

WHAT ARE WE WILLING TO LEARN? WHAT DO WE WANT TO TEACH? FIVE PEOPLE HONORING THEIR PROMISES FOR THE WORLD

Judith Aftergut, Deborah London Baker, Christopher C. Jones, Sharon Jones, and Ruth B. Shields

ABSTRACT

Combining individual expressions of an impossible promise into a community with a common theme produced results beyond what is seen as possible as individuals. Embracing the random and measuring both what appears and what is missing has produced lives of miracles. Being in an inquiry takes everything into account.

THE NATURAL WORLD MODELS FOR SPREADING OUR IMPOSSIBLE PROMISES

This report from the field covers the evolution of five impossible promises over the past two years. Those promises are: (1) by 2012, all people honoring themselves, each other, the planet and the mystery of universe (Judith); (2) by 2020, every person honored and present to life's miracles (Chris); (3) by 2020, a world where death is celebrated, life honored, and communities inspired by the lives that pass through (Sharon); (4) by 2020, all of us are participating fully in all of life for all our lives (Ruth); and (5) by 2022, all people consciously choosing their lives; all people being honored (Deb).

The links among our promises and our lives have been obvious to us since we came together to write and publish a paper (Aftergut, et al., 2002a) and present a workshop at an international conference (Aftergut, et al., 2002b). Our promises are linked through our commitment to honoring as a distinction, as language, and as the intention to create powerful behaviors and 'right action' in the world. Honoring as an intention has its expression in many behaviors: celebration, appreciation, and -- in difficult situations -- accepting (without condoning) that people and situations or things 'are as they are' in the present while intending that they be different in the future (Chopra, 1994). Honoring can also be expressed as behaviors in many different arenas -- in honoring between generations, in how we treat elders, and in conflict resolution, to name just a few. From the beginning, we have offered two questions as an access to the territory of honoring in any situation: "What am I willing to learn?" and "What do I want to teach?"

A number of models exist for working to fulfill impossible promises in the world. As our promises co-evolve, we are discovering a model for working together that works by analogy to the natural world. We find that this connection to nature creates a sense of peacefulness with our commitments and allows us to compare the growth, depth, and breadth of our promises and our individual and collective lives to new discoveries about organic communities.

As an organic community example, take the fungi. Some of them "extend for many square miles under the hardwood forests of North America, Europe, and Japan." "A single *Armillaria bulbosa* fungus covers 38 acres in Michigan, weighs the same amount as an adult blue whale (100 tons), and ... is believed to be between 1,500 and 10,000 years old." This fungus -- nicknamed the 'humongous fungus' by locals -- "exists mostly underground except

for tiny offshoots that poke through the surface of the earth in the fall, edibles commonly known as button or honey mushrooms" (City of Crystal Falls, MI website).

Oregon's Blue Mountains are the home for another fungus, an *Armillaria ostoyae*. This single organism is 2000-8500 years old, with a total area of 9.65 square kilometers or 1600 football fields. According to Dr. Catherine Parks, one of the team that discovered it, this fungus "spreads mainly along tree roots, but also through the soil using shoestring-like structures called rhizomorphs. ... These findings are already giving us new insights into how forests work, and causing us to rethink fundamental ideas, like what is an individual and what is a species" (CISTI, 2003).

In addition, in 2002, a group of scientists found a supercolony of billions of ants inhabiting thousands of miles of the Mediterranean coast and thought to be the world's largest cooperative unit on the earth. Having arrived in Europe, probably by ship, from their native Argentina, these ants interact cooperatively with each other rather than fighting despite their having different queens and belonging to separate nests (Giraud, et al., 2002).

Inspired by these biological precedents, we ask: "What if a set of related impossible promises (and the distinction and practices of 'honoring') could spread through the world like fungi? What if we could create a giant network of cooperation akin to a supercolony of ants? What if we could create a 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000) after which our set of promises and the ideas and practices of honoring would spread, in and of themselves, naturally, as a matter of course?"

We want honoring as an intention -- as the highest and best way of living life and as an expression of the sacred -- to spread and take on a life of its own. We want it to cross the species barrier, like Mad Cow disease, or SARS. We want honoring as terminology and behavior to grow quickly and quietly, perhaps fooling everyone into thinking it has gone completely dormant, only to suddenly sprout everywhere like wildflowers or patches of mushrooms. We want the behaviors of honoring to be taken up by billions, like ants in a sudden rush of cooperation. In the end, we want an epidemic. We offer this report from the field and the underground with this goal in mind.

Valuing randomness

A distinction or concept like honoring can be difficult to measure. We are exploring the fungus comparison. The essence of honoring - the links in behavior among people - may occur 'underground', spreading like rhizomorphs. Results will show up above ground, here and there, like the fruiting bodies of the honey mushrooms. We will measure the presence of the 'fruit' above ground as signs of our promises at work.

As a result, we may miss some specific elements in the underground landscape of honoring. Creating a world of honoring -- or of any impossible promise -- will require not only transformation, but also serendipity, synchronicity, accidents, miracles, randomness, total chance, flukes, and sheer luck. We therefore value randomness. We are willing to take the risk at first of missing some of what is invisibly occurring and therefore of not being able initially to measure it.

In addition, while we acknowledge the importance of measurement and planning, we also know that along with plans, promises, milestones, and scheduled actions, our success in

the end may depend upon who we are being, what we are intending, and what we are out to cause. It may also depend upon whom and what we are willing to welcome as a guest into our house. The Sufi poet Rumi wrote that "This being human is a guest house," encouraging each of us to honor whatever shows up at the door -- "a joy, a depression, a meanness" by "welcoming it as a gift from beyond." Our method embraces whatever comes and going wherever we go, even if it seems random and by accident. We align ourselves with those scientists and inventors who honor their intuitive hunches, finding surprising answers in both their mistakes and their dreams.

Honoring as inherent

Following the comparison with fungi, we are interested in having 'honoring' behaviors and our promises for the world connect 'separate' individuals. We like the idea that 'honoring' may already inhere 'underground' in people and in cultures and remains to be called forth as a means of empowerment. We assert that honoring or whatever it is called in a particular society – be it honoring elders, land, etc. -- exists as a value in most, if not all, human cultures.

If we look at the evolution of human rights, self-determination, tolerance, open debate, and celebration of diversity, we see where threads of honoring behaviors have been weaving and re-weaving their way through history -- growing, persisting, and unexpectedly reappearing in the most unlikely places. *Isms* that have been used to oppress or discriminate against people become new areas to address as honoring language emerges to include them: racism, sexism, homophobia, religious persecution transformed into new conversations expanding our idea of who and how we can honor people. Each of these are examples that involve applying honoring behaviors to a greater and greater number of people, thus bringing valuing and self-valuing to more and more human beings.

We do not assert that people honoring each other will result in a perfect world. We believe, however, that the presence of honoring one another and the planet may be crucial for our continued existence as human beings. We think that honoring is an essential part of being human and of human relationships, just as "the fungus is an integral part of the ecosystem, feeding on decayed wood and producing carbon dioxide essential for the process through which plants generate life-giving oxygen" (City of Crystal Falls, MI website).

FIELDS ARE FOR PLAYING (IN)

What is a report from the field? We answer this with several questions. First, what do we mean by 'field'? Despite our inquiry comparing the spread of impossible promises with how fungi masses expand, we are not using 'field' in relation to 'ground'. Do we mean 'field' as in physics – a magnetic or psychological 'field' we 'exist' in, non-local, a 'place' we can access from anywhere? In part. Do we mean a 'field' as something the five of us are 'inside of'? Is a 'field' something we are affected by, something we create, or something we already 'are'? 'Field work' is a relevant concept, in that it includes on-site scientific observations, data collection, and analysis. The dictionary gives a number of definitions: "a sphere or branch of activity of interest," "to engage in a broad range of activities," "the total complex of factors in which a psychological event occurs or is perceived as occurring." All of these, and even the phrase 'playing the field' as in "dating a large number of persons during the same period of time" (Random House, 1997), have something to offer us as we

apply the fungus approach to growing our promises. We have indeed gone all over the place, played the field, and playing in the field. This way of linking our promises for the world is a source of joy to us.

The birth in team

We wish to report first on the 'field' that the five of us participate in together as a team and the field's newfound value. This connection among us – the kinds of conversations we have, the 'space' created, the straight talk about when we are honoring ourselves and each other (and when we are not) -- is crucial to our promises' fulfillment. The five of us initially joined together through mutual connection with the concept of 'honoring': honoring in families, honoring in communities, honoring within and between generations. We saw an initial opportunity to model, empower and spread the behaviors of honoring around the world through a networked system involving the post-World War II 'baby boomers,' who in the United States alone number around 76 million. We asked, "What if baby boomers as they grow older also grew more conscious in the aging process, becoming wise elders, modeling how people could honor each other, and providing that distinction for people of all ages?" As they became conscious elders, we thought the baby boomers would be likely to consider what kind of world they wished to leave when they die, and what difference they could make while alive. So the idea of 'Elderboomers' was born.

We created a website (www.elderboomer.org), we designed and marketed Elderboomer shirts individually numbered from one to 76 million, and we applied to trademark Elderboomer™ workshops. In our first workshop at the 2nd Conference for Global Transformation (CGT2), we asked: For any given generation, whether its members are older or younger than you are, "What are you willing to learn? What do you want to teach?" These two questions evoke the 'field' of honoring and its behaviors. (We recommend them to you.)

Not all who wander are lost

After that conference, we struggled with our commitments to each other. We forgot about learning and teaching. For months we wandered and thought we were lost. We each thought we weren't accomplishing much with our promises and that neither was anyone else in the group! We became impatient. We got 'polite'. We forgot about honoring, although we used the term. Finally, in the fall of 2003, we asked a facilitator to meet with us for two of our by-then-irregular 'weekly' teleconferences. We talked straight. We fell in love with each other again and with our work together. We looked at how we had grown in the two years we had known each other. The quality of our conversations transformed as a result. We honored one another again.

We built the 'new' conversations we were having by developing our individual and collective integrity. Judith, who was having challenges with the application for the trademark for Elderboomer workshops, was motivated by our group conversation and became unstoppable. She declared that a 'miracle' would occur, then conversed with the trademark attorney in Washington, D.C., listening to his perspective and telling him that "we are simply working to do some good work in the world." After three conversations, the attorney recommended approval of the application. The man with whose company Judith had filed

the trademark application on-line said he had never heard of such an occurrence and was impressed. Integrity was maintained for everyone. An unpredictable result had occurred.

Ruth, too, went to work on 'honoring her word', interviewing each of us about whether we saw improvement. We noticed that she was communicating with us, saying yes and no more clearly, letting us know what she would do and then doing it. A second 'miracle' occurred: once Ruth had transformed her relationship to her word, she was able to say and did say to us that she is "here for us for life." Without having built the integrity of her word, Ruth's promising to be here for us -- or for anyone -- for the length of her life would have made no sense. She couldn't have said it, and if she had said it, we wouldn't have believed her.

As Ruth built the power of her word, the "for all our lives" element of her impossible promise revealed itself. Judith was 'confronted' by Ruth's declaration. She discovered she didn't believe anyone would be there for her 'for life.' She scheduled and transformed this belief within 24 hours. (We know her as a master of scheduling transformation.) Out of this, Judith recognized that Sharon, Chris, and Deb are also "there for her" for life – that all of us already were "there for her" in this way. Out of this, too, Deb began making 'lifelong' declarations to her family members.

It is great (and crucial) to have a community like that – a community that calls forth this level of integrity and of transforming issues from perceived defects into power and action. Connected in this way, we empowered each other. We learned to honor ourselves, to honor each other, and to honor our word. We felt the desire to share what we were learning. We began to inspire each other again, once we had 'cleaned things up.' No longer separate 'spores' in the forest, this team, with our powerful listening for each other, could now spread through the 'forest' like rhizomorphs. We went to work on our website, a logo, and a questionnaire for baby boomers to participate in that would have them begin engaging with who and how they can honor people. We scheduled Elderboomer™ workshops. We started a business plan. We wrote this paper, each person contributing what they did best, inspired both sequentially and in parallel.

REPORTS TAKE EVERYTHING INTO ACCOUNT

In the previous section, we looked at the question 'what is a field?' and at playing with and in the field together. Fine, you may say. You are five individuals working together, having great conversations. You restored integrity. You spent two years building the knowledge that you could count on each other. What impact if any have you had on the world?

We begin to answer this question by asking another: "With regard to 'reports from the field', what is a 'report'?" A 'report' can be verbal, journalistic, academic or scientific reporting, or action research. In our 'report from the field', we are gleaning material from our own and others' verbal reporting (interviews, emails), others' journalistic reporting (articles about people's 'honoring' projects), and others' academic or scientific reporting (subject areas and geographic areas where more honoring is required, even if it's not languaged in terms of 'honoring').

How to measure the presence or degree of honoring in the world is an important question for a report from the field, and it is an important question for us. Some people have told us that 'honoring' cannot be measured. We disagree. We think it can be done. We are creating a "map" of the territory of 'honoring' -- a map for how to measure honoring in terms of results and also in terms of the effects of its presence. For example, we can begin to implement measures by:

- Counting how often the word 'honor' or 'honoring' is used.
- Keeping a running log of people (1) with whom we share honoring terminology, (2) who point us to examples of honoring in the world, (3) whose own work exemplifies honoring, and (4) who report back to us the effects our work has had in their lives.
- Selecting and defining the constituent elements or behaviors that together constitute honoring.
- Using these criteria to document the presence of honoring as a distinction and determine where those behaviors are present or missing in the world.
- Monitoring the spread of honoring as a set of behaviors.

Honoring in the world, separately and together

In addition to suggesting methods for tracking the spread of honoring in the world, we offer examples of accomplishments. These are results we have each produced separately or with others in our lives, results produced by our group, and initiatives with which we had nothing to do but that we are nonetheless thrilled about.

In the area of 'separate' accomplishments, each of us has seen more of his or her role in the world. Each can say, 'This is my job, this is my terrain, I am accountable for this area.' For example, Deb has been focusing upon how people are being honored and who they are consciously choosing their lives through her consulting business, in her many speaking engagements, through inquiry with the Eden Alternative, as well as in setting up radio and TV appearances for herself and for our group. She says, "My marriage is different as a result of the idea of honoring." With us, she has taken on the leadership of the Elderboomer Project.

Chris has been focusing upon honoring in his family, in the adult day-care of which he is board president, by making radio appearances, teaching, writing, chairing meetings to discuss legislation on behalf of older people in California, and supporting the Mastery Foundation, committed to serving those who serve. Chris has become our ambassador, exemplifying honoring in action and taking the ideas of honoring into the world.

Sharon has been providing the breadth of her life experience to the mostly younger fellow students in her college program, empowering the Wisdom Course Area of Landmark Education Corporation, and focusing on community through her work with the Mastery Foundation. She is the source person for our endeavors.

Judith has been exploring the distinction and practices of honoring. She is writing, speaking, and developing workshops about honoring for presentation in government,

organizations, and corporations. She is a founding member of the Global Abundance Alliance, supporting the fulfillment of the UN Millennium Development Goals as basic measures of honoring. She explores practices of honoring on a daily basis and finds ways to spread the distinction worldwide.

Ruth has been focusing on the generations of her family and has reconnected with people from the 'originating circles' of all the years of her life. She is continuing to expand our original workshop and the ideas about intergenerational honoring, exploring them within her extended family, in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities, in her project manager role with the Israel-Palestine Peace Project, and in her work as a co-founder of the Global Family Project. She continues to develop variations of our workshop and create new ones for use with any group or community. Trained in theoretical linguistics, she is developing applications of natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) and other language learning and descriptive linguistics tools to create ways for people to re-state their mission statements, impossible promises, or project outcomes in vocabulary that can be translated easily into other languages, and be understood by children and non-native speakers.

Together, the five of us have created the Elderboomer Project, with the commitment to generate workshops, seminars, books, and a tipping point conversation, creating honoring among and between all generations, and we are working with others to create The Honoring Institute.

Connecting the nodes: other people's impossible promises

Once the five of us dealt with the issues between us, we looked again at our collective promises. We noticed that we were already part of an expanding network of promises that we hadn't really seen before. To use our 'fungus' metaphor, we saw that an 'honoring network' already exists, and we had been blind to it. We know of 18 impossible promises that include 'honoring' or 'being honored' in them. Each of these 'honoring' promises forwards the others. The network extends, visibly and invisibly. What if -- for these and other impossible promises -- the network already exists, and all we need to do is to become present to it -- to link up with it or evoke it? A single person cannot fulfill a promise for the world.

We offer a few examples of our network's 'nodes.' Each has initiatives, strategies, and projects:

J. Kim Wright, JD, promises a world at peace by 2012, where all people realize their inter-connectedness and honor conflict as an opportunity for transformation. Kim works with individuals and couples to resolve issues, particularly around divorce. She writes, trains, and speaks about ways to honor conflict and transform it.

Sandy Glickfeld, whose promise includes the phrase "that love is expressed like breathing," is considering combining her love of musical theatre with her many years of work with children in public schools. Her new performance venture offers humorous insights to empower parents and children in how to relate to each other more effectively.

Debbie Ellison, a writer and a poet, says, "Honoring is the access to peace. I promise a world where honoring is truly present, a universe that values and honors every living being.

Writing is my path to creating a powerful new language of honoring, because it will take nothing less."

This year Jo Ann and Jennifer Rotermund launched the World Forgiveness Initiative, with its mission that "people, societies, and organizations are honored, experiencing unprecedented global respect, peace and abundance, sourced by a world that lives forgiveness."

Where honoring is missing in the world

When asked if they think honoring is missing in the world, people invariably say yes. Evidence people give for its absence include the existence in the world of war, domestic violence, incivility in politics, territorial conflict, and the stockpiling of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons. A recent major study states that "global warming could force one-fourth of the globe's plant and animal species to the brink of extinction" (UN Wire, a.), an example of not honoring the planet. The website www.unwire.org reports that "the global economy is consuming the world's natural resources faster than they can be renewed" and that "food security and water consumption are the two most vulnerable areas" (UN Wire, b.). We are surrounded on a daily basis by examples in the world where honoring is missing.

Where honoring is evident

As a group, we see the value of also focusing on places where honoring exists. We find much that is worthy of notice. For example where people fall into patterns of addiction or domination (abuse of various types), programs have been designed to intervene in those behaviors and to promote alternative behaviors. An increasing number of non-profit and service organizations exist to provide what others require. Their existence is a reflection of people's desire to honor others and the environment. Movements toward fair and equitable trade and toward peace and reconciliation also promote and spread behaviors of honoring in the world.

Likewise, non-discrimination policies are examples of declarations of honoring, and the work of groups and organizations dedicated to collecting data on hate crimes, violence, and discrimination and to eliminating them is evidence of a goal consistent with our own. These include equal opportunity programs and affirmative action programs (however flawed) and other national and international programs intended to provide monetary and non-monetary forms of redress (Brooks, 1999). Such projects and discourses reflect the degree to which honoring and honoring practices and behaviors already exist in the world and/or have been legislated into existence as conversations to aspire to. We also wish to point to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, promised by 2015. Each of these eight goals (in areas of poverty, gender equality, health, etc.) is an example of a place where the 191 member states of the UN have agreed to increasing the level of 'honoring' around the globe, whether they use the term 'honoring' or not.

A NATURAL CONCLUSION

There is an urban legend (Bain, et al., 2004) about university administrators who, frustrated by students who didn't walk on the paths, hired an architect to solve the problem. The architect requested that snow not be shoveled that winter and that paths in the snow be marked. When spring came, the administration put the paths where the students had walked.

Our model developed in similar way, by trusting the path we were on. As a group, we are still learning how to work together, both through planning (a 5-way, somewhat complex process) and through the power of our intention, by noticing things which occur that could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be planned. Like fungi, we make use of a dual strategy, using both spores (individual initiatives colonizing new areas) and rhizomorph networks linked up underground. We like this combined methodology. We appreciate the planning function of our minds, and we honor that which cannot be planned.

As for what will occur with these promises beyond our lifetimes, we take courage from the world of the fungi. Mushrooms sprout up, send out their spores, and die, while rhizomorphs expand underground. In the same way, our promises of 'honoring' will sprout, send out spores, and re-emerge with footholds in new places. And who knows? Perhaps we will learn one day that we are not 'individual' humans but that we are collectively the 'fruiting body' of some great invisible being.

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