

## THE BLOG

# Where Have All the Wise Men Gone?

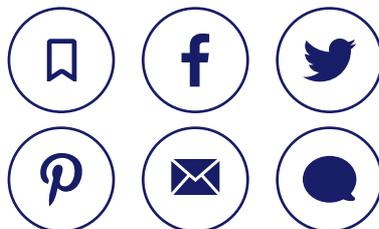
*In modern life, instead of people growing "older and wiser," people can simply grow older and older. People can live longer and longer without becoming any wiser for it.*

**By Michael Meade, Contributor**

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We live in a time of great forgetting. It's not just that people

live longer and short-term memory loss becomes inevitable over time. We reach for a familiar name, but it is temporarily out of our reach. Having parked a car so many times, we forget exactly where we parked it this time. We enter a room only to forget why we crossed that threshold and what we were looking for.

There is no tragedy, no great loss in that. Some forgetfulness is natural, just as eyesight weakens over time. Yet nature, in its wisdom, may see the whole thing differently. After 40 or 50 years a person has seen enough of this world and the point may no longer be just looking at life or observing what is going on. After enough time has passed, the issue is not the simple loss of sight, for the point has become the need to develop a genuine vision for life.

The loss of common sight might serve to precipitate deeper insights about life and about death, another event that nature requires. As we "grow older," we are supposed to also grow deeper and thereby become wiser. Those who continue to grow as they grow older are able to develop long-term vision where most become blinded by near-term needs and common neediness. Growing older happens to everyone, but growing wiser happens to those who awaken to a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Similarly, the inevitable loss of short-term memory that accompanies aging is not intended to be a complete loss. Losing one's immediate grip on certain details can be related to gaining a greater grasp of the long-term issues that affect both culture and nature. The first kind of forgetting misplaces things in the moment, but the great forgetting involves a loss

of memory regarding the gift of life itself and a lack of living wisdom that helps make both individual and collective life meaningful.

In traditional cultures, the elders are expected to remember the essential things that everyone else keeps forgetting. After "growing up," a person is supposed to grow down and become rooted deeper in the ground of being, like an old tree that draws from ever deeper resources. In traditional cultures, the elders were considered to be a valuable resource without whose guidance the whole society could lose its way.

Yet in modern life, instead of people growing "older and wiser," people can simply grow older and older. People can live longer and longer without becoming any wiser for it. When there is no genuine growth in growing older, aging can become all about loss. The longer people live the more of life they seem to lose. Instead of developing wise and seasoned "elders" who can help others find meaningful ways to live, modern societies are in danger of producing "olders" who blindly seek ways to hold onto life at any cost.

This can be seen as the problem of the olders vs. the elders. Traditionally, elders carry a greater vision of life because they develop insight into their own lives. The elders are those who found threads of purpose and meaning amidst the illusions and delusions of life. Amidst the inevitable troubles of life, the bubble of the "closed ego" bursts and a deeper, wiser self is born. Such psychological maturity involves a shift from a self-centered life to one of genuine meaning and of greater service to others.

Yet, in a culture where older folks are in the majority and people tend to live longer and longer, there seems to be an increase of fear as well as a loss of wisdom about life and about death. There seems to be a lack of knowing elders who can recall essential things in midst of the great crises troubling both nature and culture. What is the point of living longer if it doesn't mean becoming wiser and being more able to serve something beyond one's little-self?

Aging can involve various levels of memory loss. Alzheimer's disease is a tragic condition for individuals and for entire families. I am not wishing pain or suffering on anyone; however, there is something of a psychological ailment involved, a sense that more and more people are falling out of the story of life even before the end is in sight.

Can the increasing loss of memory be a collective symptom trying to call attention to the deeper issues of sustaining culture and helping nature? Is it possible that the real social security crisis is about recollecting the deeper reasons for living one's life, rather than simply collecting compensation for surviving it? Can life itself be trying to provoke an effort at recalling the deep memories and imagination that form the true inheritance of human kind?

An old idea suggests that the only ones more idealistic than young people are the elders. It's not that the elders naively believe that the great ideals of humanity, peace and justice, healing and compassion, are simply attainable. Rather, the idea is that without a commitment to such ideals a culture simply collapses into political infighting and economic warfare. The gridlock in the nation's capitol may be an

increasing national shame, but the grid lock on American imagination may be a greater tragedy in the making.

While the political parties fight over who might be the "adult in the room," there is a desperate need for elders in communities throughout the country. Whereas the '60s were characterized by change brought on by a youth revolution, the current morass may only be changed by an elder awakening. The revolution waiting to happen in this country may involve an awakening to the necessity of the role that elders can play in the great crises facing both culture and nature.

Issues like poverty and joblessness, climate change and sustainability require long-term visions combined with self-sacrifice and genuine courage. Elders are not elected, so the short-term thinking characteristic of ideological politics and winning elections can be superseded. Since the elder part of us accepts the inevitability of death, decisions that truly serve the future become more possible.

Genuine wisdom relaxes hostility, settles common fears and makes inner balance and longer vision more possible. When older folks fail to recommit to the great ideals that sustain the deepest values of human life, they tend to feel more fearful and anxious while also becoming more cynical and self-involved. When older folks act with genuine courage and vision, young people feel encouraged to find and follow their dreams.

Another old idea suggests that a culture falls apart when the dreams of its youth are rejected and the visions of its elders are neglected. This country is moving closer to the kind of lack of vision and lack of wisdom that precipitates such a fall.

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