

## Indigenous Wisdom and Ageism

Rick Hill for HAL magazine

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Elder. Wisdom Keeper. Knowledge Guardian. Who are these people? What do such terms mean or imply about a person? I often get asked if I am an elder. The gray hair helps, but people assume that there are common old people, and a special class of elders – those with much knowledge of their culture. Since I have learned how to make sense out of much of my 65 years of living, people wonder if I have attained eldership.

We don't really have a notion of an *elder* that has become popular today. We have ceremonial leaders. We have longhouse speakers. We have good storytellers. We have old people who can reflect on life-long learning. Often, they are simply referred to as the "old ones," "old people" or "old timers."

The Cayuga people have a term *kso:t* which can be a term of respect for an old person, or your grandmother. Respect for our old people is part of our culture. Age in itself does not ensure intelligence or great wisdom. It simply means that we honor those who have come before us. Life provides ample opportunities to learn, and once they have gotten over the vigour of youth, they can be more reflective.

There is a tradition that when the world was new, the first Original People were made from the clay of the earth. They were given a set of Original Instructions about how to live well on the Great Turtle Island. They were told that there would be a path to follow, as if countless ancestors had already walked there already. This actually means that a way of life was laid out for humans, and if they remained true to that way of life, the future generations would be happy and healthy.

So, people journey down that path, experiencing the beautiful world, negotiating with friend and foe, and trying to mimic the way of life of the Original People. Storytelling and practical experiences were the way by which people gained an understanding of the meaning of the path of life. However, we do not all experience that path in the same way.

There is another old adage: No one can know it all. There are no 'experts' in our culture, as there is too much to know for any one person. Instead, everyone can share a piece of the larger picture. It is when more and more people contribute what they know that we gain a broader insight into our culture, philosophy, history, arts, governance and languages.

The ability to think well is honored in our society. Having good thinking skills were needed in the old days and people had to exercise their thinking abilities. Perhaps this is what makes storytelling so important. It creates mental pictures, and allows your mind to seek resolutions within the mental pictures. When faced with a dire situation, our ancestors would always seek to ensure that their thinking about the matter was 'right.' This implies that the Good Mind (free of debilitating bias) will use its reason to arrive at what is right.

The Cayugas do acknowledge some people are gifted with an ability to remember and recall what older people told them and make sense out of it; they have an extraordinary ability to think things through; they are wise because life has allowed them to be so. *Hodinigohowane* applies to men who have the capacity to think, meaning their minds can carry big thoughts. There is also a term for elder men, *hodinigoha:t*, meaning they have 'wisdom.' This does not mean that women are not smart, only that these are terms that apply to men.

There is however, a slight distinction between someone who is smart because of book learning. *Syadohsraedi* means that 'you are smart (because of education)' and a component of that word has to do with 'paper.' But being paper smart and being culturally smart are not necessarily the same thing. In fact, old people used to say that too much reading can confuse a person. Too many ideas about what is right muddles your mind. So, I better keep this essay brief!

In the end, I would say that while we do not have the concept of an elder in our culture, we recognize that every person has a special gift, and if they can discover and hone that gift, they can provide great service to their community by contributing to the perpetuation of the way of life of our ancestors. Such a gift implies the responsibility to use it well. You can be of any age and employ that gift. Rather than to think of elders, it might be more productive to think of Good Minded people in whose presence our own Good Mind can shine.