



Wisdom of the (S)ages

Old can be bold, particularly when those with age under their wings seek ways to capitalize on, and share, their own life insights and lessons. A powerfully disruptive force of change has entered the fray from a variety of sources. The Selwyn Institute's Caroline Leys and Hilda Johnson-Bogaerts document the rise and return of the Sages.

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Introduction

Boomers make waves. Fittingly they are part of the turning of the tide in the way Western cultures view older people. They defined what it meant to be young and are doing the same as they enter the 'ageing' zone.

True to their traditions, rather than going quietly into the night, they are blossoming as they assert their input and influence. Helped by their own critical mass and energy along with new initiatives and programs that are adding fuel to their fire.

One such phenomenon given a new lease on life is aptly known as Sage-ing. In keeping with its mandate of caring for, and about, older people The Selwyn Institute is promoting this as a platform to empower people in a manner that will make a world of difference. Part of this process is exploring relevant spiritual influences for the continued engagement with life.

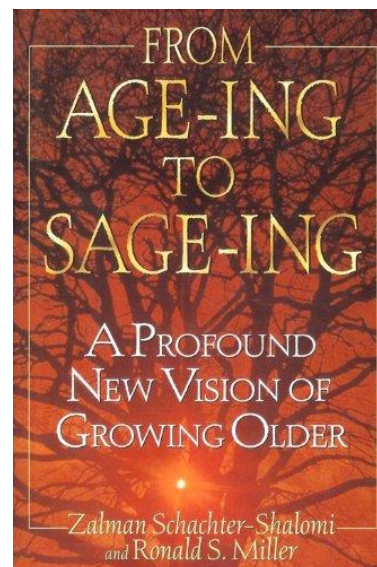
Sage-ing is the brain and soul child of one Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi who took on his own journey of harnessing the enduring power of older people. Part of this involved a literal period of deep contemplation that resulted in his definitive work *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*.

Known more widely as Reb Salman, until his death he was the driving force behind Sage-ing. A movement designed to connect people with themselves and others seeking to be a positively powerful force in their worlds. Through the sharing of insights, experiences, knowledge and goodwill.

Reb Zalman's religious orientation derives from Judaism. In regards to Sage-ing, however, his spheres of spiritual influences and opportunities are much more eclectic.

He was an active teacher of Hasidism and Jewish Mysticism and a participant in ecumenical dialogues throughout the world. His belief in the universality of spiritual truth led him to study with Sufi masters, Buddhist teachers, Native American elders and shamans, Catholic monks and humanistic and transpersonal psychologists. From these influences and his own life journey, he wrote numerous other books and articles. He lived by example and created a platform with enduring possibilities and opportunities for others to learn.

The starting point of his questioning and searching was excitement meshed with curiosity about the future including death. Rather than taking a passive role his turning of the tide on attitudes towards ageing cast the net widely and deeply. He grabbed hold of the concept of using the collected energy of the ages as a critical element of his concept of Sage-ing. There was a strong component of gratitude and service to others.



Off the shelf

Years after his death a discussion took place between 21st Century blog site The Huffington Post and a Zen priest. The interaction captured the essence of what Sage-ing seeks to challenge and change.

The overarching theme was the number of cultures, even in the 'modern' era, that cherish older people. With the 'elephant' in the conversation being: why have societies in the West lost the value, and wisdom of, the ages? Is this 'changing of the guard' a temporary aberration or a symptom of something more entrenched and pervasive?

The blog started the discussion: While many cultures celebrate the ageing process and venerate their elders, in Western cultures — where youth is fetishized and the elderly are commonly removed from the community and relegated to hospitals and nursing homes — ageing can become a shameful experience. Physical signs of getting older tend to be regarded with distaste. Ageing is often depicted in a negative light in popular culture, if it is even depicted at all.

The priest concurred: There's so much shame in Western culture around ageing and death. People themselves, when they're ageing, feel that there's something wrong with them and they're losing value.

Had he been alive no question that Reb Zalman would have put his hand up and introduced Sage-ing as a means of changing this dynamic.

Regaining old ground

There are a number of contributing factors, rather like the proverbial perfect storm, whereby older people in Western cultures are rediscovering and recapturing their dignity, power and influence.

Boomers, with their collective and individual wealth and diversity of life lessons, are proclaiming the more positive aspects of ageing. This phenomenon comes from a variety of sources and directions. Meshed with the ability to question, challenge and not necessarily accept the wishes, or demands, of others.

In an age of consumerism and 'quick fix' solutions to perceived life problems dismissing the accumulated insights and experiences of older people just because they may seem 'uncool' is a wasted opportunity. On a different level, this negative engagement is not only divisive but also destructive to peoples' health and wellbeing at a time when they are increasingly vulnerable.

Turning the tide, and tables, on this trend is one of several reasons why there is a positive correlation with ageing and Sage-ing. The process has been invaluable in helping to prepare people of all ages to the challenges that life's journey inevitably present.

The irony is that the independent, even self-assured, spirit embodied in the Boomers had a hand in creating this disengagement. This generation is taking back ownership of how and why people connect.

Jennifer Ailshire,¹ an assistant professor at a The University of Southern California School of Gerontology, proposes that Boomers are redefining what ageing is and what old age looks like. Another academic, William Chopik who is an expert in ageing and wellbeing, says older people usually say they feel younger than they are. People who report feeling younger actually tend to live longer and healthier lives. Moreover, they do not tend to have as much of a pattern of decline.

Similarly, The New Zealand Mental Health organisation sees the influence of Boomers as an important part of an ageing well strategy and practice. They take the position that Boomers are all about helping people prepare for a later life that has meaning, purpose and joy.

In their words: *We're ageing faster and living longer than ever before. The Boomers (those born 1946-1964) have the potential to re-define what it means to grow old. It's predicted that by 2020, the over-65s will outnumber children. And by 2036 almost a quarter of our population (23%), will be aged 65 and over. Ageing isn't something we can dodge. What's really important is how we age. Like financial planning for retirement, wellbeing planning works better the sooner it starts. It is aligned with the Mental Health Foundation's [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) and o with the Government's [Positive Ageing Strategy](#), which aims for older New Zealanders to be healthy, independent, connected and respected.*

3 | 1. Why your perception of 'old' changes as you age; Kaiser Health News. June 2019.
2. Ageing people are feeling younger; Physician News, June 2019.

Boom time for life engagement

The benefits, and outcomes, for The Selwyn Institute building on the Sage-ing concept are many and varied.

Sage-ing involves looking at life in a new way, as we grow older. It involves the notion of harvesting the wisdom of peoples' lives, transmitting that wisdom as a legacy to future generations, and giving back through service.

It effectively 'harvests' life experience and sees service as the natural result of continued inner growth. This generosity of spirit triggers joy in human relations, while positively benefiting the communities and cultures where Sage-ing is alive.

The process, involving both contemplation and action, that culminated in the creation of the Sage-ing movement took guidance from historical positions such as Tribal Elder and the like.

Reb Zalman acknowledges the influence from the ages. "Throughout most of history, elders occupied honored roles in society as sages and seers, leaders and judges, guardians of the tradition and instructors of the young. They were revered as gurus, shamans, wise old men and women who helped guide the social order and who initiated spiritual seekers into the mysteries of inner space. Beginning with the Industrial Revolution, with its emphasis on technological knowledge that often was beyond their ken, elders lost their esteemed place in society and fell into the disempowered state that we now ascribe to 'normal' old age. At the time most people confronted the prospect of ageing with fear as they looked forward to decades-long decline into personal diminishment and impoverishment."

"To reverse this negative expectation the model of sage is someone who benefits from extended longevity by developing extended consciousness. Elders practice contemplative disciplines from our spiritual traditions and come to terms with their mortality. They harvest their life experiences, pass on their wisdom to younger people, and safeguard the health of our ailing planet. Out of their late-life explorations in consciousness, elders bestow upon the world the life-giving wisdom it desperately needs. At the same time crowning their lives with respect and honour."

Positive take on the human spirit

Concurrent with this rediscovery of the power of ageing has come the emergence of the fourth wave of the evolution of psychology, namely positive psychology. The timing from a Sage-ing perspective is serendipitous to say the least.

Sages draw on growth techniques from modern psychology and contemplative techniques from the world's spiritual traditions to expand their consciousness and develop wisdom. By expressing wisdom as consecrated service to the community, they endow their lives with meaning and avoid becoming economic and psychological burdens on their loved ones and on society.

Publication *Psychology Today* says Positive psychology³ focuses on well-being, contentment, excitement, cheerfulness, the pursuit of happiness, and meaning in life. Traditionally, psychology has focused on dysfunction—people with mental illness or other issues—and how to treat it. Positive psychology, in contrast, is a field that explores how ordinary people can become happier and more fulfilled.

According to the late Christopher Peterson⁴, a pioneering researcher in the field, the positive psychology movement is founded on three maxims: "What is good in life is as genuine as what is bad... What is good in life is not simply the absence of what is problematic... And third, the good life requires its own explanation, not simply a theory of disorder stood sideways or flipped on its head."



Emphasis on meaning

In positive psychology, there is an emphasis on meaning, not just on fleeting happiness and warm ‘fuzzy’ feelings. Martin Seligman, often regarded as the Godfather of positive psychology, has described three paths to happiness: the Pleasant Life (Hollywood’s view of happiness); the Good Life (focused on personal strengths and states of flow); and the Meaningful Life (aimed toward a higher purpose).

“Being a happy-go-lucky individual,” he says, “is largely a matter of genetics. What we should strive for is eudemonia—Aristotle’s concept of flourishing—rather than hedonia (pleasure). Studies suggest that pursuing a good and meaningful life predicts greater life satisfaction overall.

Steve Taylor⁵ a senior lecturer in psychology at the United Kingdom is Leeds Beckett University, shares this view.

“Positive psychologists have established that merely to have a “good time” in the present moment does not provide the basis of a life of well-being. There are many other important factors: for example, a sense of purpose and meaning, positive relationships, regular periods of flow (absorption or engagement in activities), a positive thinking style, and a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Having regular contact with nature, practicing acts of altruism, and a sense of self-development are also important sources of well-being. In the end, trying to find happiness solely through hedonism leads to sense of meaninglessness and emptiness. A life based on flow, altruism and self-development becomes rich with meaning and fulfilment, in the same way that a garden that has been carefully cultivated becomes fertile and abundant.”

The legacy lives

Reb Zalman has left a legacy that feeds on the confluence of deep, and meaningful, engagement with the flow of life. Adding value to the combined work, and efforts, of others. Rather than being distraught with the way the world is evolving, he saw more than just glimmers of hope.

His pioneering work has had an irreversible impact on our culture. Psychologists, gerontologists, spiritual teachers and even popular talk-show hosts are recognising the need for expanded consciousness, especially Boomers in searching for a psycho-spiritual model to make sense of the elder years. Second, as someone who has been deployed to plant seeds in the garden called spiritual eldering, he did his part in cultivating the tender first shoots that have appeared.

While we’re still enmeshed in our culture’s fascination and obsession with youth, as the Huffington Post acknowledged, below the surface an eldering consciousness is germinating. As it gathers force, it’s providing an influx of wisdom we need to face the multiple, system-wide crises that confront us everywhere.

Along with other initiatives taking place at The Selwyn Institute there is a natural and enduring ‘fit’ with the teachings that come from Sage-ing. At its heart, Selwyn is a Christian, and spiritual, organisation. Determined to help people lead full lives to the best of their potential. There is an amazing ‘tribe’ of goodwill over and above the foundation of faith intent on helping others achieve a generous maturity for now and the future. This is a leadership role fostering an environment where people willingly take up challenges and opportunities.

Sage-ing fits in well with the Selwyn Institute and overall with The Selwyn Way. Giving reassurance to older people that they are safe in the hands of people who care for, and about, them. Clearly, its introduction creates an opportunity for engagement with some very good concepts and resources that have ageless meaning and purpose.



Sage-ing: The Power of Eight Working as One

1. *Nourishing ourselves mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and*
2. *Acquiring the skills for working on the inside, and*
3. *Giving a real hearing to our inner voices, and*
4. *Engaging in life review and life repair, and*
5. *Synthesizing wisdom from long life experience, and*
6. *Dealing with life completion and coming to terms with one's mortality, and*
7. *Transmitting a legacy to future generations, and*
8. *Doing this nobly, in connection with our inner, actualized self.*



Reb Zalman. Ageless wisdom

To care for older people, you have to care about them

*Me mātua aroha ki tetangata,
hei manaaki tika i arātou*

The Selwyn Way is our approach to the care and wellbeing of all who connect with us. The wellbeing of any person we connect with, is defined by the following five domains:

Spirituality (Taha Wairua)

A dimension that brings meaning to life.

Growth (Te Haere Whakamua)

Continuing to learn and flourish as a person.

Contentment (Te Taunga Manawa)

A state of satisfaction with life.

Belonging (Whanaungatanga)

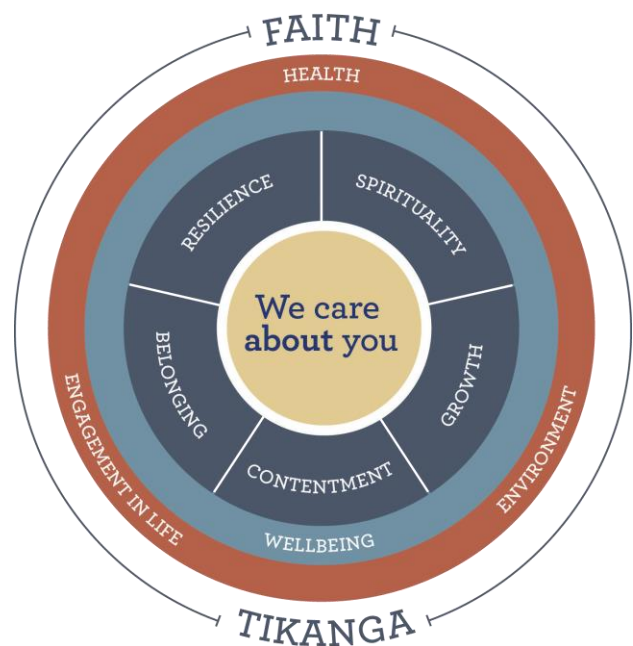
A sense of meaningful connection with others, being part of a community.

Resilience (Te Oranga)

Capacity to overcome adversity, stress or uncomfortable change in ourselves or our circumstances.

Wellbeing is impacted by:

- The environments we create for you
- Your physical health status
- The opportunities you have to engage in life



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