



Our Earth, **Our Elders**

Our inability to value elderly people, particularly those with dementia, reflects our loss of the soul dimension of life, argues psychotherapist and eldercare operator Nader Shabangi. **By valuing the timeless human qualities expressed by elders we find meaning, too.**



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Dr Nader Shabahangi is chief and cofounder of AgeSong. He ensures that the company's vision drives its decisions and plans for eldercare services.

In 1992, he founded the Pacific Institute, a nonprofit organisation that helps elders live meaningful lives.

He is an advocate for marginalised groups and creates programmes aimed at caring more comprehensively for elders. Dr Shabahangi is a frequent guest lecturer, including presenting at international conferences focusing on ageing, counselling, and dementia.

In 2003, he authored *Faces of Ageing*, a book challenging stereotypical views of the ageing process and of growing old. In 2008, he co-authored *Deeper Into the Soul*, a book aimed at de-stigmatising and broadening our understanding of dementia. He co-authored *Conversations With Ed*, a book challenging readers to look at dementia in different ways, in 2009 and in 2011 he wrote *Elders Today*, a photo essay describing the opportunities awaiting us in our second half of life.

Last year he edited *Encounters of a Real Kind*, a compilation of stories highlighting his innovative Gero-Wellness programme in which psychotherapy interns work with frail, forgetful elders in an elder community.

Dr Shabahangi received his Doctorate from Stanford University and is a licensed psychotherapist.

Our earth, our world and home, needs elders. It needs their soulful qualities. It needs the wisdom elders afford us, the teachings they can give us. Elders are those elderly people who have turned to values that have stood the test of time.

Having lived through life's trials and tribulations, facing their mortality as they face their end of life, elders have evolved enough to express timeless human qualities such as equanimity, acceptance, patience, compassion, kindness, thoughtfulness, gentleness, calm, empathy and mindfulness. These words describe an attitude, a disposition towards life, the world, people and events, one that's often hard-won through experiences spanning emotions from ecstatic moments of joy to deep, often extended periods of suffering.

Timeless qualities express that which is essentially human. They speak of what we often call the soul – that which is immutable, that transcends time, trends and culture. In today's global culture with its multiplicity of attitudes and approaches to life and its unprecedented access to information and knowledge, an awareness of and focus on timeless human qualities can help us navigate through the thicket of offerings and so help us remain close to what matters most.

Understanding and experience

The search for such depth in life is not to be derived from ideas or theoretical contemplations alone.

Rather, the search for depth and meaning and the importance of timeless human qualities are to be found also in our work with elders and the dying.

We see time and again how humans understand

Timeless human qualities



their lives based on their actual experience, and not merely on what they imagine or comprehend intellectually. Elders with their long life experience and continued learning could and should therefore have a special role in helping guide our societies. Yet, elders have lost the role of guides and advisors. In Western cultures in particular, elders and older people are often tucked away in senior communities or stay isolated in their homes.

Looking past needs to see the person

Our mainstream attitude towards older people is very visible in our so-called assisted-living communities, where many of the oldest of our elders live today. Rather than being held in the highest possible esteem, elders in assisted living are mostly cared for as if they have little to offer. Elders are seen through the lens of the assistance they need, not through the lens of who they are as human beings.

Such an attitude exists because many of us have lost sight of the timeless human qualities that are often most clearly expressed by our elders.

Our inability to see the essential value of our elders relates to our having lost sight of the soul dimension of the human being, of the timeless human qualities that make us human.

Beyond the pathology of dementia

We use the medical diagnosis of "dementia" to describe a state of being. Forgetful elders are called demented, and what is meant is that they are no longer with us, that their mind has left and that they have become people who are no longer fully human. Another viewpoint is to see dementia as a shedding

of the unimportant, a concentration on what is essentially human, and a time to focus on the care of a human being's soul.

Working with forgetful elders constitutes soul-work. We need to consider what makes us essentially human, what comprises a human soul. Do the daily tasks of living, our name and identification numbers, our material possessions, our degrees and certificates, constitute our essential humanity? Hardly. If we lose those elements that do not make up the "soul" of a human being, what do we really lose? Is a human being no longer fully human if all that is unimportant is (at last) gone?

Forgetfulness might just allow us to forget the superfluous and help us remember our core humanity. Rather than speaking of dealing with dementia, we could speak of living closer to our soul.

Timeless human qualities: the soul

Being with the elderly in their last years of life affords insight that helps us arrive at an alternative view on everyday life. Whereas so-called mainstream values, and often those propagated by television programmes and news, promote ideals such as achievement and success, speed and youth, possessions and image, individualism and self-assertion, a different picture of priorities emerges in the presence of true elders.

With them there is little talk about achievements and successes of the past, and no desire to move speedily along or pine for any other age than the present one. Rather than a desire for possessions and individualism, a longing for connection and relationship expresses itself at this stage of life.

Appreciation of the present

In listening to and being with elders, we notice an appreciation of the present moment above concerns about the past or the future. Focusing on the moment relates to elders' ability to be attentive and mindful to what occurs in and around them. They begin to notice more of the so-called little things often overlooked in our busy lives, such as people's sensitivities and feelings, the beauty and diversity of nature, the sounds and smells of the environment.

A different sense of time

Elders often go through life more slowly. We often perceive more deliberate and thoughtful actions, from simple movements such as getting a glass of water to walking to the store. It is as if the actual doing is an end in itself, not simply a means to something else. Walking to the store seems as much about the process and enjoyment of walking as it is about the goal of reaching the store and completing the task at hand.

An elder once pointed out to a young care partner that he felt he was experiencing every moment so much more vividly and intensely than ever before in his life. Subjectively seen, he felt as if he had just as much time ahead of him as any younger person has simply because he experienced "time" and the present moment so much more intensely and deeply.

Gratitude for all that manifests

Feeling thankful for all that manifests in life is a consistent theme for many elders. A smile, a touch, an acknowledgement are met with a gratitude not often found in everyday interactions between people. This gratefulness extends also to an acceptance of one's state of being, to feeling grateful for the people one meets, with whom one shares a life, for the so-called little things one is able to experience and which often go unnoticed.

Patience with the process

Kierkegaard stated that a human being's soul resides in patience. In being patient we accept or flow with life unfolding as it does, rather than being rigid about the way we want it to unfold. As such, we can either live in a constant tension with life or submit to the process as it unfolds in and around us.

Elders have often learned to respect the way life unfolds in its own ways. They have relinquished their desire to control the process. This relinquishment might also be understood as the ability to endure suffering when we humans do not get our way.

Patience thus refers to the ability to stay present with the process and value the process for its own sake. Rather than focus on some goal, the way towards the goal is valued in its own right.

This also speaks of an acceptance of what is present rather than a focus on what is lacking.

Kindness towards life

One of the obvious qualities of most elders is their kindness towards others, especially children and animals. This kindness extends to helping each other by means of a smile, an encouragement, a reassurance offered.

Perhaps because elders had to endure so many of the vagaries of life, they have experienced also how being kind to others has left them feeling better as well.

In many thought and spiritual traditions, kindness is considered a foundational quality often understood as the essence of love.

Kindness also reveals itself in a person's ability to listen, to be truly with others in what it is they are sharing. Such an attitude allows the other the space to explore and discover for themselves rather than being interrupted and distracted by the listener. Elders can be truly amazing listeners.

Mindfulness as a way of being

In going more slowly, paying attention to the so-called little things of life, and in the appreciation of the present, the main attributes of mindfulness can be found.

Mindfulness refers first and foremost to maintaining a calm awareness of oneself and the world in which one lives. Being calm is a requirement for being attentive and present to oneself and the world around one.

Again, it is elders who most exemplify such calmness and presence.

In eldercare communities especially we notice how elders watch the goings-on around them with interest and attentiveness. They move with a slowness that allows them to see and be with what appears in front of them and also to experience themselves at the same time.

Living in harmony with our planet

Humans will have to change their understanding, attitude and behaviour towards our planet if we are to have a future here. Those human qualities that have stood the test of time and that once allowed people to live in harmony with their home, might be a good starting point in our search for a different approach to living with one another and on our planet.

These timeless human qualities are most visible in our elders. Such attributes, if adopted by those younger in years, might indeed influence our societies towards a more sustainable way of life.

For example, an attitude of gratitude or mindfulness alone would – if lived as a principle by those making major policy decisions – allow for a different approach towards ideas of continued development and growth. Rather than thinking that we need more material security and wealth to attain contentment, we would focus on other, more soulful priorities to achieve fulfillment. Similarly, a world established in a spirit of kindness would look very different from a world based on continued self-assertion and self-advancement.

“ How we look at elders is of special importance in caring for and being with those who have become forgetful. ”

