To launch an elder journey can mean for many taking a big risk. The risks include:

- Having confidence in your wisdom,
- Cutting back on travel and play to allow time to serve,
- Celebrating your long life rather than wining about it,
- Trusting that embracing elderhood is not the same as admitting you are an impotent old man,
- Facing the bias toward the aging,
- Doing the personal healing necessary to allow us to be in service,
- Initiation into elderhood begins with a voluntary relinquishment of the personal status and executive authority that we have historically offered to older people.

So, hold onto your nuts men, whether you like it or not, if you are over fifty, you are being seen as an elder by MKP, your family, the community and a world that needs generative older people. They don’t trust us but they need us and we, each of us, are being called to decide if we want to launch a personal elder journey. The elders of MKP have defined the elder journey as having seven parts.

**One, The Awakening:** “At some point there is an awakening to the call to become an Elder…It will be a call…to move on and/or change his [a man’s] his path…He will know it as an invitation to function without doing.”

**Two, The Choice:** “…if [an older man] has chosen to continue to grow and develop, he is ready to…realize the power of choosing consciously how he is to live the rest of his life.”

**Three, The Struggle—Facing the Shadows of Old Age:** “Our culture defines old age as a time of decline and disengagement. Choosing otherwise will sometimes feel like ‘swimming against a current’”.

**Four, Resolution and Development of the Tools and Skills of Elderhood:**
“Participating in gatherings and activities of ‘The Elders’, storytelling, ceremony, and passing of family history and gifts of wisdom and blessing to the next generation are key parts of Elder activities in this time of life.”

**Five, Acceptance and Being:** “This is the turning point—the break through. It is a time to enjoy the vibrancy of life, to stop worrying and come to each day with joy and the gift of another day.”

**Six, In Service:** “I am aware that, as an elder, my mission has changed. With my elder mission of service, I can live out my life with a sense of purpose and meaning.”
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By Terry Jones

Seven, Passing it On and Passing On: “The elder has faced and lives with the absolute certainty of his approaching death. We also want to leave a legacy. This season is a time to share what we have acquired with those who are ready to receive it.”

So, first we are initiated as New Warriors, then we integrate that experience into our lives through our groups and then, if we are older men, we are being asked to consider another journey that places us on another, deeper path of healing that prepares us for service. Watch out for your nuts, this is not for the weak. We are not only being asked by the universe to hear the call to elderhood, we are also confronting a long history of prejudice towards elders.

Let’s consider the history for a bit. The hunger for mentors dates back to the time when extended family began to disintegrate. Women today have an average of about two children in their lifetime. Before 1860, families consisted of over five people. This was primarily a nuclear family with an occasional grandparent. The pre-industrial era village contained numerous extended family members. The master craftsmen and other elders such as aunts and uncles and friends of the extended family left their agrarian home about 200 years ago. They went away to work in the cities to feed their families. The work they went to do often lacked meaning. It provided an income but it removed them from Earth. It made subsistence possible and yet was focused on earning wages. Life and livelihood can be about living in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contributing to the greater community. Elderhood includes a confidence in “good work”. Doing good work means doing what we have an inner calling to do. We want to do this kind of work no matter the wages.

In the USA our assumptions about home, work, women and women’s relationship to productivity changed permanently by the 19th Century. The earliest factories were actually the homes of agricultural workers who began producing textiles, iron, glass and other commodities. Women had worked alongside men even at the forges and the textile industry in particular had always depended on women. Gradually younger women were driven into the mills just like the men. This move, this enclosure of men and women away from the home, began the destruction of Earth that is so apparent today. The pride of the elders, the spirit and joy of the elders, and the husbandry by the elders began to suffer when the men and women left home. Another historical event added to the diminution of the elders: the immigration from Europe to America.

An uncontrolled movement of people from all world cultures into the United States occurred in the 19th Century. It was the young and hardy that took on this adventure. Most of the older people remained in their native countries. The American culture from about 1900 on was made up of the children of immigrants. Absent were the elders because they were still in their home country. The offspring of the immigrants were forced to create a culture based largely on their observation of their peers, who offered
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more practical models than those of the few elders who did immigrate. The past of the older people was inaccessible to them. The ancestors of some of the world’s primitive cultures like the Eskimos, for example, who historically had come from an Oriental culture in the Old World, also lacked the knowledge and depth and variety of experience needed to thrive in the New World. Most of the Eskimo elders remained in their natural surroundings in Asia.

The founding “fathers” in this country were in fact “founding sons”, rebellious sons, refugees from patriarchal gerontocracy. They had run from the stifling tradition of being monitored by the repulsive, chiding, gossiping elders in claustrophobic villages. Industrialization and the breakup of the extended family and immigration separated old men and women from the young. In pre-modern times, before the 18th Century, the young discovered adulthood by being in close proximity to parents and older people who were living in the same village. Older people did not need to be balanced and devoted elders to model accessibility. The mere fact that they were not mobile, remained in the community and had long lives meant that they could be a resource to the young. Some of the older people exhibited elder like behavior but all older people, mature or not, left behind a pathway for the young to assess.

In America today, old people are denigrated. In my experience many find people over 60 years of age to be noxious, in their way, bothersome, weak and lacking in intelligence. The distance we feel between older people and the young is, however, not a uniquely Western problem. Retiring older people, in turn, try to drown out any positive intuition we might have about aging through diversions such as travel, entertainment, alcohol abuse and other obsessive habits. Old people remind us of our mortality. Our judgment in the West is that death is a mistake and we try to avoid it as long as possible. Embracing death as a part of life, however, is guaranteed to deepen a person’s appreciation of life. Erik Erikson said that elders have a “detached concern with life…in the face of death itself.” Our denigration of older people is more an expression of our fear of aging than a statement about the value of older people.

Sigmund Freud theorized that two forces drive human experience: libido, the life instinct and thanatos, the death instinct. Freud believed life included a struggle between these two forces. Rabbi Schachter-Shalomi said that “Libido surges with vitality, seeking pleasure and continuity of experience. Thanatos longs to return to an inanimate state of quiescence devoid of all striving and conflict”. In The Prophet, Gibran wrote, “Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the King whose hand is to be laid upon him in honor. Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his trembling that he shall wear the mark of the King? Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling?” When we access the death instinct we can be energized in a way that is comparable to the charge we get from libido. If we accept our mortality we are more inclined to celebrate the time we have left on Earth and get the most out of the present moment.

When Westerners, especially those who are male, first consider the libido and its drives, they assume with trembling that the libido begins to die in the second half of life. It is at this time, they muse, that the completing and contemplative instincts of thanatos replace
the libido. This brought up a problem for me, however: a number of large, stressful and action-oriented challenges came into my life when I passed the age of 50. I shifted from my professional occupation into an energetic and creative occupation with elderhood and the research that went into it. I had to let go of my children as they matured and moved into their adult lives. My wife took off professionally and at age 50, she was as vigorous and passionate about her work as I had been in my thirties. While I was gradually resting into a quieter and less aggressive style of living, I was also charged with new passions, new relationships, a “new” wife and new activities that came with these new charges. My libido was calmed in some ways but was elevated in others. At 50, I was beginning to be drawn by the siren call of thanatos, but it could be many years, I judged, before contemplation, reminiscing, meditation, listening and quiet days of minimal anxiety would be mine.

The way we think about elders is lost in how we view the elderly. Our fear of death and our consequent desire to stay young and stay around young people gets in the way of seeking out elders. Our language overflows with words and phrases we use to separate ourselves from old people: relic of the past, old relic, out-of-date, not-with-it, old fossil, obsolete, over-the-hill, old fogey, old codger, old crock, crotchety, decrepit, doddering, gray beard, senile, outmoded, little old man/lady, wizened, wrinkled, superannuated, archaic, second childhood, dotage, past their prime, having one foot in the grave, antiquated, toothless, old biddy. When the United States was formed in 1776, our founders turned to the young for energy and their hunger for individual expression. The “New Americans” wanted to avoid the mistakes and excesses that had reduced the Mother Country into an old, wrinkled, withered, worn-out hag! Interesting it was, however, that we chose the bald eagle as our national bird. One of a young man’s fears is growing bald as he ages. If this means some ambivalence prevailed, it probably resulted from the young Americans’ wish that the old were more dependable, more accessible and interested in mentoring the young.

The young Americans of the 18th Century displayed uneasiness with decorum, gentility and the propriety one expects from old people. A fear of old age and old people was rampant among them. By the end of the 19th Century historian Frederick Turner was appealing to Americans to cherish one’s youth: “The older they grow, the more they must reverence the dreams of their youth.”

The Puritans, however, had seen in old people the image of God and when His majesty and eternity are set forth in Scripture, it is with white hair. These early Americans saw the old as standing on the boundary between the “natural and unnatural worlds.” The assumption made in pre-modern times even in North America was that the old were wiser because of accumulated experience. In communities where literacy was less common, it was the older people who provided not only but also a connection to the past. Their memory was the unrecorded history of the people.

Though your infirmities be never so many and great, you have peculiar honor that is twisted with your infirmity, for it is called the Crown of Age. The old were expected to be dignified in that they wore the Crown of Old Age. This led, incidentally, to the
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expectation that they would live with restraint. A minister of the 18th Century wrote that the old were “expected to be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, charity and patience… They were to be always a living example of the good old way for the public”. So, not only were the old respected but also they apparently had to work at maintaining that respect. There was an assumption in the community, shared by older people, that being old earned a person a heightened level of respect. In those days it was seldom questioned whether an old person was truly wise. When the old were fewer in number, perhaps it was easier to value them as a resource. In the world of high fertility and high mortality, where the population was very young and the odds against surviving to a ripe old age were great, respect for age was enhanced by its comparative rarity”.

There are other factors that affect the status of old people in a culture. The foremost for males has been property ownership. The influence of the landed citizen has been significant ever since people stopped their nomadic wandering and held onto “things”. Two of the most energetic classes of people in American history, however, were the pioneer and the entrepreneur. These two risk-takers were capable of confronting new horizons without the wise old people to guide them. In the New World, young people with new ideas and lots of energy accomplished a great deal on their own. The pioneers found their own land. They had less need for inherited land and, therefore, were less influenced by the older people from whom they might inherit land. The entrepreneur built businesses and accumulated wealth in a community of young and hardy people. The old people who owned land had been left behind.

The next most significant factor determining the status of old people after possession of land is the possession of strategic knowledge. To be “strategic” the knowledge would need to be applicable, for example, in the management of a person’s economy, the raising of children or in the maintenance of their health. The old people who immigrated were a resource in their homeland “strategically” but much less in the New World. Another factor determining status has always been the predominant modes and styles of economic productivity (Fischer, p.39). Once again, the old in the New World were less skilled because what they had learned about economy and survival was in another, older culture.

Before the Industrial Era, families were clustered closely together. In the 17th Century the village commons were the primary social units of England. In this system the majority of people, the peasantry at least, comprised a village community of shareholders who utilized the majority of the land on a collective basis. By the 18th Century, millions of craftspeople and artisans in England and throughout Europe were beginning to see the degradation of their labor and the undermining of their families through the displacement of handicrafts by machines”. The era of machines drew the men away from the village commons and into the new way of life that began the breakdown of the extended family. Old men could not compete for the new industrial jobs. Respect for them by younger men, therefore, began to wane. So, the fourth factor of status, an ethic of mutual dependence, began to lose its potency. The older people became less and less necessary to the survival of the family.
Yet another factor of significance is the importance of received traditions, especially religious ones. Received tradition could be defined as the inherited transmission, from generation to generation, of customs, practices and knowledge. Initiation is a ceremonial admission into a group or society. Of the four elements of initiation (i.e., community, sacred space, the elder, readiness of initiate) the elder's blessing was an example of a person offering and another receiving tradition. What has happened in modern times is that elders have become less visible and ritual initiation has occurred less often. Tradition is not being "received" as readily as it was in pre-industrial times.

When in colonial America the older citizen was occasionally appreciated it facilitated continuity, stability, permanence and order in the society. The privileges of old age were apparent in the arrangement of permanent seating in many of the colonial meetinghouses. These community halls were used regularly and were a core aspect of maintaining a sense of community in early America. But, one by one, the governing committees of the meetinghouses changed the seating arrangements. The change began in the late 18th Century and it only took a generation to complete the transition. Rather than assigning seats by age and respect, the committees sold the seats to the highest bidder. The shift from a “pluralistic system of stratification to a unitary system” was based largely on wealth. (Fischer, p.79) A stratified society with the old highly represented at the top was changing.

Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations was published in 1776. Smith’s philosophy laid the foundation for the free-market doctrine. Smith taught that society could become wealthy by following your self-interest and honoring the laws of supply and demand. In 1859 came Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species whose dictate was that the strongest and most fit survived in the evolution of all species. Men and women of the industrial era read Darwin to suggest that survival at any price was a natural behavior in the market place. This also suggested that the youngest, richest and most competitive should be preeminent. Around 1800, the authority of age began to be undermined and at the same time the direction of age bias began to be reversed. The doctrine of profit and the ethic of competition were new and unique to Western societies.

People began to move toward the cities and away from the village community of elders, craftsmen and fellow farmers on common land. Joint work and shared roles in farming and craftsmanship waned in favor of the more competitive world of industrial production. Men were becoming a collection of competitors for scarce jobs. The change in older people’s relationship to younger was becoming apparent. Older men and women stopped seeing themselves as responsible for teaching and mentoring the young. The young were seen as a threat. The young were becoming more capable of taking over the jobs and they lost respect for the older and less competitive men. Older women remained in the village community longer than the men but they increasingly felt that they were alone as educator for the young. The older men began to lose self-respect as the young men moved into the industrialized world and rejected the older men as incapable of preparing them for the workplace.
In ancient Eastern philosophy such as that found in India, the final and highest stage of life was what the Hindu calls the *sannyasan ashrama*. The final stage began at age 75, when a man left his property and family and lived in poverty with a commitment to self-realization and service to society. In China, Taoism taught that in old age males are set free from the prison of their possessions. The Taoist felt that a person is thus promoted to the rank of living spirit. Although modern people of India and China are questioning the utility of these ancient philosophies, it was primarily Western males who led the way off the land, out of the soul and into the world of competition for wealth that, in a twist of fate, has robbed men and women of independence, security, liberty and birthrights.

The movement away from family and the land was a turning point for male and female gender roles. Women were forced to stay home, watch the children, do the cooking and the washing and generally maintain some connection to the community in which they lived. While some great women including Florence Nightingale, Dorothea Dix and Susan B. Anthony fostered the first feminist movement in the 19th Century, the common woman remained on the land. When women did take jobs in the factories, the family system went into an uproar. A home where women were not always present was subversive to the patriarchal marriage. The home thus defined had never before existed. It was a creation of the Industrial Revolution. Men and women were away from home while at work. They had to compete for jobs and do work that was meaningless except for the income produced. Work began to mean long hours performing rote tasks away from the family for income earned, not from the sale of crafts but from the sale of a person’s time and energy.

Working for money, for gain, is only as old as the 18th Century. The village commons had an economy based on subsistence, handicrafts, barter and the sharing of land. In medieval Christian society, people were condemned for attempting to gain profit from the sale of goods or the loaning of money. The central principle of most pre-modern cultures was gift giving. Anthropologists found that in old cultures financial gain seldom was an impulse to work under the original native condition. The Industrial Era concept of working for income alone not only moved people out of the village but also separated them from their reason to celebrate their creativity and survival skills.

The effect of the Industrial Revolution on many other men, women and children was to cause a shifting of the mute, uneducated, leaderless and now more and more property less common population towards the new manufacturing areas. There they became a part of the impoverished craftspeople already in place in the growing towns of tacky and unkempt houses. Factories belching black smoke and beginning devastation to the ecology of two-hundred years were surrounded by the streets of workers’ homes, built cheaply, without space rented to the men and women who had moved there from the farms. There were no schools, no churches and nothing that reminded the new residents of creation and God.

Fathers living in the 19th Century began to detach emotionally from their family and were away from home a great deal. This poem written in 1868 depicts the family condition of the family with a father who worked for wages:
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Father is Coming.
The clock is on the stroke of six,
The father’s work is done.
Sweep up the hearth and tend the fire,
And put the kettle on.

The wild night-wind is blowing cold.
‘Tis dreary crossing o’er the world.
He’s crossing o’er the world apace,
He’s stronger than the storm;
He does not feel the cold, not he,
His heart, it is warm:
For father’s heart is stout and true.,
As ever human bosom knew…
Nay, do not close the shutters child;
For along the land,
The little window looks,
And he can see it shining plain.
I’ve heard him say he loves to mark
The cheerful firelight through the dark.

Hark! Hark! I hear his footsteps how:
He’s through the garden gate.

Run, little Bess, and open the door,
And do not let him wait.
Shout, baby, shout! And clap thy hands,
For father on the threshold stands.

Hold onto your nuts elders of MKP. Launch your elder journey and we all pray you survive it because we are being called. We are the one we have been waiting for.