

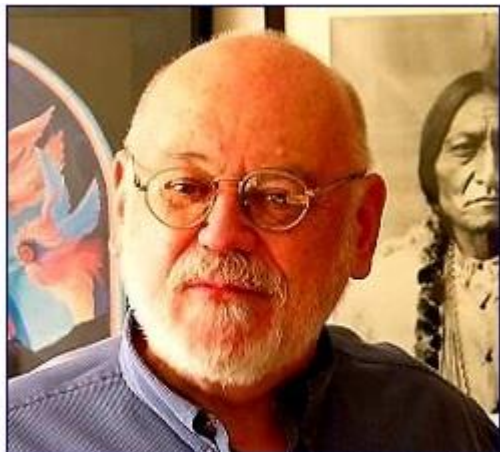
Gay Elders! Gay Elders! Where Are You?

11/02/2009

Monday, November 2, 2009 - Don Kilhefner, Ph.D., West Hollywood

West Hollywood, California (November 2, 2009) - My 70th birthday came and went a few weeks ago.

Actually I was all set to have a 70th birthday a year ago, but a cherished, long-time friend, attorney Barry Copilow, sat me down and showed me the math-I was only 69 then not 70 as I had thought.



Don Kilhefner, Ph.D. co-founded the LA Gay & Lesbian Center, the Gay Liberation Front, Van Ness House and other community-based organizations. Photo by WeHo News

I hated math in school and in third grade consciously and adamantly refused to memorize any more multiplication tables beyond the number six-my first act of civil disobedience.

To this day multiplying a number by seven or higher is an intellectual challenge for me. When studying for my doctorate I took a course on research statistics three times until I finally understood it.

Let me assure you that I am not going to say anything idiotically stupid in this column like 70 is the new 60, but, as one wag put it recently, I do have a sense that death is the new 80.

With the clock striking 70, and with well over 40 of those 70 years having been spent continuously laboring on the frontlines of the Los Angeles gay community (even before there was a gay community that many today take for granted), what I would like to talk with you today is a subject about which I have given much time and attention during the past twenty years-age apartheid in the gay community and the negative impact it has on the quality of our lives and community.

More specifically, I want to discuss the near absence of gay tribal elders consciously doing eldering in our gay villages.

A few years ago I wrote an article titled "Gay Adults! Gay Adults! Where Are You?" for White Crane Journal (Summer, 2006) about missing gay adults in our community-the failure of many gay men to mature psychologically from boys into men-and the destructive impact it has on our well-being as a people.

I was unprepared for the article's impact. Quickly, like an e-wildfire, the article was electronically posted around the world and I received well over 250 e-mails from younger gay men acknowledging that the essay had hit the nail right on the head regarding gay adults-not a single negative reply.

I was blown away and humbled by the responses.



Phill Wilson, Don Kilhefner and John Duran at a Gay Men's Workshop. Photo by WeHo News.

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West Hollywood's Gay Men's Medicine Circle is one organization that trains elders to become elders. Photo by WeHo News.

Elderhood is archetypal. Plato first coined the concept "archetypal" and Carl Jung brought the word into contemporary psychological and cultural usage.

Dr. Jung used it to mean intrinsic images and patterns of behavior that are found everywhere in our species—hero, warrior, wise old man, healer, trickster, and so forth. In other words, for something to be archetypal it must be found in all periods of history and in virtually every culture.

Cultural anthropologists tell us that whenever and wherever humans are found there seems to be a patterning of life into four stages called youth, adult, elder and ancestor.

Moreover, each of these stages have significant and distinct social roles to play in the village. There is a profound and fundamental interdependence between these stages and societal roles upon which the health and vitality of the village or tribe are largely based including ours.

For the sake of simplicity, one might say ancestors look out for our welfare and protection in this lifetime both on an individual and tribal level. Ancestors carry a vast and rich storehouse of knowledge which shamans, dream tenders, vision seekers and elders in the tribe can access directly if necessity or danger arises.



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Elders are responsible for the spiritual well-being of the village. Dr. Jung called them spiritual fathers and mothers. They facilitate the transmission of a certain type of spiritual information, knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next.

Elders think about themselves, about conditions in the village, and about seven generations yet to come. They carry external authority, inner authority, and, due to close proximity, ancestor authority.

It is simply impossible to have an alive and healthy community unless there are elders consciously doing eldering. Unfortunately in the Los Angeles gay community today many men simply become "olders" not "elders."

Generally they retire, disappear, or are discarded just when they are most needed and most valuable to those coming after them.

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