

Wisdom of the Ages

The difference between elderly and the elder

by Ken Plattner, D.Min

My wife and I live outside Denver in a mountain enclave of 90 patio homes, most of which are inhabited by persons 65 or older. As a member of the architectural and landscaping committee, I regularly have the opportunity to meet and greet my neighbors.

There are some questions that have baffled me. I've often wondered why some put out a pumpkin for Halloween and some don't. Some string lights and decorate for Christmas (maybe they can't do it for themselves, but they find a way to have it done). Some go for walks, and some talk to their neighbors. Some are planning trips; some have dinner parties; some have little gardens; some send emails and have answering machines; and some still go into the city for concerts, the symphony, the theater, or dinner. And a few don't do any of these things.

Why is it that certain people age with vitality and vigor, while most of the others shrivel, lose their juice, close themselves off, complain of aches and pains, and wither away while waiting to die a sad and lonely death?

The Spiritual Eldering Institute in Boulder, CO suggests that persons who boldly face their mortality—who choose wisdom, grace, and laughter as their spiritual partners—add as much as 7.5 years to their lives. These are the elders, and they clearly walk a different path than those we know as elderly.

New learning, being happy, laughing heartily, stepping into wisdom, choosing a grateful heart, and facing death with an open spirit—these activities not only add years to our life span, but they create an attitude of joy amid sadness, aging, and loss. This is the courageous activity of one who has chosen to accept the challenge

of becoming an elder. Not to accept this challenge can quickly plunge a senior citizen into the depths of shadow, depression, denial, and fear. Most seniors don't even know that they have a conscious choice about the matter,

I have found a simple way to discern who is on the juicy journey to become an elder and who is, unknowingly, becoming elderly. Both the elder and the elderly have lived a long time and had many experiences to show for their years. In the Eastern world there is a Zen notion that life is a joke; the difference is that the elder laughs knowing that s/he is the joke. The fear or worry of elderly folks generally keeps them from appreciating this joke because they take themselves so very seriously.

Most of those we know as elderly have adopted someone else's set idea of what their particular life should look like or be. On the other hand, most elders have broken away from conventional thinking; they are generally free and willing to risk. These are people who are still growing and changing and trusting.

The Developmental Process to Becoming an Elder

As a society we have lost many of the ceremonies and passages around becoming an elder. There are still some societies that honor their elders. They respect the wisdom of those who have lived and experienced their life into maturity. Research from Hawaiian, Spanish, Native American, and more primitive societies shows us that the path into elderhood is "a declared journey." It is a movement that does not take place all at once, but rather in small and sometimes imperceptible steps.