

## Eldering: Wisdom in Action

*By Jim Selman*

Being an elder is an ancient and important aspect of many aboriginal and Asian cultures. In the past, the word ‘Eldering’ has been used in some ethnic and religious traditions (such as the Quakers) to describe a process of keeping teachings ‘pure’ from one generation to the next—a role that connotes ‘taking care’ of the spiritual aspects of aging, as well as passing on knowledge to the young.

Historically, the gap between the older and younger generations was not particularly significant. Grandparents and grandchildren might have differed in terms of styles, some behaviors and technologies, but they more or less shared the same values and worldview. Today it can be argued that the young and the old occupy very different worlds, have different worldviews, and even speak different languages. The exponentially increasing rate of change means that solutions are obsolete before they are implemented, uncertainty and risk are constants, and reacting to circumstances cannot be tolerated as a guarantee of success. In this new context, the traditional process of Eldering as being concerned with passing on “the best of the best” and what the older generation thinks the young need to know must evolve to become the basis for creating an entirely new way for the young and the old to relate.

“This is the true joy in life: the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thorough worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

—George Bernard Shaw  
*Man and Superman*

We are appropriating the word ‘Eldering’ to denote a powerful new movement in the world and a new distinction in the domain of leadership—a way of relating where authority and tenure do not influence choices or limit possibilities and where everyone involved is committed to intergenerational collaboration and to jointly taking responsibility for the future. This movement involves practicing a kind of focused leadership in midlife for:

1. Rebuilding inclusive multigenerational communities of people *co-creating* a world that works for everyone;
2. Learning from younger persons what is missing for all of us to work together to address the intractable problems in the world we share; and
3. Transforming the culture of aging from one of decline, loss and resignation to one of power and possibility.

Eldering is an opening for the Baby Boomers to leave a legacy so future generations can look forward to the second half of their lives with enthusiasm and appreciation for growing older. And it is an opportunity for younger generations to draw on the wisdom of their elders and to gain the competencies they need, including the ability to collaborate with people of different ages, in doing what needs to be done in this increasingly complex world.

### Changing the Paradigm

The word ‘paradigm’, like so much of our language, has been overused, so much so that in business many of us don’t even like to hear the term—‘paradigm’ has become like some annoying piece of technical jargon that we half understand but which makes very little difference in our practical lives.

A paradigm is a prevailing and shared interpretation of the world or some aspect of human life that organizes how our ‘reality’ occurs for us. It, therefore, also organizes what we can observe as possible and the choices we have at a given moment. Paradigms are a phenomenon of human existence—like the weather, they are not a concept. For all practical purposes, *our paradigms are our reality*.

We could say that, since a paradigm is widely shared and mostly transparent to those who are ‘living it’, ‘who we are’ is a paradigm. If we want to ‘be’ different or transform our way of being, we need to become a new observer, transcend our historical interpretation of who we are. Likewise, when we reinterpret some ‘taken-for-granted’ aspect of our world, we are breaking the hold of the prevailing paradigm and creating a new worldview. When we create a new worldview, we create a new world and have a vision within which to act, which in turn eventually manifests as intentional change and which eventually becomes the new paradigm or reality for future generations.

**Reinvent the SELF →  
A NEW OBSERVER**

**Reinvent the PARADIGM →  
A NEW WORLDVIEW**

**Reinvent the WORLD →  
A NEW FUTURE**

For the first time in human history, more than half of us are going to be over 50 years of age. This demographic anomaly can, and most certainly will, transform our reality in profound and lasting ways. The central questions we need to focus on are whether we as individuals will have any say about what happens and whether we will participate in the transformation of our world.

Since the 1970s, the “Baby Boom” generation has shared a wealth of experiences. We have all lived through multiple major societal shifts—from Woodstock and Vietnam mobilizing millions to participate in the civil rights movement, world peace and anti-nuclear initiatives to environmental awareness and the feminist revolution that changing everything from politics to strategies for ending hunger and poverty. The “Boomers” also saw the birth of rock ‘n roll, mass marketing and the “Me Generation”. As we have grown older, we’ve become more interested in making money than in making love. The past 20 years are a testimony to how powerful a demographic ‘bulge’ can be in determining what happens in every aspect of life. The generations that have followed the Boomers have excelled in creating new technologies, but it was their fathers and mothers who created the economic and cultural freedom to do so.

But there is a dark side when one generation dominates the larger conversations and practices of a society (and in the case of the Baby Boomers, the whole world). Just as this generation has influenced how we think, what we wear, what we value and how we act, so have they also defined our collective ‘mood’. Since the ‘70s we’ve been on an optimistic ‘high’ and as we age we’ve witnessed a gradual and general diminishing of enthusiasm for the future, as well as a growing mood of resignation and even cynicism about leadership and our national institutions. We have created a long list of intractable problems that threaten civilization as we know it. Most thoughtful commentators agree that we are a turning point in human history. We will either “break through” and create new structures and processes for governance and sustaining the quality of life for human beings or we will, in all likelihood, face a period of unprecedented human suffering.

Whether one is optimistic or pessimistic is not the point. These perspectives are, after all, only based on predictions that are dependent upon one’s beliefs and predispositions. Neither point of view affects what the future will be. ***The future will be a product of individual and collective actions***—and nothing else. The question is what will organize and determine our individual and collective actions in the days and years ahead?

The ‘Eldering’ movement is grounded in the declaration that the single most important and pressing factor in shaping our actions and our future is the paradigm that defines everything else, including “who we are”. Before we make new policies, new laws or create new enterprises, we must, first and foremost, confront and resolve this larger question of who we are.

## Leadership, Coaching and Eldering

Leadership and coaching have become major themes in almost any conversation concerned about the future. These terms, along with ‘Eldering’, have much in common. They all are based in and require strong, committed relationships and focused, purposeful communication. They are all concerned with producing breakthroughs—unprecedented outcomes or unpredictable futures.

These terms are also different. Coaching is primarily focused on empowering an individual or team ‘in action’ based on the commitments of those being coached. Leadership is more about coordinating action to achieve a common vision and is generally best understood in an historical context—a break from conventional wisdom.

Eldering includes both of these, but is more focused on the co-creative aspects of how leaders and coaches create the future. Eldering provides a new context for collaboration between human beings for generating a new paradigm—a context in which coaching between different generations becomes a normal part of life and, eventually, fades into the background. It is about *transforming our traditional understanding of “who we are” as a prerequisite for generating new possibilities and choices.*

Eldering can be understood as a kind of ‘meta-relationship’ to all of our concerns. From the perspective of Eldering, we can observe our relationships with ourselves and other people, circumstances and time. These three relationships can provide a way of getting to the structures of interpretation that become self-referential patterns of thinking and behavior that keep us doing the same things over and over while looking for different outcomes. Eldering presupposes the kind of perspective that can come with age, maturity and experience. This doesn’t proscribe what our choices should be, but always reveals that we have choices *even when none seem to exist*. It is a perspective from which we can observe that most of the breakthroughs and solutions we’ve seen or experienced in our lives were created—came into existence—entirely as a function of human imagination and the willingness to act in unreasonable, often counter-intuitive, and unprecedented ways.

“The young do not know enough to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible—and achieve it, generation after generation.”

—Pearl S. Buck

## Distinctions of Eldering

Eldering itself is a new distinction in the domain of leadership. While it encompasses the best thinking and experience in the arena of developing and coaching leaders, it is also evolving and is not yet a field that stands alone or can be easily communicated to others. There are, however a number of core ideas and distinctions that capture the essence of what Eldering involves as a practice.

**Breakdowns and Problems.** The primary factor that causes the persistence of the prevailing paradigm is the belief that reality is a problem that human beings are destined to ‘fix’. For most of us, anything that doesn’t match our expectations, desires or standards is viewed as a problem. Our solutions always result in more problems that require solutions of greater complexity, solutions which lead to problems that cannot be solved and, eventually, to our resignation. An alternative way of observing the world is that ***problems are only assessments*** and never exist independent of an observer. Further, they can be distinguished easily from ‘breakdowns’. A breakdown is anything that we see is obstructing or limiting the achievement of our commitments. For example, we might see the economy as a problem, but until we lose our job it generally will not occur as a breakdown. Learning to use the phenomenon of breakdowns as feedback to achieving our commitments is essential if we are to collaborate in co-creating the future.

**Compassion.** One of the primary ways older and younger people differ is in their need to be understood and to have others agree with their point of view. The older we become, the less important it is for us to be right, to win arguments or to have others agree with us. Some of us have even learned to be patient, to trust that everyone grows and learns at their own pace and that, even when people are suffering, there is a human being present that can be acknowledged as whole and complete and competent to transform and transcend their circumstances (no matter how difficult they may be). Compassion is ‘tough love’ and the recognition that ***we are always connected to other human beings no matter how apart we may appear to be in our beliefs and practices***. Compassion is the foundation for a world in which we can contribute our differences, transform problems into opportunities, and collaborate with those who are less ‘enlightened’ than ourselves.

**Control/Mastery.** First and foremost, eldering is a kind of mastery. All mastery involves mastery of self. ***Mastery can be understood as accomplishing something without control***—more of a creative process where the results are achieved by not resisting ‘what is’, but by being in harmony and working with whatever ‘is’. In the case of Eldering, we are always working with other people. One of the more difficult aspects to achieving mastery is in letting go of our paradigmatic addiction to control as a necessary prerequisite to achieving what we say we want.

**Creating Possibility.** Eldering is about creating possibilities where none exist. ***Possibilities are, by definition, not ‘reality’***. If they were, they would be examples. Thus, the ability to co-create an unprecedented future requires that all parties involved acknowledge and accept the paradox of confronting an intractable condition in which there are no solutions, while simultaneously being committed to creating outcomes that are seemingly impossible within the context of conventional thinking.

**Communication.** Eldering, like all forms of leadership and coaching, occurs in conversations between human beings. Conversations encompass all aspects of communication—oral, written, symbolic and emotional. *Speaking and listening (in the larger sense of ‘languaging’) is the medium in which we exist as human beings.* It occurs for us as ‘water to a fish’, in the sense that it is so pervasive we don’t normally distinguish it. It is the stuff of conscious awareness. It is also the way we not only describe an objective world in language, but also how we create the world we describe.

**Completion.** Eldering is about co-creating a future that is “outside the box” of our contemporary paradigm. Creating anything involves a willingness to disconnect or let go of what is already present—to put the past in the past and create a space that is open to something new and original. Completion is not the same thing as ‘finished’. Most of us have experienced something being finished but not complete (for example, ending a relationship and continuing to feel and experience the memories and desires in the present). *Completion is a ‘state of being’ in which how one relates to the past allows one to have a memory without the memory dominating or having power over one’s actions or experience in the present.* Most elders have learned (or are learning) to appreciate the past while ‘letting it be’. This capability is essential if Eldering is to be an opening for new conversations for creating an unprecedented future.

**Humility.** Humility is the consequence of having a distinction between our ego-centered, largely automatic thinking and our Self—the observer of our thinking processes. *When we are being our Self, we are able to choose and commit in ways that are not possible when we are reacting to our thoughts and feelings.* Humility is not some form of pious modesty. A human being who is humble is clear who he or she is and is also capable of working with others in ways that are engaging and collaborative, rather than driven by forceful persuasion, manipulation or domineering practices.

**Responsibility.** In our contemporary cause-and-effect paradigm, responsibility is inextricably connected to either causality (who did it or will do it) or to blame/credit for what has already happened. If taken literally to mean “response-ability”, it is neither. It is a relationship with circumstances, not a cause of circumstances. *Responsibility is a way of being, an ownership of one’s world, an acceptance that at the end of the day we are, in fact, always responsible for how we choose to relate to whatever is happening, whatever has occurred or whatever might occur in the future.* The only question is whether we can declare this to be so for ourselves and allow this distinction to empower us to ‘respond’ in often unreasonable and unprecedented ways.

**Service.** Robert Greenleaf pointed out in his remarkable essay “Servant Leadership” that true leaders are always servants of those they lead. They not only embody humility and are a stand for an inclusive vision, they are also deeply caring and connected to other people. Service from the perspective of Eldering is not ‘helping’ (which is often not appreciated), but *it is always taking actions ‘for the sake of’ creating more space and possibility for others.* Most older persons will acknowledge that their deepest desire is to contribute whatever they can to others—to make a difference. For elders, service is a privilege and a basis of being valued and expressing their love of others.

**Surrender.** One of the most predominant blockages to intergenerational collaboration is the often well-grounded belief that older people “know the answers” and that younger people need to ‘learn’ what the older people know. Aside from the logical obviousness that at the current rate of change *no one knows what will be needed in the future*, this notion evokes a kind of arrogance on the part of older persons and a kind of natural resistance on the part of those who are younger. It is necessary to be willing to ‘give up’ the attachment we have to what we know and surrender—give ourselves fully—to the possibility that we can only find the answer in conversations with others. We must be committed to learning as much from the young as we have to give. One of the difficulties in our culture is that we think of surrender as ‘giving up’ or a state of weakness. Nothing could be further from the truth. Surrender is not the same as succumbing. It doesn’t mean ‘beaten’: *surrender is a choice wherein one voluntarily chooses to not resist and to accept life on life’s terms.* The key idea is to ‘give oneself to’ whatever is beyond one’s capacity for control and understanding—to acknowledge the fact that we are always vulnerable to whatever is outside of our own limited system of beliefs.

### What is Wisdom?

Most of us think of wisdom as being a kind of ‘right knowledge’, practical insights approximating ‘truth’ that are gained through longevity and experience. Formal definitions suggest that wisdom isn’t so much about knowledge as it is something like ‘good judgment’, being able to sort out the right and best choices from the many that are available to us at any moment.

“We don’t receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us.”

—Marcel Proust

In the context of Eldering, wisdom is closer to the latter definition with the added component of commitment. To be wise is to have something to say, a point of view, or an instruction or recommendation that we are committed to. We are less concerned with whether it can be justified or defended than with whether we can be responsible for the consequences. *Wisdom isn’t a function of age or tenure, but being fully engaged and having something at stake in the conversation.* In the final analysis, wisdom is an assessment that we make *after the fact* based on the results of a particular decision or strategy.

### What is Action?

Action is always relative to an observer. Whatever we are doing can vary, depending upon the context in which we are observing. For example, if I am mowing my lawn, one could say I am working in the garden, but one could also say I am getting exercise. Both interpretations would be equally valid.

From this view, *action happens in language*. Any meaningful movement or action in a conversation or systematic pattern is linguistic in nature. That is, without language we would not be able to distinguish one action from another. As we get older it becomes more and more obvious that everything we are doing involves conversations with ourselves or others. The mere fact that we may be physically more limited suggests that we learn to appreciate the linguistic nature of action—the power of requests, promises, and declarations. We are more and more conscious of the relative validity of our assessments and assertions and are often more focused on whether someone is ‘walking the talk’, rather than whether they have a good story for why they are doing whatever they do.

Eldering is about intergenerational collaboration. Collaboration is action that happens in conversations (and which is therefore not limited by physical capabilities) as a function of commitment and engagement in the process of creating the future.

### Eldering and the Future

Originally eldering was a term used to denote mid-life leadership. It became quickly apparent that the idea of leadership in mid-life was the old paradigm of experience and age presuming answers on behalf of others. The fact is that *older persons do not know the answers today*. Moreover, they live in a different disclosive space or interpretation of the world than most younger people. The paradigmatic ‘gap’ between people born in the 1920s and their children born in the 1940s or 1950s is small compared to the gap between Baby Boomers approaching retirement and Generations X, Y and later.

Today, age is one of the factors that divide us. Eldering is about having age be one of the things that we all have in common that can unite us. It can be a context for collaboration and coordination, rather than a factor that limits what’s possible. We are all familiar with the litany of problems that threaten us, and our way of life in the not too distant future. Eldering begins with older persons taking responsibility for the circumstances of our world and then engaging with others of all ages to create projects to challenge conventional wisdom and the prevailing paradigms that limit possibility and thwart our best intentions. Eldering projects have the dual purposes of simultaneously bringing forth new possibilities and unprecedented ways of addressing the problems, but also in transferring to the next generation not only the best of what we’ve learned, but the best of who we are.