

Introduction

There are more of us entering the second half of our lives than at any other time in history. Our numbers are growing rapidly, and as life expectancy continues to rise, more of us will find ourselves living much longer as elders than did our parents and grandparents.

These extra years, even decades, extend the blessings of life. Yet in many ways we are not prepared to live these years fully. Our American culture has lost the capacity to acknowledge and value elders the way many other cultures around the world do. We have forgotten the rites of passage that help us learn how to become wise elders who actively participate in our communities and live deep, fulfilling lives. Unfortunately, our culture's current perspective is that the second half of life offers only decline, disease, despair, and death.

If we are to live our best second half of life, to embrace these years and flourish in them, we need to consciously shift our cultural perspective. It is time. To know that things must change, we have only to look at the shocking fact that America has the world's highest suicide rate among elders. We can no longer ignore the wisdom that is irrevocably lost to future generations when our elders are marginalized or rendered invisible. The more challenging our world, the more we need our elders with us to share the lessons they have learned, to

lend us their problem-solving skills, and to enhance our lives by imparting their unique gifts.

The rites of passage from birth to fifty years of age are well defined. We may go to school, get our first job, find life partners, raise a family, develop a career, and contribute to our communities. But the skills we developed during the first half of life are not adequate, nor are they appropriate, to support us during the second half; the tasks and requirements for growth and change are completely different. From age fifty onward, we know that there will be four broad frontiers to face:

- Retirement: from what, toward what?
- The possibility of becoming a mentor, a steward, or a grandparent.
- Coping with the natural challenges of maintaining the health of an aging body.
- Mortality: losing our loved ones, and the inevitability of our own death.

Each of these frontiers will demand from us very different attitudes, disciplines, and life skills, many of which have not yet been clearly associated with increased longevity. Each frontier will challenge us to be courageous in the face of our fears. This new terrain promises to be both daunting and exciting.

Many world tales and perennial wisdoms point to eight metaphorical gates of initiation through which we must pass in order to develop fully into wise people, or elders. These gates are archetypal passageways to deepening our experience of life in our later years. They offer powerful tools

to help us shift our perspective. They map a new landscape for the second half of life, grounded in multicultural traditions that honor elders.

As we explore each archetypal gate, we will encounter myths, stories, and songs from around the world that teach us to see with fresh eyes. We will reflect upon art, poetry, symbols, and metaphor to gain understanding. Learning from wise people across many disciplines — psychology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, and others — we will deepen our experience and add new dimension to our lives.

Each gate chapter opens with an image of hands and ends with an image of feet—both symbols of the process of entering and leaving the gate. Every initiation or transition has the potential to expand our love, to teach us more about giving and receiving, and to manifest more balance and creativity in our lives—all concepts that are embodied by hands and feet. They symbolize the power to love, create, move, or change. Hands are associated with giving, receiving, and serving. They teach us about reciprocity. Feet bring us to where we can be of use. They uphold us firmly and keep us in balance while our hands do the work. Hands and feet are both extremes of the body and are obedient to our instinctual desires and thoughts. Many cultures of the world purify or mark hands and feet before or after an initiation, in recognition of their capacity to bridge the profane and sacred worlds.

The lessons offered at each of the eight gates rigorously prepare us for our initiation into elderhood. The Silver Gate challenges us to invite new experiences into our lives. The White Picket Gate asks us to reflect on the roles we have played earlier in life, and to learn to assume the new role of elder. The Clay Gate urges us to care for and enjoy our bodies, even as we come to terms with their limitations. At the Black and White

Gate, we learn to deepen our relationships in more intimate and mature ways. The Rustic Gate encourages us to use our creativity to enhance our lives, contribute to our communities, and leave a lasting legacy. At the Bone Gate, we develop the courage to be authentically ourselves in the world. The Natural Gate calls us to replenish our souls in silence and in nature and to take time for reflection. When we reach the Gold Gate, we actively engage in practices of nonattachment and prepare for our passing from this world.

The second half of life is the ultimate initiation. In it, we encounter new, unexpected, unfamiliar, and unknowable moments that remind us that we are a sacred mystery made manifest. If we truly understand what is required of us at this stage, we are blessed with an enormous opportunity to develop and embody wisdom and character. We enjoy limitless possibilities to restore, renew, and heal ourselves. And because of our increased longevity, for the first time in history we also have the opportunity to create a map of spiritual maturity for future generations to use as they enter their own later years.

How can we meet the challenges and opportunities of the second half of life? How can we do it better than has been done before? Our personal and collective work at the eight gates of initiation is an essential tool that can enable us to reclaim the rites of passage into elderhood. At each gate, we will learn from cultures that regard elders as living treasures; symbols, images, and metaphor will offer direct experience of the mysteries of initiation; and the initiatory process itself will ignite, deepen, and cultivate our wisdom and insight.

The second half of life presents us with the opportunity to develop increased depth, integrity, and character—or not. The choice is always

ours. If we choose to grow and achieve ever-deepening wisdom, we must be willing to do the personal work necessary to pass through the eight gates. There are rich rewards to be had for our efforts. The tasks, challenges, and gifts presented at each gate prepare us to be wise and engaged elders who provide meaningful contributions to other individuals, families, organizations, and communities.

May our journey through the eight gates of initiation liberate us from the disparaging stereotypes of aging, and light a new path for future generations. May we be the ones to reclaim and model the dignity, grace, and authentic power that true elderhood confers. This book is offered as both a guide and a resource to encourage such a transformation in our approach to aging. It provides information, reflection, and solace for those who want to further understand the mysteries of the second half of life and deepen their experience of it.

May our conscious legacies and wise stewardship make the world a better place.