

THE PULSE OF SPIRIT



EMISSARIES
OF DIVINE LIGHT

THE POWER OF CLEAR RELATIONSHIPS WITH ELDERS

25 MAY 2009

About fifteen years ago, I had the privilege of attending a seminar with Malidoma and Sobonfu Somé, and Robert Bly. Here is a description of Malidoma and his work:

Malidoma, as representative of his village in Burkina Faso, West Africa, and an initiated elder, has come to the west to share the ancient wisdom and practices which have supported his people for thousands of years.

At this critical time in history, the earth's people are awakening to a deep need for global healing. African wisdom, so long held secret, is being called on to provide tools to enable us to move into a more peaceful and empowered way of being, both within ourselves, and within our communities. The indigenous spirit in each of us is calling for cleansing and reconciliation. The ancestors are responding.

The weekend I spent with Malidoma had a lot to do with what we tend to think of in the West as ancestor worship. I remember reading about that in my textbooks at school. It seemed like a very superstitious practice and a fairly mysterious one. Over the course of this weekend with Malidoma, it all made sense to me. I believe there's a profound teaching in it that is relevant for us.

The belief in Malidoma's village was that when a person passes on, they go, first of all, to a place that is something like the purgatory that Christians sometimes believe in. As time goes on, they go on to a higher heaven. While they're in that purgatory, it is believed that they can reach out of that world into our world and do damage in our lives. It is safer when the person has gone to the higher heaven. Yet there is still some risk at that point that the ancestor could reach out of that higher heaven and cause problems in our world. It is also true that the ancestors could bring favor to our lives.

So it might seem a bit superstitious to believe that. But I want to describe what I believe is true about this, highly significant, for our lives. When someone who has been an elder to us has passed

on to the “other side,” if our relationship with that elder is unclear, it will keep unclear things alive in our lives. I’d even go so far as to say that when the physical body has passed on, the energy of the elder remains for a time; it hasn’t dissipated entirely. If that energy pattern is kept alive by people, they may see ghosts. But whether or not we see the ghost, there is the energy of the person that has not fully passed away, just as the physical body may not have fully disintegrated. It is possible to keep a wrong relationship with that kind of energy, which should be allowed to pass away.

But even leaving that aside, if someone who has in any way been an elder to us—a teacher, a parent, a leader—if our relationship with that one is somehow unclear, that keeps something unresolved in us. It is clearly true with a parent. Psychiatrists discovered this somewhere along the line, to the point that it’s gotten to be a joke that psychiatrists speak about mother issues or father issues. So it is true that unresolved relationships with parents who die can leave something hugely unresolved in the person. It is best to have the opportunity to work out what is unresolved between us and a parent while they’re alive. It’s not impossible after they’re gone, but there’s an advantage to doing it in the flesh.

That applies to physical parents who have been elders for us. It also applies to all kinds of other people who played important roles in our life. Last week, here in this Dome and around the world, we had a chance to celebrate the life of someone who had been a spiritual elder to many. It turns out there were a hundred and twenty stations on the telephone, celebrating the life and spirit of Martin Exeter.

It made me remember that in that weekend I spent some years ago, Malidoma and Sobonfu created a ritual. Over the course of several hours we had the opportunity to come closer to the spiritual reality that we knew through someone who had been an elder to us and resolve whatever might be unresolved. It was a profound process. For me, the elder was Martin. And I’ve been thankful for that opportunity I had, and to Malidoma for giving it to me in that form at least. I was not afraid that Martin was going to leap out of the other world and cause problems in my life, but I knew that who I am as a man had been developed, in a large way, in relationship to him, and that who I could be in my life could be inhibited if there were things in me that were unresolved relative to him. The other side of that is that there could be blessing brought through a right relationship with his spirit.

If we are playing the role of an elder, a mother or a father or any other kind of elder, to others, I’m sure we aspire to do it the best that we can. We make it easier on those for whom we’re providing eldering if we do it the best that we can. But what makes it easier? It’s easier for the younger person to embrace their own elderhood if the representation of elderhood that they meet is clear.

However, ultimately, for any person, their stepping into elderhood themselves is not conditioned by the representation of elderhood to them. Having a gifted elder does not guarantee for any of us that we will be the same, and having an elder who has faults in no way prevents us from stepping into our own elderhood. You might say, thank God, because for many people the faults of their elders are only too apparent to them.

What is critical in relationship to those who provide elderhood is our attitude in the matter. For a child, it's hard and maybe even impossible to differentiate between the person who is the mother or the father and the gift that's being given. It's all one package. The child is not going to differentiate between that, because in many ways his parents define his world. But over time, coming into maturity, the child has the opportunity to discover that, for them and for their life, what ultimately matters to them is their appreciation for the truth that's been provided to them. There is the opportunity to let everything else pass away and to become meaningless to them. It doesn't have to matter. It only matters for the young person when they insist upon it mattering. And that's okay, to a point. But we come into our own elderhood in relationship to those who have been our elders, and so the way we handle that relationship is pivotal.

This is a description of what I've been calling *reciprocity*. In this case, our reciprocation and our giving back has to do with coming into the place that an elder has been holding for us. So if we're coming into elderhood, what is it that we are holding for the younger person? Isn't it first and foremost unconditional love? Certainly, as a parent, that's job one. It's hard to come to that place of unconditional love if, in relationship to one's elder, one is living in a place of judgment. I judge my elder but I'm going to offer unconditional love to those who come to me for eldership? If you think about it, do you know anyone who has huge unresolved emotional issues with their parents or their teachers or their leaders, and then are in position to offer unconditional love to others? I don't.

It is a sad thing when eldership that's been offered is deeply flawed. Any actual hurt that has been done is sad, but what is most sad is when the person who has been on the receiving end of the hurt is caused to live in a place of judgment, believing that that will protect them and that will help them along their way. That judgment is most often accompanied by a lack of faith in the person's own ability to be whole and to be an elder. If there is a deeply flawed elder, then there may be protection that is needed. But for the person who has been hurt, the restoration of their faith ultimately comes through their own forgiveness and unconditional love. When those attitudes are present, whatever gifts were brought by the elder are fully received and, along with that, the person's own greatness is embraced. And whatever was flawed is allowed to fade into the past.

So we can think of our own ancestors. I hope that each of us has some way of relating to people of greater wisdom, greater strength, greater understanding and compassion, greater assurance and love in a given circumstance. If you are looking to bring any of those qualities in your life, how do you do it? How would anyone do it? By drumming it up? Well, there is something to rising to the occasion—that's important. But how about doing some ancestor work? How about doing some work with those who represent those qualities that we seek to embody ourselves?

If there's something unresolved in that relationship, we can do something about it. We can bring a spirit of forgiveness so that we set aside what's not clear—just set it aside. In essence, we can say, "All right, that's there, but it won't be relevant for me. What will be relevant in my relationship with people who are my elders will be those qualities of being that I seek to embody myself. That's what's relevant. I reciprocate by magnifying those qualities." And how could anyone reciprocate

with their elders if they don't have that attitude of forgiveness, and set aside those things that they deem to be flaws?

For a time, for a young person, seeing flaws in elders may be useful. It allows them to say, "Okay, you're you and I'm me, and I'm going to live my life and determine my own values for myself." There's probably something healthy about that at some point. But ultimately, a person can't rise to their highest if they're held down by the weights of judgment and unresolve with their elders.

We have the opportunity to surpass our elders, not because in our own mind or heart we put them down and leave them in the dust, but because we celebrate and praise them. In that celebration, we find that we're standing on their shoulders, on the foundation that is the best they've been able to create. We find that we're called to something in *this* day that is *our* work to do. But how can we rise to do our work if we're sitting in judgment over something in the past?

So here is an opportunity for freedom and greatness. It is greatness that's born out of humility. I notice that in most relationships, even though we like to think we are equal, there is imbalance. Somebody is older; somebody knows more about whatever it is; somebody has assurance to bring. Whatever it is, there's some kind of inequality. We have the opportunity to be humble in the face of the inequality. How *do* we handle it? Do we stay in relationship? Do we let it work well? If not, the unresolve may continue and reach down to do damage in our lives, just because we never learned how to work it with each other. I think that the work with the ones we acknowledge as our elders is a good place to start.

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