



## Elder Wisdom in Context

Rudi Krause  
November 2016

This reflection is meant to put the SPEC Elders' Circle initiative into the context of how we experience the flow and direction of our lives in our time.

Our experience of time is like how fish experience water, in the sense that we are immersed in it. Yet, unlike fish, we are very much aware of time. Everything we are and do is immediately and profoundly affected by time. We move through it, and its movements, in turn, affect us. Like water, time flows in currents or like a river, but it also moves in eddies and swirling cycles. It lifts and falls like the tide. (“Time” and “tide” are close relatives on the family tree of our language.)

We know that time is both linear and cyclical. The days, months, years, and centuries move inexorably forward. October 2016 is followed by November 2016 and will never be repeated. At the end of the year we put up a new calendar (if we still hang calendars on our walls). Bruce Cockburn sings, “Things that exist in time run out of time some day.” There are beginnings and endings.

But we also experience the reality of the cycles of day, week, month, and the seasons of the year. When I still lived in the Okanagan, I experienced this with my whole being. Working in my orchard, picking peaches during the bright days of summer, I felt much closer to the previous year's harvest twelve months ago than to tobogganing around the trees six months earlier.

Traditional societies tend to emphasize the cyclical nature of time. For our own society, shaped by modernity, the enlightenment, and industrialization, time is primarily linear, is seen as progress. The fortunes of individuals, societies, empires, and civilizations may rise and fall, but history's course keeps moving forward.

We live at a time characterized by confusing and disorienting cross-currents, a time in which it is difficult to read the “signs of the time.” In some ways, life is “getting better all the time”, yet there are also many reasons to lament and be tempted to despair.

It is said that Polynesian navigators were able to read the ocean just as well as others read a landscape. Currents, swells, the interplay of wave patterns, the shifting light reflected off the water; all spoke to them. But this has become increasingly difficult because of the disturbances of modern freighters and tanker traffic. In a similar manner, there are many disturbances and interferences in our day and age which cause us to be uncertain as we try to live our lives as best we can.

It is difficult to avoid these confusing influences; they are all around us, seemingly in the very air we breathe. We continue to cling to and rely on the gifts of modernity (the

comforts of our homes, the ability to move about at will, the wonders of medical expertise and technology). Yet we increasingly recognize that modernity seems to have run its course, that the “modern experiment” has somehow failed us, that the price we are paying for modernity's gifts is, after all, too high.

Philosophers speak of “postmodernism.” More and more scientists are questioning earlier assumptions that everything can ultimately be explained, and thus “solved” or controlled, by science and technology. Such reductionism is becoming increasingly suspect.

Politically, economically, ideologically, and spiritually we are in a stage of transition where many certainties are no longer valid or valued. At the same time it is a stage of possibility, of potential, of transformation, of emergence.

One way to “cope” with the uncertainties of our present experience, is to reach back to earlier verities, to reclaim what was lost, to take on board what earlier had been jettisoned. On the other hand, it may be necessary to let go of some things (old maps, say), and to throw overboard what no longer works. What is certain is that it is not enough to rearrange the deck chairs. The ship may not be sinking but we need to change course; it may even be necessary to relearn to sail into the wind.

A few years ago a beautiful movie was released which illustrates this challenge. “Whalerider” is set in present-day New Zealand among the Maori. The chief elder of the community is distraught over how the modern world has robbed his people of what is—in his eyes—truly valuable. The movie portrays many of the young adults as listless, lazy, without direction and purpose. The elder decides to revive ancient traditions by teaching the young boys of the community. He is somewhat successful in this attempt, even inspiring some of the young adults to make positive changes. But the old man is blind to the fact that his own granddaughter has a gift which cries out to be recognized, developed, encouraged, and allowed to benefit the community. In his eyes—according to the old ways—only boys are permitted to assume such a role. In the end, a moving episode involving the rescue of beached whales opens the elder's eyes, and he recognizes the gift his granddaughter is able to give to her people.

This beautifully told story teaches us that we may need to reclaim some things while remaining open to the possibilities of something new, something perhaps unexpected. That is what elder wisdom must be like. It is like jazz in this regard, grounded in the rhythms of nature and valid traditions, in harmony with life's stages and seasons, yet always improvising fresh and new melodies.

Music also exists in time. As we reflect on our own lives and on the events, issues and developments around us, as we encourage one another, as we engage with others, and as we get involved in our communities, may we hear a music both old and new, a music that will let us step lightly and invite others into the dance.