

The Good Enough Elder Keynote Address

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When I was asked several months ago if I would say a few words to a gathering of World Elders from the Mankind Project I said yes with a sense of adventure and joy and a certain sense of risk taking. My comfort zone is music and poetry in community...not public address. In the interest of total transparency if I were wearing boots right now I would be shaking in them.

I am deeply honored to be here and truly humbled by the opportunity.

Under a full moon in Texas, ready or not, here we go. I invoke once again a perfection free zone for us all. As Leonard Cohen says:

"Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There's a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in."

In the Buddhist tradition I would like to offer up all merit from this brief discourse to those elders who I feel deserve our unending gratitude and respect. These are the hundreds and thousands of elders around the world who care for and nurture innocent children...who have lost the protective support and guidance of loving parents and family due to: senseless and cruel wars, epidemics of disease and addictions, criminal or political imprisonments and divorce.

I thought of the assignment..."What is going on with elders around the world and what are our opportunities" and fell immediately into a reporter mode, burning up the internet. Elders doing conflict resolution in Somalia where modern systems have broken down, an elder council ending a political deadlock in Ethiopia, Elders Without Borders in Canada doing first nation healing and reconciliation lodges. Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu...tackling some of the world's toughest problems with THEELDERS.ORG. Muhammad Yunus helping the world's poor with micro-credit. Al Gore and global warming. On and on. I've actually done a lot of research...but I'm not a reporter. Hell, we can all make a list of charismatic people who are great movers and shakers in our world. You guys can Google this stuff and I hope you do.

God knows we do need world leaders who carry the qualities of elder wisdom but so many of them seem to be tangled up in issues of religious, political or military power. They seem bent on maintaining a world of "us & them." They have become isolated from the lives of ordinary men and women who mail their own letters and make their own bread. So I've been searching for another kind of engaged elder.

I think the elders I'm searching for may look a lot like you. You see what interests me are The Good Enough Elders out there and the good enough ones inside our chests. I'd like to share with you what has come up for me around the search for the Good Enough Elder.

As elders we know time seems to be moving faster and certainly our precious time together now is going quickly. So I'm going to need some help here to bring more elders rapidly into the room. I ask you to please roll with this.

Please close your eyes and picture an elder you met this week who made a positive impression on you or an elder you remember in your heart. Picturing him or her, what do you feel emotionally? How is that in your body? Where is that in your body? Please invite them to join us here. I would like to welcome all of those elders into the room to be with us on our search. You could even imagine holding that elders hand as I invoke a circle by giving you a poem by the Kentucky elder Wendell Berry.

We Clasp the Hands

We clasp the hands of those who go before us
and the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each others arms
and the larger circle of lovers
whose hands are joined in a dance
and the even larger circle of all creatures
passing in and out of life
who also move in a dance
to a music so subtle and vast
that no ear hears it
except in fragments.

Thank you. I took the hand of Mrs. Cole, the president's wife of Cornell College in Mt. Vernon, Iowa when I was a 21 year old, first semester junior, and my life was a real mess. A false rumor was afoot that I had made an ex girlfriend pregnant. The money I earned for college in miserable jobs had finally run out. It was the time of the Korean conflict and I had just volunteered for the army with the hope of getting the GI bill. My parents, to put it gently, were very upset with me.

Mrs. Cole called me up as I was packing and invited me to tea. She heard my story and simply said, "I believe in you, Doug. I know you'll come through this just fine. I believe in you."

Her words of blessing got me through two years of the army and back again to that same school where she welcomed me back with a hug and a cup of tea. Mrs. Cole was a great Good Enough Elder.

So what did she do? She showed up when she was needed. She touched my heart. She engaged my imagination. She gave me a positive vision of the future. She blessed me. That's an elder at work.

I would guess much of what I'm saying...you already know in your bones but validation can be a good thing sometimes.

So what do we look for in a Good Enough Elder? I'll start with a quote by Angeles Arrien, an elder from the Basque community. "They show up, pay attention, speak the truth and are not attached to the outcome."

They show up by showing up, by being in the places, times and events in community where their presence is recognized and needed.

They pay attention by listening. They are willing to truly listen when that is appropriate, speak when appropriate, and hold the space when appropriate. The Good Enough Elder has the wisdom to know what is needed or is willing to wait in silence until the wisdom is revealed.

The Portuguese poet Sophia de-Mello Breyner said,

I'm listening
but I don't know
if what I hear is silence
or God.
I'm listening
but I can't tell
if I hear the plane of emptiness echoing
or a keen consciousness
that at the ends of the universe
deciphers and watches me.
I only know that I walk like someone
who is beheld, beloved and known.
And because of this
I put into my every movement
Solemnity and Risk.

There's a Good Enough Elder right there..."I only know that I walk like someone who is beheld, beloved and known. And because of this I put into my every movement Solemnity and Risk."

I have a quote on my refrigerator...

"I speak the truth, not as much as I would but as much as I dare...
and I dare more as I grow older."

Perhaps as elders we can risk speaking the hard truths with respect because we're not so preoccupied with fitting in, getting approval and protecting or safeguarding our reputations.

Here are some other things to look for in the Good Enough Elder. They live from a core of authenticity. They're comfortable in their own skin. They seem to keep their personal bull-shit indicator well calibrated. I look for a person whose lived experience I can trust because they have confronted their shadow side and worked through most of their issues to a reasonable degree. In other words, they've lived what they talk about.

And they have enough self knowledge to be able to laugh at them selves.

And they are interested in removing the distinctions and differences that divide groups of people into "us and them" and delight in making larger and larger circles to include all life as "Us". They create circles to lighten the heart of their communities. They understand that wisdom...is in the circle...and the circle itself is a great elder.

There seems to be a beauty that comes from the elder's willingness to reveal exactly who they are in the moment. They live fully in their emotional body. So much that goes un-felt in this world...our sorrow, joy, grief, pain, empathy, fear, passion, longing...are all familiar to the Good Enough Elder and they express their emotions fully and unashamed. And by their expression they allow others to do the same.

The Good Enough Elders seem to live with an open heart. They care about people and show it. Their spirit grows stronger with age. They are still in love with life. They walk in the certain knowledge that the young are watching how they move. Their open heart includes those generations walking behind them.

They know like is short so they live fully in the present. They are prepared to face down the dark side including suffering and death with dignity and forbearance. They know they will soon lose life - and so naturally they generously give it away to those around them. A Good Enough Elder is always moving toward mastery of generosity.

The Good Enough Elder is a role model for terminal curiosity and wonder. They have not stopped learning skills that might serve community. They are willing to move past their comfort zone and risk being on the edge. By their actions they trouble us to become what we had not thought to be.

I have been truly blessed to have a lot of great elders in my life. I've watched them closely over the years and saw many of them to a greater or lesser degree as role models. Years ago I found myself on the same teaching bench with the poet Robert Bly, the brilliant Jungian therapist James Hillman, Malidoma Some, John Stokes from The Tracking Project and the Aikido Master Terry Dobson. I thought to myself something like, "Oh, jeez. I'm in deep shit here. How am I supposed to match these guys?" I felt they were on the 10th floor and I was still in the parking lot. My throat gets dry just thinking about them.

So at one point Robert Bly turned to me and said, "Get us singing!" Just like that. Well, I did. And it went well. Then I saw a chance for a poem and pitched it in. And it went well. But afterward, Robert said to me, "The poem was fine Doug, but it didn't sound like you. Find your own voice. You have to be you!" And through the years his voice, in that moment, has never stopped helping me.

Robert Bly has been a role model I've watched grow and change over the last 25 years. When we first met he was a hard edged real tough teacher who often publicly engaged others in anger and conflict. What was fire is now water. At 80 he has matured and softened into a very generous Good Enough Elder. I could say he finally received the blessing he desperately needed from a huge community of men...and he now actively passes on the blessing to thousands of younger men and women.

Which takes me to a most precious quality of the Good Enough Elder...the one who blesses. I feel it starts simply as recognizing and "urge to bless" then nourishing the urge and acting upon it. This urge to bless can rise out of compassion toward another...a desire to see someone flourish and grow...even a thought like "I wish that person knew how much they are appreciated." Blessing is a practice over time that flourishes in the Good Enough elder.

To bless means to wish unconditional and total unrestricted good for others...from the deepest wellspring of your heart.

A blessing can be as simple as,
"I see you, oh, yes, I see you.
I bless you and wish you well.
I take you into my heart."

My good friend Bob Roberts from Project Return in New Orleans has this to say about blessing the young:

"I believe another job of elders is to "see" the young men - see and help every young man to know that he is a precious gift. He has a precious song that only he can sing to the world. In remembering his song, he will remember his soul, who he really is...and that will be the only true guide he will ever have or ever need."

Rabindranath Tagore said, "For years I've been stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I have come to sing remains unsung."

I went through 25 years of alcoholism before I even heard a whisper of my song. I don't think I met or perhaps recognized another Good Enough Elder until I was 45. That was 30 years ago. I am in gratitude every day to the grace that brought Dan Cottrell into my life and his guidance into a life of unimaginable richness.

I can not think of a nobler task than to help our children find their true nature and name their gift.

So as I near the end of the search...this takes me to the Good Enough Elder "in full sail."

I think "full sail" is a key image. Rather than shrinking and diminishing, it's a time of entering into fullness, taking risks, letting our beauty shine, putting ourselves out there with a willingness to be wrong. Investing our energy in places that support life. A willingness to die having used ourselves up. As the Sufi's say, "We have three days left to live and two are gone."

As you know, age alone does not an elder make. I'm influenced here by the Buddhist view that the seeds of eldering qualities are in everybody. The seeds need nourishment to help them sprout and attention to help them stay activated.

With this view to be a Good Enough Elder is not just something we pick up later in life, but its rather something we prepare for and grow into for decades. Youth is a gift of nature but age is a work of art. So we could say rituals of becoming an elder are recognition of the previous work of daily growth into elderhood.

And I feel the Good Enough Elder is never finished growing.

My friend Charley Bloom says, "We all know lots of geezers who are not and probably never will be elders because they lack the essential ingredients which include: wisdom, compassion, a sparkle in the eye, a striking sense of humor, an ability to respectfully speak the raw truth in a way that it can be heard even when it is painful to hear, an ability to listen without judgment or condemnation, a sense of being free from the social conventions that stifle our capacity to connect deeply to ourselves and others, a concern for others that goes beyond our immediate family and embraces the well-being of the rest of the world, an unquenchable thirst for learning that deepens rather than diminishes with age, a relationship with death that is based upon respect and openness, rather than fear and denial, an ability to come up with the questions that challenge and inspire, rather than with answers that affirm one's control and authority, freedom from the tyranny of the ego, a healthy portion of coyote, and perhaps paradoxically, a quality of youthfulness and vitality of spirit regardless of the shape or age of the body."

As I close, I would like to express my gratitude to the conveners of this gathering for their invitation and to all of you for receiving me in such a gracious and attentive manner. I asked and received the help of many friends to help me order my thoughts this evening and I'm very grateful to them. I am aware of the presence of the other elders we invoked into the room when we first began. You may release them if you wish or keep them with you always in your heart.

Tonight, in searching for The Good Enough Elder out there and inside here, it is very clear to me, that I am standing in a room jam packed with men who are way, way beyond Good Enough Elders.

The elder in feeling his own soul nourishes all life. By your very presence in the world you raise the awareness of what's possible in a well lived life. A well lived life doesn't have to be some grand act of social service, of making a profound impact in the political realm. As you practice so well in the Mankind Project, it is as simple and profound as saving the world one life at a time. I bless your work and may it continue to shine around the world until the last mountain is a grain of sand.

I'll close with a quote from James Broughton at 80...

Stand firmly, sit serenely,
Mutter profoundly,
Sing outrageously and
Dance all the way to your death.

Thank you.