

## The Lost Elders: Who are we? Where's our voice?

At 21 million, if we're not a major blessing, we'll be a major problem

Over-fifties are one third of the whole UK population, but this huge group has no collective name, voice, or sense of purpose. Many of these over-fifties are relatively well-off for time, money, and health, and yet there are major worries on how their pensions and care needs will be funded.

I'm now 64: I've found the years since 50 both happy and bewildering. It's a time when you need to reinvent yourself, the old maps are no use. Since 2010, I've been exploring elderhood, a concept which could offer identity and purpose to the older generations. My exploration has included leading groups on elderhood, for men and women, co-founding the Men Beyond 50 Network, and writing *No Shed Required: A Midlife Manual for Men*, to be published July 2013.

The biggest surprise from these explorations has been the very widespread denial about ageing, the unwillingness to consider the issues. The best explanation for this that I've found comes from a French expert, Olivier de Ladoucette: "*people don't perceive growing old as a progressive process, but as something that 'attacks' you around the age of seventy-five or eighty. Between fifty and seventy-five, we don't know what is going on*".



Storytelling: a traditional role of the elders

I believe that millions of healthy over-fifties feel they're on borrowed time, in the shadow of a disastrous event, where they can't control the timing or the effects – the 'attack' of real old age, which implies dependency, dementia, care homes, and other unthinkable horrors.

The antidote to this fear and denial could be for elders to become elders. Elderhood is a rich concept with a range of meanings. For me, elderhood includes:

- ☞ Having a steady, positive sense of yourself as an older person, which includes facing fears of dependency and dying.
- ☞ Choosing an outlook of gratitude and hope, instead of focussing on the losses which are a part of ageing.

- ☞ Believing you have a valuable role in society, and fulfilling it: this could be in active ways, or in your wise presence.
- ☞ Recognising the collective aspect of elderhood, and helping to create groups of elders for fellowship, wisdom, support, and service.

In a world awash with problems, the elders can be a massive blessing, a power for positive change, if they find their vision, their voice, and their power. There are flickering signs of such a trend beginning.

#### Senior cohousing: a much better kind of ageing



As I've pondered the over-fifties, I see parallels with an even bigger situation: the huge global challenges of the 2020s. Most people know what these are, but feel too overwhelmed to look: climate change, food and energy supply, service cuts, economic contraction... Here too, denial is the first huge challenge to overcome.

The scary problems of the 2020s can be a gift. We could choose to react by moving to a simpler, more localised way of life, where people share more resources and help each other out. Instead of seeing old age or the future generally as disasters beyond our control, we can face them, shape them, meet them constructively.

And if one-third of the UK population (44% of all adults) led the way in this constructive outlook, the elders would fulfil their potential as a blessing, not a burden.

Tags: Community, Social issues, Ageing, Elderhood