

Ways of Honoring: Building a Legacy of Practice, Intention, and Inquiry in the Process of Growing Older

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There are two practices we believe could change the state of the world as we currently know it. They are “honoring” and “being an elder.” We think looking into these ideas offers ways to choose actions with respect to an impossible promise, communicate with others about it, fulfill on an impossible promise and ensure the continuation of that promise beyond individual lives.

In sections III and VI of this paper, we will provide sets of simple experiential questions related to “honoring” and “being an elder.” The questions can be used by anyone to look at “honoring” issues in life at the level of individual, group and the world. These sets of questions provide a path of inquiry and language for anyone to create remarkable integrity, enroll other people into an impossible promise, create measures for an impossible promise and fulfill on the legacy of this promise after they die.

Our intention is to plant the concepts of “honoring” and “being an elder,” to water these ideas and cause them to flourish worldwide. Obviously, neither concept is new. In many cultures, the idea of honoring elders has been a value for centuries or millennia. In some cultures, honoring elders is practiced, and this practice builds the capacity to honor in all areas of society. In many communities within the U.S., the idea of “honoring” comes from the Biblical commandment to “honor your father and your mother.” But how do we honor and learn to be elders?

Answers to this question will forward our own and others’ impossible promises. Beyond honoring our own elders, we are by definition growing older and may soon be elders ourselves. We will wish to be honored. We must be worthy of honoring, and we must become honoring mentors. Elders, as we mean the term, have remarkable integrity, the stature to speak on behalf of a culture and a grounded relationship to the world. They are committed to sharing and teaching and are focused on creating a vision and legacy for society. Beyond personal self-interest, becoming an elder provides a benefit for (the fulfillment of?) any impossible promise. As elders practice being elders and pass the practices on, honoring leads to honoring. Elders show others a path, and these two ways of being bear fruit beyond our own lives. Although in this paper we speak of elders as usually defined, i.e., related to age, we also include the idea of “elders” as a way of being regardless of age. (1)

I. THE CURRENT STATE OF THE WORLD WITH RESPECT TO AGING

The current world population (2002) is 6.23 billion people. By 2040, the predicted world population will be 9.2 billion. Average life expectancy is now

increasing as the fertility rate declines. This has resulted in an increase in the average age of people on the planet. By 2020, 1.1 billion people are expected to be over the age of 65. This will create a problem worldwide, not just in countries like Japan, where huge increases in older-age dependency ratios (the ratio of elderly people unable to work to people of productive working-age) have been highly publicized. In most countries, birth rates have already fallen below "replacement levels." That is, the number of births is smaller than the number of deaths, or will be within the next 10 years. This has already happened in Japan and will soon occur in Russia for different reasons. In Japan, there has been an increase in the number of older people vs. children. In Russia, deaths due to alcoholism and violence has increased since the dissolution of the USSR. (2)

In every country, women's life expectancies exceed men's. As the average age increases, a majority of the elderly will be women. Currently, most of these women live in poverty, are malnourished and are uninsured, even in countries where they have access to insurance programs. (3) These statistics do not reflect a world where older people are honored, are being well cared for or are being treated with dignity and respect.

II. HONORING AS AN IDEA AND AS A PRACTICE

What then do we mean by honoring? Our inquiry developed from the Jewish tradition ("Honor your father and your mother") and Greek rhetoric. It began with the question, "How do I honor a mother who has Alzheimer's Disease and bipolar disorder?" In the Jewish tradition, the rabbis noticed that the commandment did not require people to love their parents. Why? Because all children cannot be expected to love their parents. However, they can honor them. Honoring is also intended for difficult situations. It is extremely effective to extend the idea of honoring parents to honoring worldwide diversity and resulting situations.

We are engaged in this discussion about honoring because dishonoring exists. The everyday usage of the word honoring can be used to speak of a variety of phenomena where "honoring" is not actually present in the world. If you forget (or don't know) that you are part of the world and it is part of you, then you might blindly obey your elders and call it honoring them. You might consume more than your share of the world's resources and justify it as honoring yourself. We are not speaking here of the sort of "honor" that can result in punishment, revenge or ethnic cleansing, that is, "one's honor as a man" or "the family honor." To us, these are all signs that honoring is missing in these situations.

The true value of the idea of "honoring" is that it can be used to illuminate any situation and open a path for what Buddhists might call "right action." The practice of asking "how do I honor" any situation allows one to be peaceful in the presence of difficult issues, including issues that are confronted when pursuing an impossible promise. Our investigation is a lifelong endeavor. So far, we have seen the following:

1. As an adult, honoring doesn't mean to obey, do what you're told, guard and protect.
2. Honoring is an intention, an aim or design, not any specific action. In Judaism, the intention to honor is held as sacred. The Hebrew word for intention is "kavanah."
3. Honoring means accepting people and events as they are. After accepting a situation as it is, we can ask what action (or non-action) would constitute "honoring." If you are trying to change something, by definition you are not honoring it.
4. The spectrum of actions that could express honoring is endless: among them, to do nothing, to leave, to intervene. You will know for yourself the best action. You will experience peace. Until then, you are in an inquiry. The outer situation may not change.
5. If it doesn't honor you, it doesn't honor anyone. (4) Honoring doesn't mean sacrifice. On a plane, you put on your oxygen mask before helping your child with their mask.
6. Our definition of honoring is: "The highest and best action (or non action) given what you know about yourself, the other people involved and the situation, holding all of these within a sacred context."

III. HONORING AND LOGIC AS IDEAS AND IN PRACTICE

How does a person choose the highest and best action in a situation? Megan Brown, a logic course instructor at Portland (Oregon) Community College, suggests there are two kinds of honoring. For "ordinary honoring" (in simple, straightforward situations), you use basic common sense. (5) How do you honor a plant? You give it water with the sacred intention to honor it. Megan Brown calls the second type of honoring "God-inspired." Finding the appropriate action here is more complex and requires use of a different element of logic -- that of intuition. God-inspired honoring applies when the answer lies beyond common sense. How do you honor a mother diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and bipolar disorder who wishes to live alone and be responsible for her medications? To resolve this, her children need "direct or immediate insights" where "the mind apprehends without the intervention of reasoning." (6)

How do you begin to practice honoring? You use logic. There are two types. In deductive logic, you begin with a thought or a premise, locating evidence to prove it. For inductive logic, you start with a set of experiences, make an intuitive leap and come to a conclusion. The Greek teachers of rhetoric proposed that

logic involves three questions: what do you “know” about yourself, what do you “know” about the other people involved (your audience) and what relevant information do you “know” about the situation you are in? The reward of logic used in this way is peace. (7)

We suggest three questions as an initial honoring practice. Hold a person or situation in a sacred context and ask:

1. Am I honoring (people, places, etc.) in this situation?
2. What am I honoring (or not honoring)?
3. What do I know about myself, the others involved and the information required here?

If you are not at peace, explore what you don't know about yourself, others and the required information.

We have found these questions useful at all levels (individual, family, group, city/town, society, culture and world) and for any topic (children, finances, marriage, picnics, death, war and famine, the Holocaust, statistics, etc.) They apply to the conflicts in India/Pakistan, in Israel/Palestine, to AIDS in Africa and to your own community. In each type of honoring (ordinary or God-inspired), you can explore the three questions of honoring. The reward of this practice can be (immediately or eventually) an experience of peace for you in relationship to life's events, such as illness, divorce or the death of someone close to you. You will see what you can do, what honors the situation, the other people involved and yourself. You can explore use of these questions with people and groups on all sides of a conflict.

Integrity is inherent in the practices of honoring. Ask the three honoring questions to determine where and with whom integrity needs to be cleaned up. While you are asking, remember to include yourself. You will bring your integrity to a new level when you use the questions to develop a context for your actions, your relationships and your impossible promise. For example, you can look at what you are honoring (or not honoring) in the areas of well being and finances. The reward of honoring and logic is peace. Honoring in these areas can decrease stress and point to aspects of health to be honored. How do you honor yourself, others and the planet in the area of economics: earning money, spending money, investing money and using resources? What are your attachments -- the possessions or connections beyond basic necessities without which you think you cannot survive? Your concern may be an addiction, an attachment to a specific outcome or another issue. Using the honoring questions can make a difference.

The honoring questions as stated above are also relevant and useful on whatever level you choose to view the state of the world – as individual, couple, family, group, organization, city, state, country or globe. With respect to a

situation that concerns you, ask these questions as a way to define it on any level.

We believe that honoring is expressed in some form in all cultures, although the actions taken to honor an elder will not be the same. People are different. To respect that difference is part of the honoring process. In addition, the word and the concept “honoring” may not be understood across boundaries of language and culture. As English speakers, we may identify behaviors in other cultures with what we call honoring; however, the phrases “honoring” and “being an elder” may not be clearly understood in translation. A word or phrase introduced to another language is often given a new meaning, lengthened, shortened and/or used as a different part of speech. Honoring such linguistic challenges is crucial for any impossible promise. (8) Cross-cultural understanding is required if “honoring” is to live in the world as a practice.

IV. BEING/BECOMING AN ELDER AS AN IDEA AND IN PRACTICE

Associated with honoring is the concept of “being an elder.” Generally older people are referred to as the elders to be honored. It is through them that we learn to honor others. Wise elders are wise in part because they are good at honoring. By learning to honor elders and applying the lessons of honoring to the world at large, life can begin to occur as peaceful. We see four ways of distinguishing the term “elders:”

1. Elders are people who are old chronologically and who are older than we are. This is the usual meaning of the word “elder” in the U.S.
2. Elders are people who are older and wiser.
3. Elders are people who have a designated role and have standing in a community, perhaps because they are older, but usually because they are older and wiser. In some cultures, the specific role of an elder is inherited.
4. Elders are people who see more than one side of a conflict, irrespective of age. This terminology comes from the writing of Arnold Mindell, who has worked to resolve conflicts in South Africa, the U.S. (race relations), and Israel/Palestine, among others. To rephrase Mindell’s definition, elders “honor” all sides of a conflict. This way of defining “elder” links the word to a role (a perspective or a behavior), which may be temporary, rather than linked to a fixed age. A person functions as an elder when they see more than one perspective. Even a child can function this way. (9)

These are starting points for exploring being an elder. The ideas presented here will evolve. For the purpose of this paper, we think that the second definition, “elders as older and wiser,” merits attention.

What are the characteristics of elders who are older and wiser?

1. They have experienced life deeply, sharing truths from their life experience. (10) That is, they have cleaned up integrity issues, creating remarkable integrity. In addition to age, experience, and vision for the future this integrity is a source of their stature.
2. As a result of life experience, an elder knows how to “lose” (is experienced with loss) and is willing to lose while waiting to make a difference. (11) That is, an elder is practiced in dealing with attachments, can live unattached to outcome, has a sense of humor and has learned to laugh at herself/himself. Elders are good at honoring others, at choosing right action and at waiting for right timing. They have lived with failure and benefited from the experience. They can speak across cultural boundaries and express what is central to human life. They are models for us.
3. Elders are interested legacies for the future. An elder, even a young one, may cause trouble, out of a sense of commitment. (12) An elder trains others, is interested in new possibilities and is a great partner in creating opportunities for an impossible promise.

With the growth in the number of older people in the US and worldwide, what if the “baby-boomers” (76 million in the U.S.) became “wise elders” as they aged? Baby boomers, who grew up as idealists in the 1960’s and now wonder where their generation went off track, could see “old age” as a time for great contribution. These “elder-boomers” could take on practices of honoring and sharing themselves with others. This generation of elders could transmit the ideas of honoring, of being an elder, creating partnership in the present and contribution beyond their individual lives.

V. HONORING AND MEASUREMENT

We have discussed the state of the world in 2002 with respect to elders (people who are older.) What about the state of the world with respect to honoring in general? You could say that honoring is missing in the world, and that the things people ordinarily think of as “wrong with the world” are areas where honoring is not present. We would say that honoring is not present in the world where we find war, rape, difficult gender relationships, refugees, children as soldiers, child prostitution, hunger, pollution, decline in species and global warming. The People-Centered Development Forum reported that: “During roughly the same forty-year period in which economic output expanded by five times, the population of the world doubled. The number of people living in absolute poverty doubled. The gap between rich and poor doubled. Ecological devastation reached such proportions that it placed the future viability of the human species in doubt. And indicators of a disintegrating social fabric, from crime and drug use to divorce, teenage suicide and economic refugees, increased at alarming rates in nearly every country of the world.” (13) However, the World Game Institute, among others, has come up with actual cost/benefit analyses showing that, if

people work in concert, conditions that people around the world agree are desirable can be attained in our lifetime. (14)

In addition, we think that honoring underlies and supports every promise for the world. When you look at any element of the state of the world, ask yourself whether honoring is present. It could be an issue of hunger, poverty, peace, health care or clean air. In each of these areas, an improvement means that a condition is now being honored which was perhaps previously being dishonored, or ignored. In each of the authors' impossible promises we see that honoring is a necessary part of the fulfillment. In Judith Aftergut's promise ("By 2025, all people honoring themselves, each other, the planet and the mystery of the universe") and in Chris Jones's promise ("A world where elders are the source of honoring, and growth and development are present, cradle to grave"), honoring is a specific focus. In Ruth B. Shields' promise ("By 2020, a world of grace, joy, forgiveness, and self-expression, in which all of us experience and express ourselves as ambassadors for humanity"), honoring is implied. Ambassadors for humanity would be honoring others. If "by 2022, all people are consciously choosing their lives" (Deb Baker's promise), each would accept their life as it is, i.e., honor their own life choices, choose actions and perspectives that honor themselves and others, rather than blaming other people or circumstances.

Consider an impossible promise that focuses on ensuring the availability of clean water for everyone on the planet. (15) Fulfillment would require that people honor other people's need for water, evaluate how water is used and understand the need to share resources. We think you will see that honoring is an element inherent in this promise, as a core and central idea. Every person who takes on an impossible promise is working on major world issues. Underlying each impossible promise is the idea of honoring.

If people were honoring themselves, each other and the planet by the year 2020, what would we observe? We might see:

1. A significant decrease in armed conflicts, because people would be listening to and honoring each other, resolving conflicts rather than suppressing them. (In 2002, fifty-five armed conflicts were occurring or had recently ended.) (16) In 2025, Israel and Palestine would be experiencing peace, reconciliation and healing. The Doomsday Clock (measuring levels of conflict) would be at 1:00 AM, not midnight. Millions of acres would be free of landmines.
2. A reversal of trends in: global warming; species decline; pollution of water, air and oceans.
3. Dialogue about "honoring" and "being an elder" locally and worldwide across lines of culture and language. The presence of this dialogue could be measured by the number of times the idea of honoring was

included in international peace agreements, spoken in Congress or in a parliament and considered at the UN. Elders would be acknowledged as the source of honoring in the world. The wisdom of elders would be seen as a collective resource for solving planetary problems. This parameter of honoring could be measured by correlating the increase in wealth (decrease in poverty level) with the level of respect as reported by elders.

4. Every child in the world would be welcomed at birth into a loving home. Initially, this can be measured by tracking child abuse and domestic violence statistics.

These are only a few of the many possible ways to measure “honoring” and “being an elder.” We think all impossible promises include, by their very nature, measures for the presence of honoring. As the measures of impossible promises are met, they will reflect the presence of honoring.

A story from Ecuador told by Lynne Twist provides one example of how the concepts of “honoring” and of “being an elder” converge. “Logging and oil exploration threatened the Achuar people’s rainforest land, so they faced their situation and, for the first time, asked for help across the divide of culture. They stood in a place of integrity and requested a remarkable integrity from us. Asked what would save their land and culture, they replied that [their] sparse contact with the outside world had shown them that saving their homeland would require ‘changing the dream of the North.’ (17)

“The Achuar spoke on behalf of dreams for the future, both theirs and ours. They called forth the best in all people, for the highest good. They ask us to look at our well being, stature, infrastructure and attachments on a global rather than a regional level, to consider more than simply our own economies and comfort. Asked how people in ‘the North’ (North America) could ‘alter their dream?’ The people of the Amazon rainforest responded, ‘You can teach your children in one generation. We will help.’ (18) Altering our dream would save them.”

Each impossible promise requires reviewing our lives: what we are honoring, or not? How might a shift in our level of integrity, beginning on a personal level, alter the state of the world, creating a legacy to benefit us, other people and the planet?

VI. WAYS TO BEGIN

Whether the year is 2002 or 2020, we invite you to take on the intention to honor -- to look in your daily life and experience peace, which is the reward of honoring. We invite you to review the capacities of an elder and to acknowledge the gifts you’ve been given. You may already be on the path to honoring and to being an elder. Ask yourself:

1. Who are the elders in my life (how ever I wish to define the word “elder”)? How am I honoring them, or not. Honoring your own (family) elders is a first step. Looking at the lineage you come from (your own elders) may help to dispel the notion that any struggle in your life is one of yourself and with yourself.
2. Do I consider myself an elder? This idea may be confronting! An elder is anyone who has lived their experience deeply, has learned from it and has wisdom to share with others. (19)
3. What do I honor (and how) in my close relationships – with my spouse or partner, my children, family, friends, acquaintances and colleagues?
4. In relationship to work and finances, what do I honor? What does my workplace or company honor through what it builds, offers, manufactures, creates or provides? What is honored (or not) through the financial practices and ways of using resources in my society? What am I honoring by the way I am spending, saving, earning, investing and contributing money? (You are always honoring something.)
5. What does my country honor (or not) when involved in world situations?
6. What am I honoring with my impossible promise? Who are the elders in my life? Which elders might I consult? With respect to my promise, where in the world is honoring present or missing? How can the ideas of honoring and being an elder forward the fulfillment of my impossible promise and/or the promise of others?

The language of honoring creates a context for a conversation of fulfilling your own impossible promise, now and beyond your lifetime. It can be used to enroll people into new possibilities of being and into opportunities that exist inside of these possibilities. Here are some suggestions for using the language of honoring to communicate to others the concepts we have discussed:

1. You could say, “Here’s how I haven’t been honoring myself, you and our relationship.”
2. You could use this language in your family, your organization and your community. Ask: “What have we been honoring/not honoring? What might we choose to honor? How can we honor the most difficult situations we face?”
3. You could use this language to share your impossible promise. You can say to others, “I/we haven’t been honoring the need for (fill in the blank) in the world, and I am interested in honoring that need. What do you see about this? What opportunities might we create? What could we measure?”

4. You could ask the “three honoring questions” (Section III) whenever you confront an issue or challenge with respect to your promise and to other areas of life.

We have two more suggested actions:

1. To further the dialogue of honoring and being an elder, we request that you share what you have seen from reading this paper with at least two people within 48 hours.
2. We invite you to continue this dialogue and to participate in the dialogue’s evolution on a website created for this purpose: www.elderboomer.org.

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