-3.

**C.** Close with the following words by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi:

*We can shape ourselves into the kind of elders*

*we want to be, enjoying creative, deeply fulfilling lives.*

***THE SINE QUA NON  
Of Spiritual Eldering© Work***

**By Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi**

- 1. To be willing to deal with life completion,  
and overcome a denial of aging.**
- 2. To come to terms with one's own mortality.**
- 3. To acquire the skills for inner work by learning**
  - ❖ Journal writing**
  - ❖ Spiritual intimacy**
  - ❖ Meditation**
  - ❖ Socialized meditation.**
- 4. To pay attention to body, feelings, mind and spirit,  
to be guided by them and maintain them well.**
- 5. To really listen to one's own inner voices,  
witnessing all minorities within the whole person.**
- 6. To begin to do life repair,  
in health and practical matters,  
in relationships between the generations,  
and doing one's own forgiveness work.**
- 7. To do the philosophical homework,  
pondering the meaning and purpose of life.**
- 8. To serve as an Elder to others,  
on behalf of family, community, and the Earth.**
- 9. To prepare for a serene death and afterlife.**
- 10. To do this work nobly, in connection with one's  
own spiritual traditions.**

*Our Lives as a Cycle of a Year*

<b>January</b>	<b>0 -7 years</b>	<b>Infancy</b>	<b>Early Childhood</b>
<b>February</b>	<b>8 – 14 years</b>	<b>Puberty</b>	<b>Adolescence</b>
<b>March</b>	<b>15 – 21 years</b>	<b>Early Adulthood</b>	
<b>April</b>	<b>22 – 28 years</b>	<b>Building Adult Personality</b>	
<b>May</b>	<b>29 – 35 years</b>	<b>Career and Family Life</b>	
<b>June</b>	<b>36 – 42 years</b>	<b>Social Identity Established</b>	
<b>July</b>	<b>43 – 49 years</b>	<b>Responsibility Mastery</b>	
<b>August</b>	<b>50 – 56 years</b>	<b>Fullness of Leadership Power</b>	
<b>September</b>	<b>57 – 63 years</b>	<b>Custodianship of institutions</b>	
<b>October</b>	<b>64 – 70 years</b>	<b>Harvesting Life Wisdom</b>	
<b>November</b>	<b>71 – 77 years</b>	<b>Reflect on Achievements</b>	
<b>December</b>	<b>78 and older</b>	<b>Finding One’s Place in the Universe</b>	

## SESSION TWO: Becoming a Sage

### Goals for Participants:

- To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering
- To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood
- To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation
- To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder*

### Preparation

- Beverages and snack
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Display of resource books
- Journals or writing paper and pencils
- Handout 3 *The Hindu Life Stages* for each person
- Drawing of the Triune Brain on newsprint

### Notes to Leader

Design your session to include a 10-minute break when appropriate for your group. Decide between whole group or small group discussion of the reflection questions for The Promise of Second Maturity. At the close of the session encourage participants to further their journal writing and spiritual intimacy dialogues between meetings.

### Session Plan

#### *Opening*

- A. Light the chalice and begin the session with these words:

*Without envisioning old age as the culminating stage of spiritual development, we short-circuit this process and put brakes on the evolutionary imperative for growth.*

*We are driven by this instinct for life completion as an individual and as a species still evolving.*

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

- B. Review the guidelines and the themes of the last session and relate them to this session's theme. Ask participants to name a sage important to their personal and/or spiritual life. Affirm the diversity of sages identified.

#### *Promise of Second Maturity*

- A. Review Gerald Heard's "The Five Ages of Man" from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*

1. *Pre-individual* when we have a completely dependent relationship with our mothers and conform to tribal codes and rituals.
2. *Proto-individual* when we struggle to establish separate personal identities in the period called childhood.
3. *Ascetic / Mid-individual* when we search for our identities and often work on self-improvement in the period called adolescence.

4. *Humanic* when we set out to master the world and improve the social order in this period of first maturity.
  5. *Post-individual* when we seek our roles as society's seers and sages and claim our group solidarity and second maturity.
- C.** Review Dr. Paul MacLean's "Triune Brain" from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*
1. *reptilian brain* (oldest and most primitive part of the brain) deals with our most basic survival needs; seeks order and routine and when threatened acts in ways that are repetitive and ritualistic.
  2. *limbic brain* (layer of the brain that we share with mammals) relates us on a feeling level to the social world; seat of emotions, particularly feelings of belonging and love that lead us to form families and develop civilizations.
  3. *neocortex brain* (specific to humans in its highest development) adds the ability for learning, reason, language, symbols, ideals, ethics, and imagination and enables us to respond to variety, novelty and change.
- D.** Review Joseph Chilton Pearce and Jean Houston work from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*  
They challenge us to think about *Evolution's End* and *Life Force* and call us to awaken our immense brain-mind potential and develop our intuitive capacities.  
Zalman Schachter-Shalomi calls us to extend our consciousness during our extended longevity and dedicate our elder years to the task of spiritual unfoldment.
- E.** After these presentations, engage participants in conversation using the following reflection questions:
1. What are some tools available to elders to extend their consciousness in various contexts of our culture today?
  2. What esoteric teachings from the world's wisdom traditions appeal to you in your spiritual eldering work?
  3. What sources - books, continuing education classes, mentors, retirement counselors, contemplative practices, spiritual disciplines, spiritual directors - will you seek out to receive guidance from your spiritual Self?

### ***Reflection and Dialogue***

Invite participants to choose one of the following activities:

- A.** Journal exercise *The Hindu Life Stages*  
Distribute Handout 3: *The Hindu Life Stages* as you review the Four Ashramas in Hindu society. Invite participants to read the handout and then reflect and write in their journals responses to these questions:

- *Imagine yourself, like the Hindu forest-dweller, going off to the forest to pursue enlightenment. What things in your life would you leave behind?*
- *Make a second list of things you would like to bring with you to your forest retreat. What would you want to take with you? Spiritual books? Friend or spiritual guide? Special objects from art or nature?*

**B.** Dialogue      *Spiritual Intimacy*

Find a spiritual partner and engage in conversation around some of the perplexing questions on the terrain of spiritual eldering:

*How should I plan my retirement? What are some of my lifestyle choices?*

*How should I grow intellectually and spiritually? What sources and resources should I seek out? What relationships do I need to nurture?*

*What do I need to give me confidence for the spiritual eldering work?*

**Closing**

- A. Share the following words by Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*:

*If you don't know that you can be a new person, you will continue dragging your old self-image into the brave new world. You will be outrun and pronounced redundant, unable to make a contribution to the inexorable advance of evolution on our planet.*

- B. Ask participants to read *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* chapter 4.
- C. In your closing circle invite volunteers to share a phrase or sentence that describes their experience of the spiritual eldering work. Affirm their responses.

**Stages of Life**

Whether life has a future beyond middle age depends in the end not on poetry but on act, on what the values of life really are. If they are supremely those of body and sense, we may as well resign ourselves to the fact that life after youth must be downhill. If worldly achievement and the exercise of power is best, middle age, the stage of the householder, will be life's apex. But if vision and self-understanding carry rewards equal to or surpassing these others, old age has its own opportunities, and we can come to happiness at the time when the rivers of our lives flow gently.

Whether or not the later years do hold such rewards depends on the scene that is disclosed when the curtain of ignorance lifts. If reality is a monotonous and depressing wasteland and self no more than subtle cybernetics, the rewards of vision and self-knowledge cannot possibly rival the ecstasies of sense or the satisfactions of social achievement. We have seen, however, that in Hinduism they are held to be more. "Leave all and follow Him! Enjoy his inexpressible riches," say the Upanishads. No joy can approximate the beatific vision, and the Self to be discovered is great beyond all report. It follows that succeeding the stages of student and householder, Hinduism will mark with confidence a third stage into which life should move.

This is the stage of retirement. Any time after the arrival of a first grandchild, the individual may take advantage of the license of age and withdraw from the social obligations that were thus far shouldered with a will. For twenty to thirty years society has exacted its dues; now relief is in order, lest life conclude before it has been understood. Thus far society has required the individual to specialize; there has been little time to read, to think, to ponder life's meaning without interruption. This is not resented; the game has carried its own satisfactions. But must the human spirit be indentured to society forever? The time has come to begin one's true adult education, to discover who one is and what life is about. What is the secret of the "I" with which one has been on such intimate terms all these years, yet which remains a stranger, full of inexplicable quirks, baffling surds, and irrational impulses? Why are we born to work and struggle, each with a portion of happiness and sorrow, only to die to break on the shore, subsiding into the anonymous fellowship of death. To find meaning in the mystery of existence is life's final and fascinating challenge.

Traditionally, those who responded fully to this lure of spiritual adventure were known as forest dwellers, for — husband and wife together if she wished to go, husband alone if she did not — they would take their leave of family, the comforts and constraints of home, and plunge into the forest solitudes to launch their program of self-discovery. At last their responsibilities were to themselves alone. "Business, family, secular life, like the beauties and hopes of youth and the successes of maturity, have now been left behind; eternity alone remains. And so it is to that — not to the tasks and worries of this life, already gone, which came and passed like a dream — that the mind is turned." Retirement looks beyond the stars, not to the village streets. It is the time for working out a philosophy, and then working that philosophy into a way of life; a time for transcending the senses to find, and dwell with, the reality that underlies this natural world.



Beyond retirement, the final stage wherein the goal is actually reached is the state of the *sannyasin*, defined by the Bhagavad-Gita as "one who neither hates nor loves anything."

The pilgrim is now free to return to the world for, the intent of the forest discipline achieved, time and place have lost their foothold. Where in all the world can one be totally free if not everywhere? The Hindus liken the *sannyasin* to the wild goose or swan, "which has no fixed home but wanders, migrating with the rain-clouds north to the Himalayas and back south again, at home on every lake or sheet of water, as also in the infinite, unbounded reaches of the sky." The marketplace has now become as hospitable as the forests. But though the *sannyasin* is back, he is back as a different person. Having discovered that complete release from every limitation is synonymous with absolute anonymity, the *sannyasin* has learned the art of keeping the finite self dispersed lest it eclipse the infinite.

Far from wanting to "be somebody," the *sannyasin's* wish is the opposite: to remain a complete nonentity on the surface in order to be joined to all at root. How could one possibly wish to make oneself up again as an individual, restore the posturings and costumes of a limiting self-identity, the persona that conceals the purity and radiance of the intrinsic self? The outward life that fits this total freedom best is that of a homeless mendicant. Others will seek to be economically independent in their old age; the *sannyasin* proposes to cut free of economics altogether. With no fixed place on earth, no obligations, no goal, no belongings, the expectations of body are nothing. Social pretensions likewise have no soil from which to sprout and interfere. No pride remains in someone who, begging bowl in hand, finds himself at the back door of someone who was once his servant and would not have it otherwise.

The *sannyasin* saints of Jainism, an offshoot of Hinduism, went about "clothed in space," stark naked. Buddhism, another offshoot, dressed its counterparts in ochre, the color worn by criminals ejected from society and condemned to death. Good to have all status whisked away at a stroke, for all social identities prevent identification with the imperishable totality of existence. "Taking no thought of the future and looking with indifference upon the present," read the Hindu texts, the *sannyasin* "lives identified with the eternal Self and beholds nothing else." "He no more cares whether he falls or remains, than does a cow what becomes of the garland that someone has hung around her neck; for the faculties of his mind are now at rest in the Holy Power, the essence of bliss."

The unwise life is one long struggle with death the intruder — an uneven contest in which age is obsessively delayed through artifice and the denial of time's erosions. When the fever of desire slackens the unwise seed to refuel it with more potent aphrodisiacs. When they are forced to let go, it is grudgingly and with self-pity, for they cannot see the inevitable as natural, and good as well. They have no comprehension of Tagore's insight that truth comes as conqueror only to those who have lost the art of receiving it as friend.

***The World Religions***

**by Huston Smith**

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## SESSION THREE: Art of Life Completion

### Goals for Participants:

- To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering
- To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood
- To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation
- To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder*

### Preparation

- Beverages and snack
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Display of resource books
- Journals or writing paper and pencils
- *Selected Poems* book with the poem *Warning* by Jenny Joseph (published by Bloodaxe Books Ltd., 1992)

### Notes to Leader

Design your session to include a 10-minute break when appropriate for your group. Decide between small group or whole group discussion of the reflection questions for the Struggle Between Libido and Thanatos. At the close of the session encourage participants to further their journal writing and spiritual intimacy dialogues between meetings.

### Session Plan

#### Opening

- A. Light the chalice and read the poem *Warning* by Jenny Joseph  
Read the poem that begins: *When I am an old woman I shall wear purple / With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me* as if you were the “old woman” or “old man” who has fully embraced freedom.
- B. Invite participants into the spirit of this poem and allow images of their true desires to enter their minds. What would they let themselves do? What colors do they see themselves wearing? What kinds of activities are they engaged in?  
Ask each participant to share a couple of scenes that came to mind where he/she lived out his/her freedom.

#### *Struggle Between Libido and Thanatos*

- A. Review Freud's theory of the *libido*, the life instinct and *thanatos*, the death instinct. Explain it as a dialogue between the two primordial driving forces of human experience: personality and the soul. Libido surges with vitality and creative activity; thanatos drives us to an inanimate state of quiescence and cessation of all activity.

- B.** Review the Spiritual Traditions in Eastern teachings of enlightenment and ego transcendence:  
*Hindu* yogis strive to break attachment with their desires (libido) to attain *samadhi*, a transcendental state in which self-consciousness is totally suspended (thanatos).  
*Sufis* practice spiritual disciplines that lead to *fana*, a blissful state in which all traces of the self are annihilated.  
*Buddhists* attempt to extinguish the forces of *tanha*, the instinctive craving for life, and enter *nirvana*, the desireless state of quiescence and equilibrium.
- C.** Review Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's view of *Beginning Instinct* and *Completing Instinct*:  
 A shift in the balance between the libido and thanatos occurs in midlife. List the characteristics of these two instincts in two columns on newsprint.  
*Beginning Instinct* is interested in reproductive energy and establishing itself in the world. *Completing Instinct* is interested in closure and meaning.  
 Youthful libido goes into preserving our genetic endowment through family; elderhood goes into preserving our legacy through writing, teaching, and creating oral histories. *Beginning Instinct* signifies becoming and growing; *Completing Instinct* signifies closure with deeper relationships with others and our inner Self.
- D.** Engage participants in conversation by asking these reflection questions:
1. What are some steps that we can take in befriending thanatos, the agent of our completed self?
  2. Recontextualizing, forgiving, and reclaiming unlived life are three interconnected parts that make up the process of life review. Spiritual eldering involves examining our life experiences and relationships and reworking them toward healing and repair. We will explore these concepts in future sessions. What do you think will be your most challenging life-review work?

### ***Reflection and Dialogue***

Invite participants to choose one of the following life review activities:

- A.** Journal exercise      *Relationship Maps*  
 By remembering some of the people who have been significant in our lives, we can contemplate the unfolding patterns in our life. Invite participants to contemplate and write responses to the following questions:
- *Who are the significant people in your life: in your family? your mentors and role models? your friends and companions?*
  - *To whom would you like to write a Letter of Appreciation? Write one of those letters.*
  - *With whom do you still have regrets or a broken relationship?*
- B.** Dialogue      *Spiritual Intimacy*

Find a spiritual partner and engage in conversation around some of the turning points of your life – What have been some of your successes? What have been some of your failures? Contemplate your response to the following questions and then engage in dialogue:  
*Where do you want to be in five years? Where will you live? What is the quality of your relationships? What activities give meaning to your life?*

***Closing***

- A.** Reread the poem *Warning* by Jenny Joseph. Invite each person to complete the phrase “When I am an old woman” or “When I am an old man.” In the spirit of the poem invite each person to conclude his/her remarks with the sentence “But maybe I ought to practice a little now.” Affirm their wild elderhood statements.
  
- B.** Ask participants to read *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* chapter 5.

## SESSION FOUR: Tools for Harvesting Life

### Goals for Participants:

- To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering
- To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood
- To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation
- To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder*

### Preparation

- Beverages and snack
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Display of resource books
- Journals or writing paper and pencils
- Handout 4: *Bedtime Prayer of Forgiveness*© by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi for each person
- Handout 5: *Wisdomkeeper: Audrey Shenandoah* for each person

### Notes to Leader

Design your session to include a 10-minute break when appropriate for your group. Print on newsprint some of the reflection questions you plan to ask when you talk about the Fourfold Model of Self as well as any reference books or web sites you recommend. At the close of the session encourage participants to further their journal writing and socialized meditation practices between meetings.

### Session Plan

#### *Opening*

- A. Light your chalice and begin the session with these words:

*The diminishments of old age school us in the art of humility and self-acceptance . . . Because we can't rely on our former attainments and on our physical strength, we must search more deeply within ourselves for a fund of inner strength and wisdom. Increased reflection and contemplation in elderhood, as taught by the world's mystical traditions, are invaluable in helping us befriend our hidden depths.*

Sister Ann

- B. Invite participants to share briefly their experiences of “increased reflection and contemplation” during the time of this course. What practices and traditions have inspired and sustained them? Affirm the important hard work of spiritual eldering that each person is doing.

#### *Restoring Ourselves to Wholeness*

- A. Review “Fourfold Model of Self” from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. From Jewish Kabbalists’ and Jungian psychologists’ holistic systems we are taught that human beings express themselves on four levels: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual.

1. *Physical* level work      respect and reverence for the body serve as a foundation for wholeness; exercise is the key to a healthy old age.
2. *Emotional* level work      the two tasks of coming to terms with our mortality and recontextualizing our past as part of life review releases us toward authenticity and wholeness.
3. *Mental* level work      by synthesizing wisdom from life experience we can do our philosophic homework with greater clarity and wholeness; our tools are understanding, interpretation and evaluation.
4. *Spiritual* level work      meditation practices are essential where we confront our fears and difficulties as well as our aspirations and successes.

**B.** Engage participants in conversation by asking the following reflection questions:

1. Our physical bodies support and sustain us: How do you feel about your physical body? How do you view your state of health – appetite, energy, physical strength, sexual energy?
2. Our emotional health depends on successfully coming to terms with change: Have you put your legal and financial affairs in order? Do you have a will and have you discussed it with loved ones?
3. Our mental insights into being and becoming need clarity and illumination: Have you integrated your philosophy of life around the abiding questions – why are we here? what is our purpose? What do you believe about God, the soul, the afterlife?
4. Our spiritual disciplines integrates body and mind, heart and soul: What spiritual disciplines do you practice? Have you practiced socialized meditation? What rituals shape your spiritual life?

### ***Reflection and Dialogue***

Invite participants to choose one of the following activities:

- A.**      Journal exercise      *Prayer of Forgiveness*  
 The work of forgiveness peels away layers of angry memories and residues of resentment. The process works best with daily attention. By creating daily opportunities to practice forgiveness we can unburden ourselves from anger and regrets. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi rendered from the Hebrew this *Bedtime Prayer of Forgiveness*. Distribute Handout 4 and invite each participant to read the prayer. Ask participants to adapt the wording of the prayer to reflect their own beliefs and invite them to journal in the following ways:
  - *Repeat the prayer with full attention to whom and what you want to forgive.*
  - *Stop after reading each line and allow yourself to feel release from a painful moment or a feeling of injustice and unburden your soul to God/Eternal Friend/Spirit of Life.*
  
- B.**      Dialogue      *Socialized Meditation*

Distribute Handout 5: *Wisdomkeeper: Audrey Shenandoah* and ask each participant to find a spiritual partner. Invite them to read Audrey Shenandoah's wisdom and after some moments of contemplation to engage in dialogue about their relationship to humanity, the environment, and Universe.

*Where are your energies directed? As a grand/mother or grand/father what do you demand for our children? For Mother Earth? How are you building your spiritual foundation?*

### **Closing**

- A.** Share these words of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi:  
*Every life matters immensely;  
Every well-lived and completed life  
helps in healing the world.*
  
- B.** Say something like “As we use the tools for harvesting life in our spiritual eldering work, we seem to be awakening to a larger world of wonderment – to catch glimpses of the diversity of creation, the beauty of our precious planet earth, and the *mysterium tremendum*.” Pause for a moment and recall when you recently truly paid attention to another person, the wonders of nature, or the voice of Spirit. Invite volunteers to share a word or phrase that reflects that experience of wonderment. Conclude with a few moments of silence.
  
- C.** Ask participants to read *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* chapter 6.

*Bedtime Prayer of Forgiveness*

*You, My Eternal Friend,*

*Witness that I forgive anyone  
who hurt or upset me or who offended me –  
damaging my body, my property,  
my reputation or people that I love;  
whether by accident or willingly,  
carelessly or purposely;  
with words, deeds, thoughts, or attitudes;  
in this lifetime or another incarnation –  
I forgive every person.  
May no one be punished because of me.*

*Help me Eternal Friend,*

*to keep from offending You and others,  
help me to be thoughtful  
and not commit outrage,  
by doing evil in Your eyes.*

*Whatever sins I have committed,  
blot out, please, in Your abundant kindness  
and spare me suffering or harmful illnesses.*

*Hear the words of my mouth and  
may the meditations of my heart  
find acceptance before You, Eternal Friend,  
who protects and frees me.*

*Amen.*

Rendered from the Hebrew by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi



**WISDOMKEEPER:  
AUDREY SHENANDOAH  
Onondaga Clan Mother**

*My greetings affirm the linkage of we humans to one another and  
our relationship to the environment and the Universe.*

*We have much to learn from the incredible knowledge of our  
ancestors which was gained long before reading and writing came about.*

*From time immemorial every bit of their intelligence and senses  
were used. Humans knew and felt relationship to all that  
lived and moved. Somehow that relationship must be regained.*

*We are faced with crucial times. Changes need to be made beginning now,  
for our life-support system is being severely abused and mismanaged.*

*Many people of peace have been persecuted through the centuries.*

*I believe that the time of persecution is passed. The energies  
of the people are now being directed in search of ways to save Mother Earth.*

*The founder of Haudenosaunee government, whom we call the Peacemaker,  
intended that there be social justice in the world. No man was  
to be more privileged than any other man. All were to be accorded respect.*

*A healthy human mind respects the gifts of life – all nature gives life.*

*There is no word for “nature” in my language. . . The closest words  
to the idea of “nature” translate to refer to things which support life. It is foolish  
arrogance for humans to think themselves superior to all the life-support system.*

*How can one be superior to that upon which one depends for life?*

*We live in an era when far too much money is expended on the military.*

*Even as we enter a time of increasing potential for peace among the major  
powers, military expenditures remain grotesquely high.*

*The purpose of these high military budgets must be the anticipation of violence.*

*As a mother I demand that our sons not be raised to die in war.*

*I would urge the whole concept of nature be rethought.*

*Nature, the land, must not mean money; it must designate life.*

*Nature is the storehouse of potential life of future generations and is sacred.*

*Human societies already possess the technologies necessary to provide food, clothing  
and shelter for everyone. The organization of distribution of wealth needs to be repaired,  
for the imbalance destroys both contemporary and future human life and nature.*

*Western society needs to prioritize life-supporting systems and to question its  
commitment to materialism. Spirituality should be our foundation . . .*

**Wisdomkeepers: Meetings With Native American Spiritual Elders**

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## SESSION FIVE: The Eternity Factor

### Goals for Participants:

- To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering
- To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood
- To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation
- To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder*

### Preparation

- Beverages and snack
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Display of resource books
- Journals or writing paper and pencils
- Handout 6: *Mustard-Seed Medicine* for each person
- Art supplies, such as drawing paper, colored pencils, watercolors and brushes, clay

### Notes to Leader

Design your session to include a 10-minute break when appropriate for your group. Particularly in this session you may want to spend most of your time with the opening and closing activities. At the close of the session encourage participants to further their journal writing reflections and socialized meditation dialogues with creative expressions through their chosen art medium.

### Session Plan

#### *Opening*

- A. Light your chalice and introduce the *Mustard-Seed Medicine* story. Distribute the story (Handout 6) and invite participants to read it together, either aloud or silently.
- B. Invite participants to imagine someone knocking at their door, asking for a mustard-seed. Continue “You cannot give her one because your house has known death. Think of some of the deaths you have encountered already in your life. Think of some of the physical deaths of loved ones, but also think of some of the “little deaths” that have changed your life.” Invite participants to share a few names on their list.
- C. In dealing with the feelings surrounding death, ask participants to name their preferred “medicines.” Who exposed their pain and asked for help? Who has helped in your healing?

#### *Elder Archetypes*

- A. Review Primordial Images of Elder from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.
  1. Jung: *Elder archetype* the image of maturity based on self-knowledge, transcendence of the personal ego, and the willingness to serve society as a mentor and teacher of the young.

2. Audrey Shenandoah: *tribal elder / wisdomkeeper* consider the deeper consequences of their behavior, taking seven generations into account before committing themselves to action; serve as sacred ecologists who protect all their “relatives.”
3. ancient Greeks: *Kronos* who uphold the old ways against encroachment by the new.
4. Hindu: *darshan* to receive the benefit of the teacher’s radiance of unconditional love and spiritual power and to trigger your own potential unfolding.
5. Jewish: *Ancient of Days* to enter into this source of wisdom that witnesses events from an expanded time horizon and to align your own highest intentions for growth with it.
6. Mexican Huichol: *Great Grandmother Growth* the elder embodiment of impermanence seeing the whole cycle of life – birth, growth, flowering, decay, death, and transformation.
7. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi: elder archetype points to a rebirth of spiritual values that could restore our culture to psychological health and equilibrium.

- B.** Ask participants to name Elder Ceremonies with which they have knowledge and experience. Include the following, if not named by participants:
1. *Crone* ceremony recognizes a woman’s childbearing years are completed and entitles her to commitment to grow in new ways with the freedom and wider concerns of elderhood.
  2. *Grandmother Lodge* tribal ceremony recognizes the woman’s commitment to become a wisdom person.
- C.** Engage participants in conversation by asking the following reflection questions:
1. Elderhood is often defined as severing people from their former identities and investing them with new responsibilities. What old identities will you let go and what new responsibilities will you take up?
  2. Each of us can create beautiful ceremonies for elders, for ourselves and for others. What rituals to commemorate retirement, menopause, or change in health status have you participated? What elder rituals or transition ceremonies are important to you?

### ***Reflection and Dialogue***

Invite participants to choose one of the following activities:

- A.** Journal exercise *Ethical Wills*  
 As you reflect on your life experiences, what wisdom from your mind and heart and soul do you want to share with loved ones? To whom do you wish to write an ethical will? Select one of these people and write to her/him the essential things that you would like to transmit in your ethical will.

- *What has been important in your life?*
- *What values and principles have you lived by?*
- *What of your life would you like to see endure?*

**B.** Dialogue      *Socialized Meditation*

In an Hasidic story Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol posed a question shortly before his death. “In the coming world,” he said, “they will not ask me ‘Why were you not like Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not what you, Zusya, could have been?’”

Each of us must grapple with the question: *Why was I not what I could have been?*

Ask participants to find a spiritual partner and to begin in silence. Then engage in dialogue around this question, each person speaking for 10 minutes while the other listens quietly. Then end in silence.

**Closing**

- A.** In our spiritual eldering work we broaden our horizon and see beyond the human time scale. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi writes:  
*We acquire a long-term vision of our place in the cosmos. Transcending our normally shortsighted perspective, we root ourselves in something vast, immeasurable – something so transpersonally grand and enduring. That I call it the “eternity factor.”*
- B.** Invite participants to share from their elder perspective as a representative of Earth’s long-term investment in evolution and guardian of the Universe, what are the blessings of the longer vision? What transcendent meaning and purpose does your life have?  
Then invite participants to express their insights through the media of creative arts – draw, paint, sculpt. Conclude the session by inviting volunteers to share their creative expressions. Encourage participants to continue this creative meditation at home.
- C.** Ask participants to read *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* chapter 7.

### **The Mustard Seed Medicine**

Kisa Gotami was a beautiful young woman with neither father nor mother to care for her. In the city market one day, a rich young man saw her as she stood in a booth selling flowers. He fell in love with her at first sight. Later he married her. Everyone thought: "What a happy life Kisa Gotami will now have!"

Some time after that a baby was born, a beautiful little boy, and Kisa Gotami was completely happy. The days slipped by very fast as she watched her little son grow and learn. Almost before she knew it, he could run about and talk. She loved him more than anyone else in all the world. She loved him when he was obedient and when he was stubborn. She loved him when he laughed and when he cried.

But one day the little boy suddenly became very sick. Even though his mother and father did everything they knew how to do for him, the little boy did not get well. In a few days he died.

Kisa Gotami could not believe her little boy was really dead. She thought his sickness had only put him to sleep. Some kind of medicine would surely wake him up. So she wrapped the little body in its baby sheet and lifted it up in her arms. She carried it to her neighbor's door.

"Please, my friend, " she begged, "give me some medicine that will cure my child." But when her neighbor lifted the sheet and saw the baby's face, she shook her head sadly. She knew there was no medicine that could cure him.

Kisa Gotami was not easily discouraged. She went from door to door. She begged each neighbor she saw: "Please give me some medicine to cure my little boy." But each neighbor in turn looked at the baby's sleeping face and shook her head sadly. The neighbors all felt very sorry for Kisa Gotami. When she was gone, they said:

"Poor Kisa Gotami! Has she lost her senses?" Finally she met a man on the street who said:

"My good woman, I cannot give you any medicine for your child, but I know a man who can help you."

"Oh, tell me, please, who is he and where may I find him?"

"Go to Buddha," said the man encouragingly. "He can always help people." So Kisa Gotami hurried to the home of Buddha. She stood before the great man and said:

"Good Buddha, I am told you are always able to help people in trouble. Please give me some medicine that will cure my child."

Buddha looked tenderly at the anxious mother. He knew the child was dead. He knew he could not bring the dead back to life again, but he knew also that he could help the mother to feel peaceful and comforted.

"My good woman, you must help me find the medicine," said Buddha kindly. "Go and bring me a handful of mustard seed."

"Surely I can easily find a handful of mustard seed," said Kisa Gotami eagerly.

"Do as I tell you," said Buddha, "but remember this: The mustard seed must be taken from a house where no one has ever died or it will be of no use."

Believing she could find the mustard seed in some house where no one had ever died, Kisa Gotami thanked Buddha and went back home. There she gently laid her child's lifeless body on its little bed. Then she went out alone to find the handful of mustard seed.

First she went hopefully to her next-door neighbor. "Have you a handful of mustard seed?" she asked. "Buddha says it will cure my child."

"Certainly I have a mustard seed. I will gladly give you a handful and more."

"Thank you so much, kind neighbor," said Kisa Gotami, "but before taking the seed I must ask you a question. Has anyone ever died in your house—a father or grandfather or grandmother or anyone else?"

"O Kisa dear, have you forgotten?" said the neighbor in surprise. "Our dear grandfather died here scarcely more than a year ago."

"Then your mustard seed cannot cure my child," said Kisa Gotami sadly. "Buddha said that I must find the seed in a home where no one has ever died."

Hopefully Kisa Gotami went to another house. She went from door to door, to every house in the village, asking for a handful of mustard seed. When she asked the question: "Has anyone ever died in this house?" one said:

"Yes, our oldest son died here. It was ten years ago, but we still miss him." Another said:

"Both our grandparents died in this house." Another said:

"My husband died here many years ago." At every door it was the same. Someone would say:

"Good Woman, why remind us of our sorrow? How can you expect to find a house where no one has died? Don't you know that the living are few but the dead are many?"

At last, tired and discouraged, Kisa Gotami went outside the village and sat down alone on a rock under a banyan tree. She knew now that even Buddha had not medicine for her child. Nothing could bring him back to life again. Tears blinded her eyes. Although it was broad daylight, it seemed as though the darkness of night had fallen over her.

As she sat quietly under the banyan tree, she slowly began to feel peaceful. After all, she was not all alone and deserted. Nor did she feel that her little boy was all alone. The really real little boy she loved was gone. That was true. She did not know where he had gone or why he had gone, but she did know now that his body was dead. It had died, just as thousands of other persons' bodies had died before. Just as her own body would sometime die. Just as everybody in all the world must sometime die. Kisa Gotami felt that all people were together in dying. No one was ever all alone.

But Kisa Gotami wanted to talk with Buddha again. She was beginning to understand why he had sent her to get the handful of mustard seed. But she wanted him to tell her. So she arose and went back to his home. Buddha greeted her in the same gentle way he had done before.

"Good woman, have you brought the mustard seed?" he asked.

"No, my lord. There is no house in all the village where someone has not at sometime died."

"Sit down beside me," said Buddha. "Let us talk together a while." Kisa Gotami was glad to listen and be quiet.

"Our lives in this world are all short whether we live for one year or for a hundred years. Everyone who is born must sometime die—yes, everyone. There are no exceptions. We all have our times of happiness and also our times of pain and sorrow. Do not try to free yourself from suffering. Try rather to free yourself from hate and selfishness.

"Do not struggle, good woman," said Buddha. "Be at peace. Accept your life as a gift. Take the days as they come one by one. Fill them as full of kindness as you can."

Kisa Gotami went often to Buddha. The thoughts that he gave her to think about were the best kind of medicine for her loneliness. Now that she knew how much it hurt to be lonely, she began to learn how to comfort others who also were sad.

Kisa Gotami, now a rich man's wife, went often to the homes of the poor. She brought them food. She played with their children. In these ways she slowly learned how to comfort herself.

*From Long Ago and Many Lands*

**by Sophia Lyon Fahs**

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## **SESSION SIX: Conscious Transit at Death**

### **Goals for Participants:**

- **To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering**
- **To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood**
- **To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation**
- **To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder***

### **Preparation**

- Beverages and snack
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Display of resource books
- Journals or writing paper and pencils
- Samples of Living Wills and Memorial Services

### **Notes to Leader**

Design your session to include a 10-minute break when appropriate for your group. Be flexible in the flow of reflection and conversation in this session; dwell where people need to be whether in talking about the final exit or “finishing the business” of living or discussing beliefs and views of the afterlife. At the close of the session encourage participants to further their journal writing reflections and socialized meditation dialogues between meetings.

### **Session Plan**

#### ***Opening***

- A. Introduce this session’s theme with reference to the crucial rites of passage of old age: entry into elderhood and death. Say something like “When we courageously talk about death and the reality of our finitude, we can convert the energy spent on repressing death to an increased appreciation for the richness of our lives.”
- B. Invite participants to share a word or phrase, thoughts or feelings that they associate with death. Affirm their willingness to share.
- C. Share two insights from Zalman Schachter-Shalomi:
  - ❖ A definition of death as a transcendental birthing process, the culminating moment of a lifetime that serves as a transition to other states of consciousness.
  - ❖ All spiritual traditions have handed down a vision of some sort of life to come, which infuses this life that we are leading now with sacred meaning.

#### ***Conscious Death***

- A. Review Death Awareness from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.



1. Hindus regard a dying person's state of mind as the principal guarantor of that person's destiny. *Gandhi's inner work and dying words were "Ram" (a Hindu name of God).*
2. *Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (Baal Shem Tov)* who founded the Hasidic movement taught his disciples that on the verge of death the physical body recedes as the soul prepares to return to its supernal home.
3. *Elizabeth Kubler-Ross* in her book on death and dying outlined five stages experienced by the dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.
4. Phenomena of *near-death experience* and *out-of-body experience* occur when a person who is pronounced clinically dead typically rises out of the body unbound by space and time and ordinary reality.

**B.** Review Death Preparation information from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.

1. *Living Will* is a testament of your wishes as to how to care for your body, if you are unable to communicate with family and medical care providers. It defines your decisions about recovery measures, resources, medications, etc. that morally binds family members and health care providers to follow your mandates.
2. *Hospice work* and *Anya Foos-Graber's process of conscious dying (deathing)* recommends that the dying person, the "coach," and support staff practice the process in preparation for the final leavetaking.

**C.** Invite participants to share their experiences with death awareness and death preparation.

***Afterlife in the World's Spiritual Traditions*** from *Age-ing to Sage-ing*.

**A.** Review: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* Hindu/Buddhist teachings  
At the moment of death, the body dies, the senses dissolve, and the ordinary mind drops away; consciousness then merges with the "Clear Light," and finally with Brahman or Buddha nature. The *Bardo* experiences of peaceful deities, then wrathful deities and then falls into an intermediate state between death and new rebirth. Soul undergoes successive reincarnations until enlightenment is attained.

**B.** Review: *Kabbalah* Jewish sacred teachings  
After death the soul passes through seven levels of purgatory, then bathes in the River of Light before it ascends to the Lower Paradise. Soul yearning to rise higher immerses itself in the River of Light and enters Upper Paradise, then in an act of surrender merges into the Godhead.

**C.** Review: *Death and Resurrection of Jesus* Christian teachings  
Soul at death must balance its earthy accounts in Purgatory; after Christ's second coming Final Judgment is consummated.

**D.** Review: *Gaian Immortality*

At death we release our consciousness to the greater planetary pool and recycle ourselves into Gaia's ongoing organic existence.

**E.** Invite participants to share their beliefs and views of the afterlife.

### ***Reflection and Dialogue***

Invite participants to choose one of the following activities:

- A.** Journal exercise      *Scripting Your Final Moments*  
Begin in silence and imagine your final moments on Earth in the most ideal setting possible. Fully experience these moments and record them in your journal. Some guiding questions follow:
- *What kind of physical surroundings would you like?*
  - *What music, poems, or prayers would you like to hear as you are dying?*
  - *What would you like to taste? What objects would you like near to touch and appreciate? What scents would you like to smell?*
  - *Who would you like present? What would you like for them to say to you? What do you want to say to them?*
  - *How do you imagine the moment of your actual death?*
  - *What would you like to have done with your body? Who would you like to care for your body?*
- B.** Dialogue      *Imagining Your Final Moments*  
Ask participants to find a spiritual partner and to begin in silence. Ask them to imagine their final moments on Earth in a most ideal setting. Then engage in dialogue around their images using the above questions to guide them. End with a moment of silence.

### ***Closing***

- A.** Conclude the session by saying something like “As we imagine and talk about our final moments, we reduce the anxiety and fear often associated with death and we enhance the capacity to experience vitality and joy in our final years.” Invite participants to write their own epitaph or obituary. Invite volunteers to share their obituary or epitaph.
- B.** Ask participants to read *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* chapter 8.

## SESSION SEVEN: Mentoring

### Goals for Participants:

- To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering
- To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood
- To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation
- To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder*

### Preparation

- Beverages and snack
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Display of resource books
- Journals or writing paper and pencils
- Pictures and articles/stories of mentoring in families, in congregations, at workplaces, in communities

### Notes to Leader

Design your session to include a 10-minute break when appropriate for your group. Familiarize yourself with mentoring relations in your congregation and/or community in order to tell some of these stories during the session as models that can work for all of us. At the end of the session encourage participants to further their journal writing reflections and socialized meditation dialogues between meetings.

### Session Plan

#### Opening

- A. Light the chalice and introduce this session's theme with a few stories of mentoring – in a family relationship, a congregational mentoring experience, a workplace model. Ask participants to pay attention to who comes to mind when they hear the word *mentor*.
- B. Invite participants to name one of their mentors and share one of the ways that person has influenced them. Affirm the tangible gifts (area of study, career choice, hobbies) and the intangible gifts (outlook on life, habits of generosity) each person has received.

#### Mentoring Relationships

- A. Review the Intergenerational Giving characteristics from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.
  1. *generative relationship* Mentors do not impose doctrines and values on their mentees, but evoke their individuality and supporting their struggle to clarify their own values and discover their own authentic life paths.
  2. *unique transmittal* Elders impart the wisdom of a lifetime including personal attitudes, ethical judgments, and aesthetic appreciations through this unique relationship, the give-and-take of a living dialogue between mentor and mentee.

3. *interactive relationship*            The communication is a two-way process that mutually benefits both persons. The elder has more life experience and wisdom; the younger has more vitality and invigorates the elder with energy and fresh ideas.

4. *spiritual midwife*                    It is the elder's gift to life and legacy to the future through creative interchange in the search for meaning, career choice, marriage, and family life.

**B.** Review the Mentoring Guidelines from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.

1. *Listen with great spaciousness of heart and mind to your mentee's concerns before attempting to share your wisdom.*
2. *Don't impose but evoke your mentee's innate knowing.*
3. *Don't try to impress your mentee by claiming to be perfect; be your searching, tentative, very human self instead.*
4. *Respect and call forth your mentee's uniqueness.*
5. *Recognize that mentoring has its seasons.*    Five stages of the mentoring relationship are:
  - ◆ Friendship and helpfulness blossom into a covenant of mentoring.
  - ◆ We negotiate the terms (expectations and limitations) of mentorship.
  - ◆ Deep trusting relationship develops.
  - ◆ The transmission of wisdom naturally unfolds.
  - ◆ "Graduation" and relationship evolves into a state of reciprocity.

**C.** Engage participants in conversation by asking the following reflection questions

1. In your experiences of mentoring what characteristics of intergenerational exchange have been most often evidenced?
2. In your view which of the mentoring guidelines are most crucial? Why?
3. How would you define the seasons in your mentoring relationships?

***Reflection and Dialogue***

Invite participants to choose one of the following activities:

**A.**     Journal exercise            *Mentoring Experiences*

First, reflect on your experiences as a mentee and then imagine your experience as a mentor. Imagine you are in the presence of your mentor and write responses to these questions:

- *Who is this person?*
- *Why is this person your mentor?*
- *How does this person relate to you?*
- *What feelings do you have in the presence of this mentor?*
- *What were the expectations and limitations of this mentoring relationship?*

Now imagine you are with your grandchild or a child in your congregation or a youth in your community. Write your responses to these questions:

- *Think of a particular moment of importance that you would like to share with your mentee. How might you share this moment?*
- *What are some things that he/she does not want to hear from you? Why?*
- *What are some things that you do not want to share with her/him?*

**B. Dialogue      *Mentoring Experience***

Find a spiritual partner and engage in dialogue around a particular mentoring experience using the questions above to guide your conversations.

***Closing***

- A.** Conclude the session with these words of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi:  
*Why should anybody live longer than the time  
of begetting and raising their children?  
If we do live longer, then nature must have a task.  
There must be a purpose.  
The purpose is to hothouse consciousness, generation by generation,  
So that the older generation can transmit something to the younger.*
- B.** Invite participants to share what gifts they would like to give away through future mentoring relationships. Encourage them to think of their professional knowledge and skills as well as the spiritual experiences and special insights. Affirm their gifts and then ask them to imagine where and to whom they might pass on these gifts.
- C.** Ask participants to read *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* chapters 9 and 10.
- D.** Remind participants that the next session will be the final meeting of the group. Ask each person to bring something to share – something personal and something for the whole group. Invite them to bring an example of their spiritual eldering work: an excerpt from their journal, a creative expression on one session’s theme, a poem or whatever they choose. Also ask them to bring food, beverage or music to share.

## SESSION EIGHT: Elders as Healers of Family, Community, and Gaia

### Goals for Participants:

- To awaken to a vision of spiritual eldering
- To deepen my understanding of aging and elderhood
- To engage in the homework of spiritual eldering – journaling, spiritual intimacy, meditation
- To witness my transformation from *older* to *elder*

### Preparation

- Special beverages, snacks and party supplies
- Chalice or candle and matches
- Display of resource books
- Journals or writing paper and pencils
- Area to hang and display participants' spiritual eldering expressions
- Handout 7 *Elderhood and Spirituality Bibliography* for each person

### Notes to Leader

Design your session to conclude with at least 30 minutes of closing celebration and socializing time. Encourage participants to continue their journal writing reflections and socialized meditation dialogues. If there is interest in continuing a spiritual eldering group, define your goals and resources, meeting times and leadership.

### Session Plan

#### *Opening*

- A. Light your chalice and read these words by Margaret Kuhn, Gray Panthers founder:

*Being an elder of the tribe is awesome, demanding, and exhilarating. Elders have a purpose for living that's stronger than any physical disabilities that might slow us down. As the mind and spirit triumph over the body's infirmities, we work passionately to achieve our goals of social justice, environmental safety, and cross-cultural understanding.*

- B. Welcome participants to this final session and ask them to ponder the words *elder of the tribe*. Invite them to share thoughts and feelings that they associate with these words.

#### *Elders' Mantle of Responsibility*

- A. Review Elders Extended Longevity and Extended Consciousness from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.

1. Marty Knowlton . . . *elders are the dominant force in society. We control 75 percent of the wealth, and because we typically vote in greater numbers than younger people, we wield enormous clout. Elders have the potential of influencing the political, economic, and cultural agendas of the future.*

2. Elders can model how to transform work from competition to a source of inner fulfillment.
3. Elders can mediate conflicts and witness the authority of inner experience.
4. Erikson: Elders higher-order needs are for altruistic community service and environmental activism.

- B.** Review Elder Corps / Council of Elders information from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.
1. Ken Dychtwald and other gerontologists propose the creation of a national Elder Corps funded by federal and state government and administered on local level where elders volunteer in schools, hospitals, universities, day care centers, hospices, rehabilitation centers, and nursing homes.
  2. Proposal to reactivate the ancient form of tribal government – council of elders – whereby elders advise and make recommendations to governmental bodies, religious congregations, and educational institutions.
- C.** Review *Matrix Family* information from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.
1. Ken Dychtwald and Joe Flower (*Age Wave*) write about the emergence of the “matrix family” which is bound together not by bloodline, genetics and economic obligations but by friendship, conscious choice and shared values.
  2. A multigenerational group of people who are committed to certain core values live together in a shared housing arrangement.
- D.** Review Earth/Gaian Consciousness information from *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*.
1. Joanna Macy urges people to awaken the *ecological self*, the transpersonal mode of being that shifts our identity beyond the human family to include the non-human world.
  2. Ways that elders can develop and express Gaian consciousness:
    - Participate in intergenerational support groups united by a common environmental concern, such as recycling, planting trees, protecting the local water supply, or combating world hunger.
    - Practice a lifestyle that puts the well-being of the Earth first.
    - Acquaint yourself with the mystics of the Western tradition (Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Matthew Fox).

***Spiritual Eldering***© resources to share with participants include:

- A.** Joining the Spiritual Eldering© Institute  
 (970 Aurora Avenue, Boulder, CO 80302 (303) 449-SAGE  
[www.spiritualeldering.org](http://www.spiritualeldering.org))
1. Unique opportunities for elders to review their life and use their experiences as a source of wisdom for themselves and for future generations.
  2. Seminars and workshops, Leaders’ Training Program, and Spiritual Eldering Newsletter are available.
  3. Develop networking, speakers bureau, and social activism.

- B.** Contacting these eldering resources:
  1. Elderhostels (617-426-7788)
  2. Gray Panthers (202-466-3132)
  3. National Senior Service Corps (800-424-8867)
  4. Bibliography
- C.** Engage participants in conversation with these reflection questions:
  1. What elder responsibilities do you feel most strongly about? Why?
  2. How will you further your spiritual eldering work?

### ***Reflection and Dialogue***

Invite participants to choose one of the following activities:

- A.** Journal exercise *Elder of the Tribe*  
 Like tribal elders of the past, today's spiritual elders are wisdom-keepers entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining the well-being of our families and communities. Remember conversations that you have had where you spoke with passion and vision about issues and problems. Imagine yourself addressing a Council of World Leaders and write segments of your speech expressing your moral and political convictions about issues that concern you. Include responses to these questions:
  - *How can I best serve the planet?*
  - *How can I serve my country?*
  - *How can I serve my community?*
  - *How can I be of service to my family?*
- B.** Dialogue *Elder of the Tribe*  
 Find a spiritual partner and engage in dialogue around ways you will become an *Elder of the Tribe* using the questions above to guide your conversations.

### ***Closing***

- A.** Share these words of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi to begin your celebration:  
*An Elder's work is to synthesize wisdom  
 from long life experience and  
 formulate this into a  
 legacy for future generations.*
- B.** Invite participants to share their expressions of spiritual eldering work that they brought to this final meeting. Affirm each expression and each person's growth and learning as a spiritual elder.
- C.** Encourage all participants to continue their spiritual eldering work. Distribute The Bibliography (Handout 8) to all participants and highlight the resources available from the Spiritual Eldering Institute. Ask participants to name one of their next steps in their spiritual eldering work.



*D.* Celebrate with the refreshments brought by participants, with conversations, and with challenges and good wishes for continued growth in elderhood.

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