



Reflections on Being a Wisdom Elder

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Life lessons bring us some of our wisdom but we also need to grow other values, attitudes, and behaviours that are characteristic of wisdom. Recent brain science tells that our brains are plastic; not as pliable as children, but we're not old dogs that can't learn new tricks. We're elder dogs with some good tricks still up our sleeves.

Research reveals five key characteristics of people who live productive and successful elder lives and who give back to the community. *These are not the only characteristics and not everyone has all five in equal quantity.

Wise elders:

1. Overcome a natural tendency to look at the negative.

Evolutionarily we are always looking out for the threat. We tend to employ this strategy across the board in our lives. We miss a lot of rewarding experiences because they take us out of our comfort zone. We're afraid we won't be liked or we'll get stuck with people we don't like, or we're afraid to commit to something because another better option might come along, or we're concerned we'll be too tired, etc. We have a number of well-worn grooves in our brains that warn us against trying new things or committing our time. If we yield to the negative voices that wonder if we'll fit in or have a good time, we miss the opportunity to say, "I'm so glad I did that".

2. Seek out experiences that deepen their bond with nature.

Mother Nature is our most profound elder from whom we can learn a great deal of what we really need to know. Nature teaches us wisdom.

3. Embrace uncertainty and see it as a strength.

Our cultural tendency is to see absolutism as strong when, in fact, it's a weakness of intelligence and wisdom. The immature mind will resist change and create suffering. A mature mind tolerates ambiguity and is always free to modify its beliefs based on new information.

4. Express Generosity with all their resources.

Our culture discourages generosity and encourages the suspicion that others will take advantage of us. We should cultivate generosity because it undergirds happiness. It is important to resist our cultural conditioning and experience the wisdom and the joy of generosity.

5. Are Generative.

They genuinely care for the well-being of others and for the next generations and willingly give something back to help them prepare for the challenges of the future.

In addition to these five key characteristics, there are other more nuanced examples of elder wisdom. I had an experience yesterday that might at first sound like an elder foolishness, but in the immediate aftermath, I recognized examples of growing elder wisdom and felt grateful to discover them. I'll tell the story, not in all its glorious detail, but enough for you to get a picture of what happened. Then I'll draw out some embedded examples of elder wisdom.

The Story: A full screen warning came up on my computer advising me it was massively infected with a dangerous virus, that if I didn't tend to it immediately my computer would be locked down to protect "the network", and that I should immediately call the number on the screen.

I felt concerned. I called and was briefly interviewed by a staffer who then turned me over to a senior technician who was supremely competent, confident, and reassuring. He told me he was a level five Microsoft Technician and he could fix the problem. He asked me to agree to make him a partner on my computer – that is to allow him to control the computer while he fixed it. I did.

He did a quick scan and then showed me at least a half dozen examples of how "established users" were on my computer without my knowledge. He told me there were dozens and dozens of warnings from my anti-virus program, but that they had been turned off by those users. He then showed me in Wikipedia the name and the characteristics of the "Koopface Worm" that infected 98% of my computer. He warned me that "the established users" could mine my data for information on how to access my bank account.

I bought it. I gave him my trust and we agreed that he'd clean up my computer and my husband's computer and all the various devices that used the same wifi connection – for \$650.00.

During this 20 minute exchange my visiting friend, Evelyn, tried to warn me that this might be a fraud, but I was confident that he was a Microsoft technician. My husband Rick also came into the scene, and he expressed concern, "Who is this guy?" "How do you know he is who he says he is?" I had no good answer to that. I just believed he was legit.

When we came to the payment, he encouraged me to not use a credit card because of compromised security. OK, I thought. He said he'd take a cheque but then he said "you don't actually need to write out and send a cheque". Standing with the cheque book in my hand, I had my first pang of real doubt. Rick was now really wincing and expressing again, "How do we know who he is?" Doubt had entered my mind.

The situation must have seemed more fragile because suddenly my offender agreed to wait for the payment until the work was done. He gave me numbers to call to verify his identity and those numbers were answered by someone who said "Microsoft." I felt vindicated but Rick and Evelyn were still deeply suspicious. He said it would take a half hour to "clean up my computer", and then he'd call and get the information needed to do the same for Rick. I agreed that he could go ahead – remember, he already had control of my computer, and I had no idea how to interrupt that.

But now I'm off the phone and out of his spell. Evelyn tells me a story of something quite similar that happened to her. Rick goes to the bank to secure our account against any on-line transactions. And I call Microsoft.

That was not as easy as it sounds, but I finally reached a technician and explained my dilemma. He advised me that they do not farm out their technical support, and then took me through a series of steps to disconnect from my offender and to arrange my settings to disallow re-entry by

this guy. Finally, he did a scan to remove software planted in my computer. I was grateful to pay \$150 for the fix and a year-long subscription to service our devices should something such as this happen again.

That's the story. What can be drawn from it that exemplifies wisdom?

1. I didn't judge myself but accepted that I was fooled by a gifted con artist.
2. I maintained equilibrium and perspective. Nothing felt like "the end of the world."
3. I didn't change my view of the world because someone successfully fooled me. It didn't erode my fundamental belief and trust in the goodness of people.
4. I embraced uncertainty, listened to others, valued their opinion, and changed my mind.
5. I didn't give up in frustration when Microsoft was hard to reach. I persevered.
6. I am willing to reveal my foolishness without defensiveness.
7. I actually feel some generativity towards my offender. I see him as injuring himself as he injures the commons. I wanted to call him back and invite him to bring his intelligence, confidence, and expert skills and come over to the "light side."
8. I was grateful for the lesson I learned.

The bottom line?

1. Life equips us with some of the skills, attitudes, and behaviours to be wise elders.
2. Because of the plasticity of our brains, we can learn other skills, attitudes, and behaviours and grow as Wisdom Elders.
3. We intuitively recognize the authenticity of Elder Wisdom.
4. The SPEC Elders Circle is a learning place because we move more quickly in acquiring these wisdom characteristics when we're with others and when we add action and actual experience to our conceptual knowledge.

* A particularly helpful book with detail on these characteristics is, *Triumphs of Experience: the men of the Harvard Grant Study*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2012.

About SPEC

SPEC is Canada's oldest Environmental organization and one of the oldest in North America – 47 years! It has a venerable history of activism, education, research, and advocacy that has had profound impacts. Currently we work primarily in the area of urban sustainability, but are always poised to enter into environmental issues with larger geographical scope.

We conduct programs, projects, and campaigns through our committees or special board initiatives, almost all of which are run by dedicated volunteers and funded by foundations and other granting agencies. We always need new SPEC members to support the staff and other parenting features that keep our programs alive. We invite you all to become SPEC members.

The Big picture of the SPEC Elders Circle is to encourage people to step into the developmental task of becoming a Wisdom Elder – to explore, connect, and grow as creative and wise mentors.