

## Exploring Elderhood: Creating the map

The idea of elderhood may sound good, but where do we find the role models, the route to this destination? These days, we need to create our own map. The place of elders in tribal society offers some useful ideas: but our own times are so different that we can't start from here. People just aren't waiting around to receive the wisdom of the elders any more.

If we think about the maiden-mother-crone model of three ages of womanhood, it shows us a big part of the problem, for men and women: getting old is not seen as desirable or fruitful. The media assail us with the cult of youth. So how do we start the map-making? One relevant feature of tribal elders is the way peer groups would evolve a wise response to new challenges. I have helped create such gatherings for maturing men and women, and they can start the process of finding yourself as an elder. Discovering your identity through a group, not individually, may be novel in our society, but it's relevant in elderhood.

Carl Jung said that in early adulthood, we choose to fulfil a few parts of ourselves, and if in midlife we don't open the door to the other parts, they'll break in through the window. So there's an inner collective involved in elderhood as well as an outer: your inner voices not only need to be heard, but also gathered and guided in a positive direction.

I believe adolescence is a useful model for entering elderhood: both are major transitions where the past can't really guide the future. And in both, some people step into the new stage smoothly, as if born to it, and others struggle. I haven't found elderhood easy: partly because I was still hooked on being a warrior, a role that suited my readiness for heroic struggle.

So you may find that your threshold into elderhood is a loss or a shipwreck. Some women experience menopause as a loss that needs grieving. Or it may be a more general sense that you are losing a level of health and energy as you age. Episodes of loss like this are good to face, and can move you through to gratitude for all the capacities you still have.

Recalling Jung's comments, elderhood is a time to find new aspects of yourself, and new skills which can replace what's lost. For me, one of the painful changes is having less control in my life, less power to make things happen: but the gift in this is learning to influence situations by the qualities I embody, and the reflections and support I offer others, which I believe is the way of elderhood. The good thing about the lack of role models for elderhood is that you're free to figure out how *you* want to do it. Just beware of being limited by the attitudes of society, family or friends.

It's a fair generalisation that most adults in their 20s through 40s narrow their focus: marriage, kids, work, home take most of their attention, although we now see more individuals taking a different path. One of the gifts of the years beyond 50 is the chance to raise your head and look around more widely. This can include deeper links with your local community, new friends, exploring a spiritual path, and finding ways to meet the big issues of our times. One of the vital roles of elders is providing a role model and wake-up call on issues where society is in denial, and this is urgently needed for humanity's addictive consumption patterns and loss of connection with the earth.

Another navigation point which I suggest in mapping your elderhood is how you can serve the tribe. As you look at the troubles and beauty of today's world, are there issues that arouse you or inspire you? If so, be persistent in finding ways to act on your passion and invite other elders to act with you. Our world may not be calling for the help of the elders, but it certainly needs it.

*Alan Heeks and Ineke Vollebregt are leading a week-long programme at the Findhorn Foundation on the theme of Exploring Elderhood, 23 February – 1 March, 2013. For further information and bookings see [www.findhorn.org/programmes/512/](http://www.findhorn.org/programmes/512/).*