

Claiming Your Place at the Fire Richard J. Leider

We live in a culture that celebrates youth. Many mid-lifers, being members of—or close to—the “baby boom” generation have been among those who have celebrated youth most enthusiastically. Now, though, finding ourselves no longer young,—chronologically—we wonder about this emphasis on all that is new and fresh. We wonder about our place in the world and all that we have to offer as a result of our life experience.

The place of respect that elders are accorded in traditional **societies** represents a sharp contrast to how older adults in our society are often seen. What strikes us vividly about this is the degree to which the elders in traditional societies earn and accept the respect they are given. It’s not just that they are acknowledged by their people; that is a given. As important, they claim themselves as vital resources for their communities. Becoming an elder is, for them, an active step that involves staking out a place of power that one has achieved. We see this represented clearly by the place one takes around the traditional evening fire. A person closest to the flames has to have something valuable to bring forth and must take the initiative to do so. In this way, he or she claims that place of respect at the fire.

We see this step of owning our power **and claiming our place at the fire** as the missing piece to the role of elders in our society. We recognize that, at least to some degree, we have accepted our culture’s picture of aging. We realize that that it is time for us— individually and as a group of people in the second half of our lives—to create a new picture of vital aging.

A new language emerges from our discussions. We begin calling ourselves the “new elders.” New elders are people who use the second half of life as an empty canvas, a blank page, a hunk of clay to be crafted on purpose. These are people who never stop reinventing themselves.

For new elders, the past predicts but does not determine the future. New elders live the second half of their lives in ways characterized by an aliveness and vitality that is grounded in a deep sense of purpose and a refusal—in the words of Dylan Thomas— “to go gently into that good night” as did many of their forebears.

As you seek personal direction, I suggest that you respond to four questions that we have pondered at length in our ongoing discussions of new elderhood,:

Who am I? Where do I belong? What do I care about? And what is my life’s purpose?

The answers to these questions, though elusive, seem key to becoming a new elder.

Richard Leider is Founding Partner of The Inventure Group and best-selling author of six books including *Repacking Your Bags* and *Whistle While You Work*. This article is an excerpt from the forthcoming book, *Claiming Your Place At the Fire: Living the Second Half of Your Life On Purpose* by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro (Berrett-Koehler, 2004). This book will be in bookstores September 1, 2004.

This and other essays on *Finding Personal Direction* are available from the Vital Aging Network website at www.vital-aging-network.org.



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