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Gettin' Old Ain't for Sissies!

Studies tell us that by the age of 60, people are beginning to experience the first of the physical diminishment that come with old age. And believe me, I can attest to the accuracy of that finding! By the age of 60, we begin to experience loss of skin elasticity, changes in hearing and vision, reduced energy levels, a more sluggish metabolism, and a host of other physical limitations. And the number of older American is growing. In 1900, less than 4 percent of the population was over 65; today that percentage is around 14 percent. Through most of human history, only one in ten people could expect to live to 65. Today, nearly 80 percent of Americans will live past 65. Also, through most of human history, elders occupied honored roles in society as sages, seers, leaders, guardians of traditions, teachers of our young. Beginning with the industrial revolution, elders began to lose their esteemed place in society, and increasingly fell into the disempowered state that we now often regard as "normal" old age.

"Getting' old ain't for sissies!" That's the response I often get when I ask an older person – including my mother, who is now 94 – how he or she is doing. And it's certainly true. Getting older means that tasks we used to think were simple now take a lot longer. It means a loss of independence, which we value so greatly in this culture. Maybe we can't drive anymore, or perhaps we no longer feel safe driving at night. Someone may asks us to do something that now exceeds our capabilities, as we begin to experience loss of lose our eyesight or hearing. At the same time, though, some many elders I know are heroes and not wimps, because they are determined to lead challenging and engaged lives despite – or sometimes because of – the limitations of aging. And, it must be said, so many of you in this fellowship fall into that category of elders who continue to learn, to grow, to take an active part in the world around you.

Today, I want to talk about aging, and specifically, I want to talk about how we as a community might begin to restore "elderhood" to a place of respect and veneration. And I want to talk about ways in which all of us – our entire fellowship -- can work to ensure that our elders form a treasured part of this community. I'm going to use the term "elders" frequently this morning, and I want to be clear what I mean by that term. By elders, I mean those who are our "wisdomkeepers," the ones we look to for all that they have learned about life, about families, about careers, about money. I will be referring to a book called "From Age-ing to Sage-ing" by Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi. This is how Rabbi Zal (as he is often known) defines "elder:"

An elder is a person who is still growing, still a learner, still with potential, and whose life continues to have within it promise for, and connection to, the future. An elder is still in pursuit of happiness, joy, and pleasure, and her or his birthright to these remains intact. Moreover, an elder is a person who deserves respect and honor and whose work it is to synthesize wisdom from long life experience and to formulate this into a legacy for future generations.

So when I use the term “elders” this morning, I use it as a compliment. Our elders are those who refuse to buy into the dominant paradigm of our culture – a paradigm that focuses on youth and beauty. A paradigm that considers a person who is “retired” and over 65 to be moving into a stage of inactivity and increasing irrelevance. I want to talk about an old age in which the elder is still growing and learning, a person who remains vital and involved, a person to whom we look for wisdom.

Some years ago, the spiritual teacher Ram Dass (formerly Richard Alpert of Harvard), was visiting a friend who lived in India, in a small village in the Himalayas. The friend noted that Ram Dass was “looking so old,” and “had gotten so gray.” At first Ram Dass reacted with horror. But he soon got over his habitual dread of aging, and he realized that the friend was saying these things with joy. He was complimenting Ram Dass on having reached old age, on having become an elder. And he was suggesting that now it was time to harvest, and to enjoy, the fruits of a lifetime’s experience.

So, as Rabbi Zal suggests, it isn’t so much aging that’s the problem, as it is the images about it that we hold, based on the expectations of our culture. Rabbi Zal argues that old age should be time for inner work, for spiritual and intellectual growth and development, and for sharing the wisdom acquired over a lifetime with the wider world. Another way to put it is that elderhood is a time for “soulmaking.” He relates stories of vibrant elders in their 70s, 80s, and 90s who exercise and meditate, who write in their journals about their reflections, who clarify and repair important relationships, who risk sharing their wisdom with the wider world. Another Rabbi and Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way:

One ought to enter old age the way one enters the senior year of a university, in exciting anticipation of consummation. The years of old age may enable us to attain the high values we failed to sense, the insights we have missed, the wisdom we ignored. They are indeed formative years, rich in possibilities to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through inbred self-deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness.

A few Sundays ago, we had a conversation here about our vision for a truly intergenerational congregation. And that conversation seemed to spark new energy within the Fellowship, energy that comes from each end of our spectrum of ages. Today, after the service, there will be the first “circle lunch” for our families with children and youth. Sparked by interest from some of our elders, we have also begun a discussion about what we can do to make sure that our elders remain closely connected with this UU community.

One of our elders pointed out to me that it becomes increasingly difficult to stay connected with the Fellowship as we get older. Getting around becomes more and more of a problem as eyesight weakens. Even making contact by telephone may be problematic if we can no longer make out the numbers in our Directory or on our telephone. Same thing with email. Or, if hearing loss may make telephoning someone else an onerous chore. Our energy decreases, and we may find ourselves needing more rest. Getting around may become more difficult as our physical mobility decreases. Feet and joints are painful; we can’t walk as fast as used to. Used to living active, productive, independent lives, we feel various emotions over our diminished

capabilities – anger, crankiness, perhaps sometimes shame. All of these limitations become cause for complaint.

Underlying all of these, it seems to me, is the real problem that comes with aging – feelings that we are losing, or have lost, our independence. As busy, active Americans, we cherished our independence, our feeling that we could take care of ourselves. And so, we may experience anger at the realization that as we age, we have less control over our lives. That sense of control was probably always at least partly an illusion, but most of us cherish that sense. And when it diminishes, we can feel diminished as people. We may feel that we are no longer captains of our own fate.

And this leads me back to Rabbi Zal's book, "From Age-ing to Sage-ing." He argues compellingly that we can find ways to come to terms with the sense of losing control that comes with our diminishing physical skills. One of the ways to do that, he suggests, is to engage in more of the inner work that we didn't have time for when we were younger and leading busier – often frantic – lives. What we can do is to pay attention to the state of our own souls. We can take the time to grow intellectually, to pursue interests that we didn't have time for earlier. And we can grow in spirit – learning meditative practices, for example, or disciplines such as yoga or Tai Chi. And we can take the time to reflect on our lives – to come to terms with things we regret, to feel satisfaction about things we did well. And it certainly helps to write these things down. Many of the "elders" Rabbi Zal discusses find themselves devoting substantial amounts of time to writing, whether in personal journals, or for a wider audience.

Within our physical limitations, we can continue to exercise, and otherwise to take care of these bodies that have served us for all these years. Having a sedentary lifestyle raises our stress levels and it also contributes to physical deterioration. We can still educate the body for greater awareness and improved use. As we relieve stress, breathe more deeply, and recognize muscle patterns, we find that we can still lift our minds and bodies to new levels of enhanced performance. Deepak Chopra addresses this issue in his book, *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*:

The decline of vigor in old age is largely the result of people *expecting* to decline; they have unwittingly implanted a self-defeating intention in the form of a strong belief, and the mind-body connection automatically carries out this intention.

Chopra goes on to cite studies showing that we can overcome these beliefs that accelerate the body's preprogrammed deterioration. In the Boston area, for example, where meditative techniques were taught to people in their 80s, follow-up tests showed that showed measurable improvement in learning ability, low blood pressure, and overall mental health. Chopra speculates that we may be able to rejuvenate cellular activity and retard the aging process by using contemplative techniques.

In *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, Rabbi Zal mentions two other very important aspects of a fruitful elderhood. Both have to do with social transformation, one on the personal level, one on the societal level. Elders can play an important role in mentoring younger people, especially in this turbulent and confusing time. Elders can provide a bridge from the 20th century to the 21st, sharing the wisdom they have acquired over their lifetimes. Remember the movie, *The Karate Kid*, in which Mr. Miyagi, an older Okinawan man takes on Daniel, a hapless teenager, as an apprentice. Mr. Miyagi senses the potential that Daniel himself cannot see. He teaches the boy to become

skilled in martial arts, but more importantly, he models the inner, spiritual side of the discipline. Daniel receives priceless instruction in the art of living, learning how to meet adversity with valor, how to distinguish between inner strength and mere bravado, and how to develop self-worth. A good friend of mine, after retiring first from Bank of America, and later from a second career as a landscape designer, is now serving as a volunteer youth advocate within the Alameda County foster care system. She forms a one-on-one relationship with a teenager, and represents the child's interests in proceedings in juvenile court. In this way, she shares the wisdom she has gained over a lifetime of experience, and passes on her knowledge to a growing generation. As a Fellowship, we need to develop ways to take advantage of this mentorship potential, so that the wisdom so many of you carry can be passed on our young people.

And, as so many of you are doing, elders can play a very important role in the wider community. Over the centuries, we in the west have become a highly individualistic culture. First the enlightenment brought about an emphasis on personal liberty, and then the industrial revolution fueled our desires for endless material progress. And out of these came a pathological sense of individualism that dominates all aspects of life. We need desperately to recover our sense of connectedness – to each other, to our communities, to nature, and to the earth itself. Our elders can play an essential role, I believe, in reasserting – in all our human councils – that we are interconnected, that we are interdependent. Now, as the world teeters on the brink of constant warfare, and the very survival of earth itself is in question, we to act as ancient tribal peoples did, and consult our elders for their wisdom. Our elders are uniquely equipped to take the long view, to take into account the needs of future generations. And our elders can help to lead us into a new paradigm based on caring and compassion – toward each other and toward the earth.

Well, this is all kind of high-falutin'. But what does it have to do with our Fellowship? We want to begin to take some very practical steps to consult the wisdom of our elders and also to engage them more intimately with the life of the congregation. Two weeks from tomorrow, Monday, April 21st, we will convene the first meeting of our Council of Elders. We will meet at the Starbucks in the Junction Shopping Center at 2pm. The meeting came about because we became aware of a couple of the ways that physical limitations of age have made it harder for our elders to stay connected with our community. One obvious example is transportation. Many of our elders either can't drive at all or can't drive at night. We need to have a system in place to ensure that rides are available for things such as our Sunday morning service, doctor appointments and the like. Another item has to do with an occasional need for routine assistance with basic household chores, such as minor repairs. Suppose we were to maintain a list of the skills that our members are willing to contribute to helping others, so that help would be available when needed. And I know there are many other items that need to be considered – these just begin to scratch the surface.

So that's one side of it. The other side I want to see us address is how we can better take advantage of the wisdom and skills of our elders. You, our elders, have acquired so much wisdom over the years, so much knowledge of the art of living. How can we ensure that you are able to pass on some of that wisdom to the generations that follow? Small group ministries? A program for elders to work with our children and youth? A series of talks for members? To contribute skills to our efforts to acquire, and

then to improve a piece of property to serve as our home? Together, let's explore ways in which we might do that. Because the more we are able to engage with each other, the more we are able to share ideas and activities, the stronger and more vital we become as a community.

There is so much to be done!

There is potentially so much joy in the doing!

May we build on the energy and enthusiasm that we have generated,

And may we continue to build this loving, caring community.