



# A Call to the Spirit of the Wise Elder

## Responding to the needs of a disaffected world

### Christine Miller

**Embracing the Role of Wise Elder and accepting responsibility for guiding the world towards the spirit of peace, prosperity and safety used to be one of the essential rites and rituals of life as people aged and acquired wisdom and maturity. Younger people expected and valued the guidance of their elders, and the lived experience of those who had already trodden the path was highly regarded as a means of learning how to operate effectively in the world. Lore, legend and customs were passed on, initiations into the ways of preserving and enhancing life were shared, skills transferred and fostered, and the elders were justly revered.**

#### **The 'Baby Boomer' Generation**

Those of us born in the so-called "boomer" generation, the post-war babies who came into the world between 1946 and 1964 (arguably 1943 and 1961, according to researchers Howe and Strauss) carry a double-edged mission, part blessing and part curse, as we enter the age of the Wise Elder.

We have witnessed unprecedented change in the last twenty or so years, and many of us in the Western world have enjoyed the blessing of greater wealth and comfort than any previous generation. But that wealth has at its core a materialistic urge which has also led to an erosion of certain previously held values such as love, respect, support, sharing, family and community spirit. We have much, we acquire much, but our lives are nonetheless empty and we feel incomplete and uncertain.

As our parents pass on, and the role of elder devolves to us, how can we step into the positions of leadership with honour and help preserve the world for our descendants? Our parents' and grandparents' generations fought two world wars to safeguard the planet from dictatorship; can we now act to secure the future from the forces of greed and plundering?

We are counted as the most numerous generation ever: and yet, in spite of our numbers, we appear powerless to prevent the catastrophic depletion of resources, the disregard for human life in the name of financial progress, the spread of poverty, famine and disease. Our global village, internet-enabled with instant communication at the touch of a button, cannot offer succour to suffering and oppressed millions in parts of the world where people still walk for days to pass on a message or seek medical help. Witness only the current situation in Niger, reaching crisis point as I write this article. The media word is that we waited too long to respond. How can that be? How can we send messages around the world at such speed, and simultaneously fail to relieve mass suffering with an apparently callous disregard? We grow

fat whilst others starve, and we still think we can fill our inner emptiness with possessions and toys, wondering all the while why we feel so empty and unfulfilled.

#### **Vision and Action**

This is a call to action, on all levels - personal, family, community, local, regional, national, continental, global. We need nuclei of willing, passionate, and honest people to envision and begin to enact the future. A future which offers a return to older, more native values of preservation, co-operation, and peaceful co-existence, evolving towards an inclusive, modern model for existence. I am compelled to add my voice to those of luminaries such as Deepak Chopra and Marianne Williamson in working to create a movement towards peace and stability, as we find a way to prosper underprivileged nations and halt the unrest and war which undermines our ability to lead a life of trust and hope.

The wisdom and spirit of our generation needs to be harnessed into a formidable body of living power which we employ cooperatively to safeguard future generations, and re-establish the value of age and experience in our societies. We run the risk of our own mature years being vastly under appreciated, leading to a waste of talents and gifts on an unprecedented scale. If maturity is devalued as a commodity, then immature and rash decisions threaten the security of our own years as elders, and also put the existence of our way of life under threat of disappearing forever. Our children and their descendants will inherit, and already are inheriting, a world where the pace of life is unsustainable, and we risk burnout and depletion of horrifying proportions.

#### **False Gods, Flawed Worship**

The false gods of profit and materialism will not repay that flawed worship which we afford them with abundance. The fear and scarcity engendered by current thinking will be perpetuated, and lack and suffering will become the norm. Conversely, in a paradoxical fashion, Nature will become more abundant to balance the equation; but that abundance will be represented by natural disasters, by an abundance of destructive forces. The gap will be filled by massive action, but that massive action will render greater and greater parts of the planet uninhabitable. We are already beginning to see this happening around the globe. Floods, earthquakes, tidal waves, forest fires, droughts - quite apart from the man-made devastations affecting large parts of our heritage. The earth is redressing the balance with great acts of purification, whilst our governments continue to merrily despoil natural resources for commercial gain.

## The Leadership Deficit

Recent conversations I have had with leading business people, committed to growth and ethical social entrepreneurship, and responsible for the allocation of substantial funds for local and regional development, have revealed an underlying concern about the leadership deficit. One prominent individual with billions of pounds in funding to distribute expressed concern that there is a vacuum in the 25 - 40 age group, that there is little desire to step up into leadership positions, and those who arrive at leadership are uncertain how to fulfil the role effectively. This creates great challenges in where to place funds, if there is a lack of safe hands to guide their appropriate usage.

Mikhail Gorbachev, who opened the October 'Leaders in London' Conference, also drew attention to a leadership deficit, not only in politics but in business and every aspect of life, and stressed the vital importance of seeking out leaders today, and fostering the emergence of a new generation of people with the necessary qualities and potential for being nurtured to greatness. Firmness, prudence, authority and credibility, an ability to keep calm amidst the chaos of a changing world with a huge flow of information are characteristics Gorbachev thinks important for leaders, coupled with the confidence to implement goals and visions.

## Hearts and Minds - Interdependent and Interconnected

Current global leaders do not appear to think about the external effects of what they do, and what we need is a new leadership of an interdependent kind, in order to prevent global disasters.

Who now listens to the subtle rumblings of the planet in distress? Who takes the time to connect with the rhythm of life; the seasons roll by and our lives barely change to acknowledge their passing. We do not celebrate abundance in nature, for example, the glowing, radiant autumn leaves, perhaps the most beautiful seasonal garb to be seen. We are often not in tune with outer nature, and many of us are not attuned to our inner nature. Our minds race, our bodies struggle to keep pace, and our hearts and souls stay firmly closed, left at home, buried under the detritus of modern life and its demands.

I recently attended a workshop with David Whyte, the poet whose mission is to bring heart into the corporate world. The theme was 'Courageous Conversations' and we spoke of the hoops people jump through to get a leading managerial job - they must be good all-rounders, not only excelling in their specific professional expertise, but having a range of extra-curricular skills and talents designating them as exceptional and broad-based. So they get the job, and immediately all those additional attributes become irrelevant; they are expected to leave that side of their life, maybe as much as 90% of themselves, at home each day, and bring only the strictly professional part to work. Perhaps this is one of our greatest tragedies, in that we disregard the true *essence* of the person in favour of the barest *essentials* needed to meet a narrow job function, denying the individual wealth which could add greatly to corporate culture.

## Becoming Wise Elders Now

So, who will step up to be a wise elder? It is a role available to anyone who chooses to stand for hope, for clarity of thought, for compassion, for forgiveness. Age can add the weight of experience to effective leadership, though the wisdom of youth needs equally to be acknowledged and fostered forward. It is a collaborative effort, with those entering their mature years undertaking the mentoring of the young.

This is not a role which needs a global stage or platform, though we surely need clear, calm and candid leadership on that level to guide us to a more balanced world. New global leaders need to think of their own countries, whilst remaining attentive to the challenges of the rest of the world. We can no longer tolerate the fact that, according to the World Health Organisation, 2 billion people do not have access to sanitation, and 80% of infectious diseases are due to a lack of clean water. These are the issue to which global leaders must respond. Conversations and dialogues must take place which centre on interconnectedness and shared intention.

How can we connect, and usher in alternatives, supporting a movement which believes that a different world is possible? How can we shape the future using our ability and vision, to evaluate those alternatives and implement long term strategies? How can we inspire coming generations? Through education, through encouragement - and predominantly through our own example. That means we must remain vigilant and ever-open to learning, growing and changing. We must develop our finest qualities and maintain our integrity, whilst always acknowledging our humanity and the fallibility of our human nature. For we cannot ask for any qualities in other people which we are not prepared to manifest ourselves.

There is an urgency to act now. We ourselves must quickly accede to the demands for leadership and guidance, dare to count ourselves as wise elders, and live that role with courage, integrity, honesty and compassion. Compassion for ourselves, for our individual worlds and spheres of influence, as well as for national and global issues. It is only by setting a fine example of owning our wisdom and experience that we can hope to fire others to respect our value, so that ultimately, they, in turn, aspire to become wise elders themselves, in a noble tradition of carrying forward the evolving fate of humanity on our fragile planet.

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"*A Passion for Potential - Yours*" - Through awakening to the powerful potential of your inner self, and learning the vital importance of forgiveness and compassion, a passionate experience of joy can transform how you regard yourself and those around you."

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