

The Need for Progressive Elders
Balancing the Perspectives of Youth and Age
As America and Humankind Face a Challenging Future

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Youth is associated with: vitality, liberality, spontaneity, creativity, impulse, fecundity, physical prowess, possibilities, new ideas and ways, progressivism, independence, rebelliousness, a future perspective.

Age is associated with wisdom, conservatism, stability, solidity, established ideas and ways, history, habit, dependability, community, consistency, respect, a past perspective.

Cultures that look to the past for instruction in the present revere elders for their wisdom in bringing tried and true answers to apply to situations in the present and to prepare for what is mostly viewed as the “known” future. These are cultures informed by cyclical concepts of time where the present and future are mostly expected to repeat the challenges and solutions of the past.

Cultures that look to the future and expect change must rely on new answers for new challenges in what are expected to be new situations in a rapidly changing world. In this progressive setting, it is questionable whether the wisdom of elders drawn from past experience will be adequate to provide these new answers. As a result, these cultures tend to look to the emerging, provocative ideas of the young to identify the needed solutions.

America is a young culture that is oriented to youth. It is led by an economy that depends on new and better answers to both old and new challenges and that enlists the discoveries of science and technology to offer these new solutions. And America celebrates new opportunities as no other culture with the ever present invitation of the wide open spaces of the frontier, always the option to move – mobility: new job, new home, new location, even new spouse. For all of its supposed political conservatism, America is at root a very progressive culture – expecting change. And this fact is reflected in its fascination with youth and the opportunity to remake America with each generation, together with the expectation that this remaking will produce a better life than that of the previous generation. The past is passé. America is all about “What’s happening Now?” The glory days are before us, not behind us. America seeks the newest idea, tool, fashion, speech, media, etc. In the current framework, think Twitter culture. Conservative in its reliance on the individual to find the new approach,

theory, or invention, America is very liberal in its expectation for change and its orientation to the young to stimulate new thinking. So, there is little tolerance for age and elders in the American setting, and even parents are suspect for their guidance by the time their children reach adolescence. That is a half-generation perspective or fifteen years separating the “obsolete” old adults from the formative youth.

So, America celebrates and rests its vision in Youth – hot, new college graduates or professionals with their newly minted ideas on how the challenges in their fields should be conceived and pursued. Hollywood, always looking for the young bright star – rising. But, in its fascination with youth, America lays itself open to the danger of fads and the empty promises of youth, the flash in the pan ideas that lead to bankruptcy, the risk taker “cowboy” with a simplistic vision, a too ready weapon, and impulsive reactions that ignore fundamentals and puts the ship of state in jeopardy.

Of course the real answer is to achieve balance between youth and age, between progressive and conservative, between the past and the future focus, between repetition and innovation, between individual and community. In fact, we invite failure at either extreme as individuals, as cultures, and as a species.

If only we could successfully marry the wisdom of elders and the vitality and inspiration of youth. In that marriage we could avoid foolish fads and yet welcome well-informed, well-developed new ideas. Perhaps that is what formal, higher education is intended to produce: under the guidance of elder scholars and professional practitioners, youth imbibes the past with its call for respect and restraint while at the point of “graduation” this “youth” is required to display “something new” and original in a thesis or dissertation. This is the appropriate balance: continuity of the new with the old, progression rather than either stagnation or revolution.

Our professionals are supposed to “get it” – the proper balance, at least as they participate in their fields of specialized training. But while they may be able to sustain this balance as professionals, many are not able to apply this same balanced perspective when evaluating the affairs of everyday life, where they often allow self-interest in the benefits of the status quo to undermine their commitment to progressive change. And, so far as the supposedly educated populace at large is concerned, its members dwell mostly in the arena of opinion blown by the wind of circumstances and impression, and they discover balance mostly by accident.

Maybe we achieve a balance between the forces of youth and age only in the overall evolution of human culture where in the midst of all our general lack of social enlightenment, we nevertheless have historically crept inch by inch into a socially progressive future. The present question for the species is: having crept socially for so long in this snail pace manner at the same time that technology and science have leapt ahead at an ever increasing rate, can we afford to continue at this minimal general rate of change given the magnitude of the challenges that now face us?

Of course, all of life is up for grabs; that is just the way it ever is, whether it is to be humans that accelerate through their window of opportunity and become true masters of their destiny, or whether this option comes to some other species somewhere else in the multiverse. Each species gets its chance. And chance itself can take out even the mightiest – one giant asteroid hit and the age of the great reptiles – gone! Within the realm of chance, we have our opportunity – but only for a time. And our time is under ever greater stress from economic inequality across classes and nations, cultural colonialism and ideological terrorism, the explosion of the human population, the accumulating and potentially catastrophic effects of climate change, limited natural resources of all kinds to meet the ever greater expectations of humans to share in a high standard of living, mass migration and political upheaval as seas rise and densely populated nations are inundated, and epidemic in a packed world where new and “improved” diseases can flash across continents. Are we ignoring the giant asteroid of our species’ own making that lies in our newly minting future?

We are a youthful culture, and Youth is good at ignoring the obvious and unwittingly entering the zone of peril. Wisdom anyone? Where are the Progressive Elders with the wisdom of foresight rather than hindsight when we need them, and is anyone listening to the few of these progressive elders that we do have, whose voices are struggling to be heard? Remember the enlightened elders that tried to expose the perils of Iraq and WMD and remember the elders who warned lawmakers and the regulators about WorldCom and the derivatives market – the source of the recent Wall Street debacle and the Great Recession? The progressive elders are out there with balanced advice to address our species’ really important challenges, but our partisan politicians are mostly oblivious – consumed by meaningless bickering and senseless military and earmark adventures, while a youthful media is mired in an “every crisis of the moment” mentality and lacking the foresight to illuminate our real challenges. Is our species’ civilized window of opportunity being frittered away?

For 99.9% of our history, humans have oriented to traditional, conservative elders to show the way into the future. But we live in the last one tenth of one percent of our history where the pace of change is exponential and where the severity of our major challenges is escalating geometrically. Are we up to the challenges now confronting us? Are we wise enough to really commit to the kind of youthful, progressive change that is appropriately tempered by sensitivity to the past? We need Progressive Elders because youth does not have the power or position to act rapidly enough. And traditional elders with their conservative orientation to the past lack the foresight to lead us in a timely manner. Instead of identifying and promoting the creative solutions we need, our traditional elders – mostly political, corporate and religious – in fact pose the greatest impediment to meeting our challenges expeditiously. Yes, they are just being typical conservative elders, the same old elders when unfortunately the “same old” invites a potential doomsday outcome for human civilization. We cannot afford all the Pope like elder figures in our world wide midst who would ignore the many elephants in the room and focus our attention on the contraception bogymen, or stoning adulterers, or banning gay marriage, or supporting trickle down justifications for deregulation, or promoting fear of shortage to gain additional subsidies for expanded oil and coal production, or building razor wire fences to answer the Palestinian or “illegal” immigrant challenges. So little time, so much of it spent bogged down in the muck and mire of the status quo! Progress inch by inch will not do when what is now required is wisdom moving us socially in leaps and bounds and maintaining pace with technology.

“United Elders for Responsible Change,” that is the movement for progressive wisdom that we need in our current species’ situation, a new synthesis that combines the youthful orientation to innovation and change with the elder sensitivity to the complex needs of the whole. We need to require maturity of our leaders, give up on all the silly posturing, and commit to cooperation in pursuit of real answers to the Big Issues. That is the vision that can sustain our species’ window of opportunity in the present precarious context. At the ideal level, I am optimistic about the possibility that materializing this vision could occur, but I am not holding my pragmatic breath! There are just too many “Popes” or “Wahabi” Ayatollahs, and anti-government, one-world-order paranoids, and self-serving warlords, and self-righteous vigilantes, and corrupt dictators and bureaucrats, and offshore tax evaders, and avaricious Wall Street hedge fund operators and traders, and criminal gangs, and drug lords out there. And there are far too many uneducated, gullible humans who believe that their “Pope/Imam/Tea Party Leader/ Warlord, etc.” is somehow in possession of the absolute, if mostly 12th century, Elder Truth. Given all of the conservative forces of restraint and the weakness of the commitment of the international community

to true cooperation and enlightened, progressive change, it is entirely possible for humans to stumble worldwide into an Armageddon that has nothing to do with “God’s Will” and everything to do with the impressive human capacity for avoidance, stupidity and intransigence. For all of our supposed intelligence, are we humans really any better than the horde of lemmings gathering to run over the cliff edge and into the sea below?

Hope springs eternal. The question is: will we be privileged to continue our hoping from a platform of advanced civilization or will we be reduced to the condition of survivalist bands and tribes and once again looking to the sky and “knowing” the earth is the center of the universe and continuing to believe that each of our little bands with its exclusive, dogmatic beliefs is favored by a God who has jihad uppermost on His mind?

Youth and Age. Progressive Elders anyone?