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## Eldering™ : Wisdom in Action™

By Jim Selman



Being an elder is an ancient and important aspect of many cultures. In the past, the word ‘eldering’ has been used in some ethnic and religious traditions (such as the Quakers) to describe the process of keeping teachings ‘pure’ from one generation to the next—a role that connotes ‘taking care’ of the spiritual aspects of aging, as well as passing on knowledge to the young.

Historically, the gap between older and younger generations was not particularly significant. Grandparents and grandchildren might have differed in terms of styles, some behaviors and technologies, but they more or less shared the same values and worldview. Today it can be argued that the young and the old occupy very different worlds, have different worldviews, and even speak different languages. The exponentially increasing rate of change means that solutions are obsolete before they are implemented, uncertainty and risk are constants, and reacting to circumstances cannot be tolerated as a guarantee of success. In this new context, the traditional process of elderring as being concerned with passing on “the best of the best” and what the older generation thinks the young need to know must evolve to become the basis for creating an entirely new way for the young and the old to relate.

We are appropriating the word ‘Eldering’ to denote a powerful new movement in the world and a new distinction in the domain of leadership—a way of relating where authority and tenure do not influence choices or limit possibilities and where everyone involved is committed to intergenerational collaboration and to jointly taking responsibility for the future. This movement involves practicing a kind of focused leadership in midlife for:

1. Rebuilding inclusive multigenerational communities of people **co-creating** a world that works for everyone;
2. Learning from younger persons what is missing for all of us to work together to address the intractable problems in the world we share; and
3. Transforming the culture of aging from one of decline, loss and resignation to one of power and possibility.

Eldering is an opening for the ‘Baby Boomers’ to leave a legacy so future generations can look forward to the second half of their lives with enthusiasm and an appreciation for growing older. And it is an opportunity for younger generations to draw on the wisdom of their elders and to gain the competencies they need, including the ability to collaborate with people of different ages, in doing what needs to be done in this increasingly complex world.



## CHANGING THE PARADIGM

The word ‘paradigm’, like so much of our language, has been overused, so much so that in business many of us don’t even like to hear the term. ‘Paradigm’ has become like some annoying piece of technical jargon that we half understand but which makes very little difference in our practical lives.

A paradigm is a prevailing and shared interpretation of the world or some aspect of human life that organizes how our ‘reality’ occurs for us. It, therefore, also organizes what we can observe as possible and the choices we have at a given moment. Paradigms are a phenomenon of human existence—like the weather, they are not a concept. For all practical purposes, *our paradigms are our reality.*

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*Reinvent the SELF → A New OBSERVER*

*Reinvent the PARADIGM → A New WORLDVIEW*

*Reinvent the WORLD → A New FUTURE*

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We could say that, since a paradigm is widely shared and mostly transparent to those who are ‘living it’, ‘who we are’ is a paradigm. If we want to ‘be’ different or transform our way of being, we need to become a new observer, transcend our historical interpretation of who we are. Likewise, when we reinterpret some taken-for-granted aspect of our world, we are breaking the hold of the prevailing paradigm and creating a new worldview. When we create a new worldview, we create a new world and have a vision within which to act, which in turn eventually manifests as intentional change and which eventually becomes the new paradigm or reality for future generations.

For the first time in human history, more than half of us are going to be over 50 years of age. This demographic anomaly can, and most certainly will, transform our reality in profound and lasting ways. The central questions we need to focus on are whether we as individuals will have any say about what happens and whether we will participate in the transformation of our world.

Since the 1970s, the Baby Boom generation has shared a wealth of experiences. We have all lived through multiple major societal shifts—from Woodstock and Vietnam mobilizing millions to participate in the civil rights movement, world peace and anti-nuclear initiatives to environmental awareness and the feminist revolution that changing everything from politics to strategies for ending hunger and poverty. The Boomers also saw the birth of rock ‘n roll, mass marketing and the ‘Me Generation’. As we have grown older, we’ve become more interested in making money than in making love. The past 20 years are a testimony to how powerful a demographic ‘bulge’ can be in determining what happens in every aspect of life. The generations that have followed the Boomers have excelled in creating new technologies, but it was their fathers and mothers who created the economic and cultural freedom to do so.



But there is a dark side when one generation dominates the larger conversations and practices of a society (and in the case of the Baby Boomers, the whole world). Just as this generation has influenced how we think, what we wear, what we value and how we act, so have they also defined our collective ‘mood’. We’ve been on an optimistic ‘high’ since the ’70s, and as we age we’ve witnessed a gradual and general diminishing of enthusiasm for the future, as well as a growing mood of resignation and even cynicism about leadership and our national institutions. We have created a long list of intractable problems that threaten civilization as we know it. Most thoughtful commentators agree that we are a turning point in human history. We will either “break through” and create new structures and processes for governance and sustaining the quality of life for human beings or we will, in all likelihood, face a period of unprecedented human suffering.

Whether one is optimistic or pessimistic is not the point. These perspectives are, after all, only based on predictions that are dependent upon one’s beliefs and predispositions. Neither point of view affects what the future will be. ***The future will be a product of individual and collective actions***—and nothing else. The question is what will organize and determine our individual and collective actions in the days and years ahead?

The Eldering movement is grounded in the declaration that the single most important and pressing factor in shaping our actions and our future is the paradigm that defines everything else, including ‘who we are’. Before we make new policies, new laws or create new enterprises, we must, first and foremost, confront and resolve this larger question of who we are.

## **LEADERSHIP, COACHING AND ELDERING**

Leadership and coaching have become major themes in almost any conversation concerned about the future. These terms, along with Eldering, have much in common. They all are based in and require strong, committed relationships and focused, purposeful communication. They are all concerned with producing breakthroughs—unprecedented outcomes or unpredictable futures.

These terms are also different. Coaching is primarily focused on empowering an individual or team ‘in action’ based on the commitments of those being coached. Leadership is more about coordinating action to achieve a common vision and is generally best understood in an historical context—a break from conventional wisdom.

Eldering includes both of these, but is more focused on the co-creative aspects of how leaders and coaches create the future. Eldering provides a new context for collaboration between human beings for generating a new paradigm—a context in which coaching between different generations becomes a normal part of life and, eventually, fades into the background. It is about ***transforming our traditional understanding of ‘who we are’ as a prerequisite for generating new possibilities and choices.***



Eldering can be understood as a kind of meta-relationship to all of our concerns. From the perspective of Eldering, we can observe our relationships with ourselves and other people, circumstances and time. These three relationships can provide a way of getting to the structures of interpretation that become self-referential patterns of thinking and behavior that keep us doing the same things over and over while looking for different outcomes. Eldering presupposes the kind of perspective that can come with age, maturity and experience. This doesn't proscribe what our choices should be, but always reveals that we have choices ***even when none seem to exist.***

It is a perspective from which we can observe that most of the breakthroughs and solutions we've seen or experienced in our lives were created—came into existence—entirely as a function of human imagination and the willingness to act in unreasonable, often counter-intuitive, and unprecedented ways.

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*"We don't receive wisdom; we must discover it for ourselves after a journey that no one can take for us or spare us."*

*—Marcel Proust*

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## WHAT IS WISDOM?

Most of us think of wisdom as being a kind of 'right knowledge', practical insights approximating 'truth' that are gained through longevity and experience. Formal definitions suggest that wisdom isn't so much about knowledge as it is something like 'good judgment', being able to sort out the right and best choices from the many that are available to us at any moment.

In the context of Eldering, wisdom is closer to the latter definition with the added component of commitment. To be wise is to have something to say, a point of view, or an instruction or recommendation that we are committed to. We are less concerned with whether it can be justified or defended than with whether we can be responsible for the consequences. ***Wisdom isn't a function of age or tenure, but being fully engaged and having something at stake in the conversation.*** In the final analysis, wisdom is an assessment that we make *after the fact* based on the results of a particular decision or strategy.

## WHAT IS ACTION?

Action is always relative to an observer. Whatever we are doing can vary, depending upon the context in which we are observing. For example, if I am mowing my lawn, one could say I am working in the garden, but one could also say I am getting exercise. Both interpretations would be equally valid.

From this view, ***action happens in language.*** Any meaningful movement or action in a conversation or systematic pattern is linguistic in nature. That is, without language we would not be able to distinguish one action from another. As we get older, it becomes more and more obvious that everything we are doing involves conversations with ourselves or others. The mere



fact that we may be physically more limited suggests that we learn to appreciate the linguistic nature of action—the power of requests, promises and declarations. We are more and more conscious of the relative validity of our assessments and assertions and are often more focused on whether someone is ‘walking the talk’, rather than whether they have a good story for why they are doing whatever they do.

Eldering is about collaboration. Collaboration is action that happens in conversations (and which is, therefore, not limited by physical capabilities) as a function of commitment and engagement in the process of creating the future.

### ELDERING AND THE FUTURE

Originally, eldering was a term used to denote mid-life leadership. It became quickly apparent that the idea of leadership in mid-life was the old paradigm of experience and age presuming answers on behalf of others. The fact is that ***older persons do not know the answers today***. Moreover, they live in a different disclosive space or interpretation of the world than most younger people. The paradigmatic ‘gap’ between people born in the 1920s and their children born in the 1940s or 1950s is small compared to the gap between Baby Boomers approaching retirement and Generations X, Y and later.

Today, age is one of the factors that divide us. Eldering is about having age be one of the things that we all have in common that can unite us. It can be a context for collaboration and coordination, rather than a factor that limits what’s possible. We are all familiar with the litany of problems that threaten us, and our way of life in the not too distant future. Eldering begins with older persons taking responsibility for the circumstances of our world and then engaging with others of all ages to create projects to challenge conventional wisdom and the prevailing paradigms that limit possibility and thwart our best intentions. Eldering projects have the dual purposes of simultaneously bringing forth new possibilities and unprecedented ways of addressing the problems, but also in transferring to the next generation the best of what we’ve learned and the best of who we are.



THE ELDERING INSTITUTE® provides support, training and development, books and materials for those engaged in transforming the paradigm of aging.

[www.eldering.org](http://www.eldering.org)



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