

What Sort of Elder Do You Want to Be?

By Robert Francis

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This was Band Leader Molly Smith's question to the White River Band Cherokees in an address given nearly two decades ago: "What sort of elder do you want to be?" Looking around at all of us who were seated there, she added, "It doesn't matter how old or how young you might be. It doesn't matter if you are already an elder or if being an elder is a long ways off. Think of the sort of elder you want to be and start working now to become that elder."

Through the years I have remembered Molly Smith's words, thinking of them from time to time. This year, as I held my first grandchild in my arms, those words came back to me more strongly and more personally than ever before. What sort of elder do I want to be?



When Bob Keeshan retired from his long-time role as Captain Kangaroo in 1984, in a TV interview, he was asked, in a roundabout way, what sort of elder *he* wanted to be. "I want to be an old Geezer," he said but went on to explain that the word "Geezer", of Celtic origin, means an outspoken person. At least that's how he interpreted the word. That's good. A person should speak what's on their mind. As Sara Bareilles sings in the song *Brave*, "Say what you want to say and let the words fall out. Honestly, I want to see you be brave." So, it is good to be outspoken, good to speak one's mind. Bob Keeshan was an outspoken elder, and I want to be an outspoken elder too. At least, I want to speak when it is important to speak, keeping in mind that, no matter the age of the person, there is a fine line between being outspoken and being obnoxious.

Sometime around 1907 or 1908, Mark Twain* began writing "Shem's Diary of 920 A.C.". You may recall that Shem was one of Noah's sons, from the Biblical story, Noah's sons being Shem, Ham and Japheth. Or, were they Shemp, Moe and Curly? No, Shem, Ham and Japheth sounds right. In any case, Mark Twain never got far with "Shem's Diary". There is just one entry, as far as I know, just a couple of pages that survive in a collection of Mark Twain's writings entitled *Letters from the Earth* edited by Bernard DeVoto and first published by Harvard College in 1938. The main event recorded in that single entry of "The Diary of Shem" is a visit by one very old elder. And so, Shem relates...



Methuselah was here again today. While he isn't the oldest person in the world, he is the oldest distinguished person in it...

Methuselah has a most unpleasant disposition. I think he is never happy except when he is making other people uncomfortable. He always speaks of my brothers and me and our wives as "the children."



He does it because he sees that it hurts our feelings. One day Japheth timidly ventured to remind him that we were men and women. You could have heard him scoff a mile! And he closed his eyes in a kind of ecstasy of scorn, and puckered his withered lips, exposing his yellow fangs and the gaps between them, and hacked out a dry odious laugh with an asthmatic cough mixed with it, and said, "Men and women - the likes of you! Pray how old are you venerable relics?"

"Our wives are nearly eighty; and of us I am the youngest and I was a hundred last spring."

"Eighty, dear me! A hundred, dear me! And married! Dear, dear, dear! You cradle-rubbish! You rag dolls! Married! In my young days nobody would ever have thought of such a thing as children getting married. It's monstrous!"

Japheth started to remind him that more than one of the patriarchs had married in early youth, but he wouldn't listen! That is just his way; if you catch him out with an argument that he can't answer, he raises his voice and shouts you down, and the only thing you can do is shut your mouth and drop the matter. It won't do to dispute with him; it would be considered a scandal, and irreverent. At least it would not do for us boys to talk back.

- Mark Twain "Shem's Diary"

Maybe this explains why Methuselah was left swimming when the ark weighed anchor. They couldn't stand the thought of being cooped up in a boat with the crotchety old cuss. Six months would have seemed an eternity. And chances are, he wouldn't have done a thing to help; hand him a pitchfork, ask him kindly to muck out the elephant stalls, and his back would have gone out at the mere thought of the exertion.

The 1491s is an American Indian satirical comedy group comprised of young men from Oklahoma and Minnesota. You can find much of their work on YouTube, but be advised, they don't pull any punches. They have something to offend everyone, that being the nature of satire. In The 1491s comedy sketch "The Avatars", a Pandoran Na'vi grandfather, complains of his urbanized grandson, "He's useless to me. He can't hunt. He can't fish. He can't even ride a ****ing dragon."



The grandson comments, "They seem like good people, but the elders really

make me mad. Sometimes I wish they'd just die."

The Kayapo people of the Amazon Rain Forest sometimes refer to certain outside visitors, of whatever age, as those "with no holes in [their] ears"; this according to an article entitled "Kayapo Courage" written by Chip Brown and published in the January 2014 edition of *National Geographic*.



While Mr. Brown may have thought this to be a reference only to a lack of pierced and stretched earlobes, there could be a deeper meaning. Within every American Indian culture of which I am familiar, ear-piercing and/or stretching of the earlobes has only one basic traditional purpose; it is not done for the sake of fashion or fad, nor to look "cool". Traditional ear piercing within American Indian tribes is done to open the ears of the spirit. In many American Indian tribal traditions, ear-piercing is done as part of a naming ceremony to ensure that the one being named will hear their name called out by Creator and begin to grow into or fulfill that name. In some cultures, additional piercings may mark significant life events or occasions in which the person has taken on particular roles or responsibilities and needs open ears in relation to those roles and responsibilities. Today, ear-piercing may be done for any reason or no reason at all, but as far as I know, the traditional reason among American Indian tribes remains the opening of the spirit-ears that one may better listen. I may be wrong about this; there may be other reasons, but as far as I know, this is it. So, maybe the Kayapo are saying that some of the outsiders who visit them have a hard time listening. Listening is important.



Sometimes, I like to watch that T.V. show called *Parenthood*. I find it entertaining. It's sort of like a 21st Century version of *The Waltons*, except that, while on *The Waltons*, almost every crisis could reach resolution within a one-hour time slot, that never happens on *Parenthood*. My wife Janet will not watch *Parenthood*, saying,

"Those people *never* listen." Janet's right. On *Parenthood*, no one is ever listening, because everyone is always talking. If there are two people in the scene, when one begins talking, the other will interrupt, so now they are both talking at the same time. If three people are in the scene, pretty soon they are all talking at the same time, maybe about the same thing, maybe not. Being outspoken is good, but hey, we each have one mouth and two ears. It follows that we should give at least twice the effort to listening that we give to talking.

How do we know we are listening as we should? I have read books that say it is all about maintaining eye-contact and paraphrasing what others have said before responding. Now, to my friends of Middle Eastern cultures, Western European cultures and transplanted Middle Eastern and Western European cultures, let me say that while you and your communications experts may say that maintaining

eye-contact while conversing is normative, and that those who do not maintain eye-contact either are not paying attention, have something to hide or are showing signs of autism, there are many cultures which see prolonged eye-contact with someone other than a spouse or lover as invasive or even sexually improper. Also, if you want to rephrase or paraphrase what others have said before responding, be sure you are skilled enough to do so without an annoying air of condescension. But, I think the best way to know if we are listening is this: There should be gaps in the conversation. If there are no gaps in the conversation, how do we know when the other person is finished talking? Maybe they were only pausing to catch their breath; maybe we have interrupted. Assuming they are finished, when we begin to speak just as soon as the other person has stopped, it's a dead giveaway that rather than listening to and considering what they have said, we have been thinking about and formulating what we are going to say. So, when two people are conversing and really listening to one another, there will be quiet gaps in the conversation as what has been said is carefully considered and what will be said carefully formulated. And, when you are conversing with someone on the telephone, you can know you must be really listening when they ask, "Are you still there?" The problem is, we all have to interact with those whose idea of communication is constant talk with no breaks to the extent that one may feel the only way to get a word in edgewise is to interrupt. Watch out! That's a hard habit to break.

We should take a lesson from the Talking Stick. In indigenous cultures all over the Earth, a stick is passed around a circle, and whoever has the stick speaks while everyone else listens with no interruptions. Then there is silence as the stick is passed and the next person considers what she or he will say, as everyone else waits to listen.

In a world in which it seems everyone has their mouth open and ears closed, elders must set an example of listening. As elders respectfully listen to the younger people, the younger people will learn to listen to the elders. In turn, they will know to listen to the younger people when they are elders, and those younger people will also learn to listen through their good example.

Yes, I want to be an outspoken elder, but I also want to be an elder who listens. Learning is lifelong. Nobody knows it all. No matter how old I get, I can still learn from everyone, so long as I am willing to listen. That's the kind of elder I want to be

Properly dealing with loss is important as one grows older. As we age, we become increasingly aware that events of life seldom, if ever, go according to plan or exactly as we had hoped. We all lose loved ones. We will lose those who are older (grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles), and this is hard. We will lose many who are around our same age (siblings, cousins and friends), and this is harder. Chances are we will also lose some of those who are younger (nieces, nephews, children or even grandchildren), and this is hardest of all. Hearts

break. We must mourn our losses yet be mindful that life goes on. Life is for the living. I want to live, really live, as long as I am alive.

Aches and pains tend to increase with age and are another sort of loss that we must deal with. Everyone has aches and pains; no one is unique in this respect. I determine not to let aches and pains rule my life. I will do my best not to allow any illness or injury, allergy or intolerance define who I am or have any part in my identity. I do not want it to be said of me, "Oh, here comes Grandpa with all his aches and pains." I would rather they say, "Here's Grandpa. You know, he's pretty interesting, pretty lively for an old coot."



So, that is the sort of elder I want to be. I want to be an outspoken elder, one who is courageous enough to speak when it is important to speak, one who is brave enough to share what's on his heart. I want to be an elder who listens and not just so I can somehow figure out how to fix things for the younger folks or correct their mistakes; I want to listen and learn, no matter how old and dignified or old and decrepit I get. Finally, I want to continue living, really living, come what may, regardless of losses that visit everyone. As long as I am alive, I determine to live. These are the things I have been considering this summer and even before that. I'm working on them. It's not easy. Sometimes I really mess up. What about you? What sort of elder do you want to be? As Molly Smith once said, "It doesn't matter how old or how young you might be. It doesn't matter if you are already an elder or if being an elder is a long ways off. Think of the sort of elder you want to be and start working now to become that elder."

*Note about Mark Twain: Someone may ask, "Why do you like Mark Twain? He certainly did not hold American Indians in high regard." In answer, I will say that I appreciate *some* of Mark Twain's writings. I have the greatest appreciation for *Huckleberry Finn*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and certain suppressed writings published posthumously. There are other writings by Mark Twain that I find offensive and/or of low quality. These would include the much lauded *Tom Sawyer* as well as the atrocious sequels to *Huckleberry Finn*. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who later wrote under the name of Mark Twain grew up in Missouri in the 19th Century, when persons openly identifying themselves as being of American Indian tribes were banned from living in the state, making a character such as "Injun Joe" completely unbelievable. No, Mark Twain had no great regard for American Indians. He had even less regard for the French and no regard at all for the writings of J. Fenimore Cooper. If Mark Twain and I had lived in the same time and place, I am not sure whether we would have been friends. However, no one who despises the writings of J. Fenimore Cooper can be all bad.