

Elder Wisdom

Rev. Deane Oliva ~ December 16, 2007

I have heard that people who are hard of hearing have a difficult time talking to others.

I have heard that people who have lost their vision cannot reason as well as they used to.

I have heard that the leaders of yesterday just want to be left alone to enjoy their old age.

I have heard, but I do not believe.

Last year I was having a great time reading greeting cards in a drug store. A preteen and his mother happened past. The youth told his mom a joke and I couldn't help laughing. His mom did not laugh. He turned to her and said, "Oh, come on mom. Even that old lady thought it was funny." I was devastated, for days. I had never been called "old" before.

Frank Kaiser, the over 65 guru of fun information for seniors stated on his website, "Suddenly Senior": No wonder we're so shaken the first time someone addresses us as "Ma'am," or, without asking, we're offered a senior-citizen discount. Women of a certain age open their mailboxes in dread of finding an AARP membership card. It's like suddenly coming across your own obituary.¹

Speaking of obituaries, how many times have you read the obituary of a friend or colleague and mused, "I didn't know that. He did that? She did what? And then we think about all of the missed opportunities that we had to learn from these persons.

We are so lucky in this fellowship. We have a goodly number of elders in our midst. We have many members who have lived through the growth of our community. Let us not miss our opportunities to share with them, to learn from them, to honor their service, commitment and lives, to offer them respect.

Elder Wisdom. We have a lot of it here. You know we all accumulate wisdom as we age. How can we not? And elders by definition have had more years to accumulate wisdom. We are a congregation devoted to promoting spiritual growth and social justice – that's our mission statement, isn't it? Where does that mission come from? Not from the air but from those of us here and those in the past who have struggled to shape this fellowship into what it is today. Not all of our elders here today have been members of this fellowship for a long time, but many have. Not all have been activists, but many have. All have lived their unique lives! All have stories to tell.

We know that without careful thought and consideration, history repeats itself. In fact, when consultant Marge Keip was here earlier this month and when talking with my ministerial mentor this week, both asked, "What is the history of this congregation?" "What is their relationship with ministers?" "How have they handled conflict in the past?" What great questions! What a wonderful reminder that we are the cutting edge of our history. We are shaping the archives of the future.

¹ Kaiser, Frank "Whatever Happened to "Respect Your Elders?" found at Suddenly Senior: A place for everyone who's become a senior before their time." At <http://www.suddenlysenior.com/respect.html>

What does the current situation remind us of? How have we struggled in the past? What worked? What did we wish we had done differently? What wisdom smolders in the embers of our previous actions?

Perhaps you disclaim, “But I wasn’t here then.” Perhaps not, but many of you have joined this community-family and all families have a living history. We know that.

Some of us have watched in awe as our children imitated our words and actions. How many of us have been tweaked by the realization that we were doing something exactly as our parent did or, conversely, making sure that we did something not like our parents did it. Either way, our current action is intimately connected with the past. Not to study history is to lose a precious opportunity.

I remember the story of the twin brothers, sons of alcoholic parents. In interview, one was asked, “How can you be a tea-totaler. Your parents were alcoholics.” He answered, “How can I be anything else?” Turning to the other brother, the interviewer asked, “Given the fact that your parents were alcoholic, how could you, too, be an alcoholic?” to which he responded, “How could I be anything else?”

Our history shapes us, in our personal life and in our community life. It lives in those who wrote it with their actions, in the bones of this fellowship.

I’ll Love You Forever is a children’s story.² It is also a parable for all ages. The older members of our community shaped the fellowship into what it is today. Some were part of its birth. Many lived through its early growing pains, watching over it, making judgments and decisions which affect us even now. As the fellowship grew into adolescence, new concerns arose as it moved into a more mature identity. Troubles were dealt with, sometimes successfully and sometimes with sorrow. Yet, for many, this community family was important enough to continue to nurture and love through the hard times and the really wonderful ones. Now as these early leaders age, they still have much to share with us. It is likely that they are “not through with us yet.” They continue to lead, to offer counsel, to offer their experience. Yet as they get older they may also need our assistance. I believe that we all want to both give and take in this relationship.

So, I have some requests of our older members, to all of us who are aging. It is probable that in the next twenty or thirty years, you will need some assistance. Allow us the opportunity to serve you. Allow us the opportunity to give back. Allow us the opportunity to feel good about ourselves. Tell us what we can do for you. Let us know when we could be helpful. Ask if you need a ride; someone to shop; a favor. Tell us when you are lonely and would like company. In return, keep your creative juices working. Tell us your stories. Tell us about this fellowship. Tell us your experiences. We want to learn from you.

Today after the service we will have refreshments in your honor. It is our desire to set up a table, place refreshments for you on it and then, with microphones set up, have a short question and answer session. It is here that we would like to begin a discussion which it is hoped will continue over time.

² Munch, Robert “I’ll Love You Forever”

I know that I want to learn from you, and from the others in our congregation who have their history to share. I want to learn from your stories. Not just today, often.

I have heard that in some cultures the term “grandmother” “grandfather” “old man” “old woman” are signs of deep respect.

May it be so.