Claiming Your Place at the Fire

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Prologue
At the Fireside: The New Elder

This story begins where so many of the greatest stories ever told begin: around a blazing fire, beneath the starry heavens, far from civilization, deep in the wild. Richard recalls it this way:

On my twentieth walking safari in Tanzania, I find myself with my team of "inventurers"-our term for individuals who adventure inward through outdoor experience-sitting around the fire late into the evening with a small group of Hadza elders.

The Hadza are a tribe of hunter-gatherers who live today as did our earliest human ancestors. The ancient is present for them in this most elemental of human experiences. Gathered about a fire in an abundant region on the edge of a primeval baobab tree forest, they are grounded in the deepest sense with the natural world, their survival dependent upon it.

The elders of the tribe, in keeping with ancient tradition, sit closer to the fire. Younger members form a larger circle around them. Our inventure team is honored to sit among the elders. In the glow of the firelight, I see expressions of respect and deference on the faces of our group as we lean forward to take in the words of wisdom being shared with us.

The man who is speaking is named Maroba. He is a Hadza elder, deeply immersed in the ancient ways and stories of his people. Though barely five feet tall, Maroba exudes a solidity and power that belies his small stature.

He is sharing with us a story passed down from his parents and grandparents, from their parents and grandparents, from time immemorial. It is a story with a lesson that Maroba and his people understand in their very bones, and one that resonates powerfully across space and time. We call the story "The Gift of the Honey Guide," for the story itself is a gift, passed on from generation to generation and to us.

The Honey Guide is a small gray- and rust-colored bird, about the size of a robin, that flutters from branch to branch on the mighty baobab and acacia trees in the Hadza homeland. Maroba tells us that from his youngest days he was taught that the Honey Guide is the friend of his people. He is the "indicator" bird, who points the way to life's sweetness. The Honey Guide indicates where to find the honey on which our lives depend, the honey that we need to survive.

We are reminded, says Maroba, to keep our eyes and ears open for the Honey Guide wherever we go. Should we hear the "weet-terr, weet-terr" of this wise bird, we must whistle back to let him know we are listening.

The Honey Guide will then fly close to us and flash his white tail feathers to get our attention. Follow him, whistling to him as he sings back, "weet-terr, weet-terr," and he will lead us to a bees' nest dripping with honey. We must then climb the tree and smoke out the bees and take the honeycomb.

Then here is the most important part of all, Maroba instructs: Before we eat the honey ourselves, we must break off a piece of the honeycomb and leave it for the Honey Guide to thank him for his guidance. Tribal wisdom has it that if we

do not do so, he will no longer sing to us. Or worse, he may even play tricks on us, like choosing to sing when we are hunting, giving us away to the prey we are stalking.

Listening to Maroba's story with rapt attention, we know firsthand that it is not a myth. In fact, we know that it is true. Our group of 'inventurers' has seen the Honey Guide firsthand. We have witnessed with our own eyes and ears this amazing interaction between human beings and nature-a relationship that benefits both species involved.

Maroba's story calls us back to that miracle we have seen and reminds us that what we need in life is available to us if only we know how to look for it. And if only we remember that getting what really matters in life depends above all on giving it back. At the end of the story, I lament that the torch of wisdom, and the legends like Maroba's, are not being passed through the generations in my world. I ask our team, "Do you have elders, like Maroba, who guide you?" Many reply sadly, "I don't know. No matter whom I think of, their role seems narrow or fragmented. I don't think we have real elders anymore."

As we stare into the glowing, late-night coals of the fire, Maroba asks me, "Who are the elders of your tribe?" I try to answer but am stumped. I draw a blank. My "tribe"? What is that? My elders? Who are they? I cannot come up with a clear answer. The very concept of "elder" for our tribe-contemporary men and women in Western industrialized society-seems foreign. And yet it is clear to me that Maroba's question begs for an answer.

The next day, and as our trek wears on, Maroba's question- Who are the elders of your tribe?-stays with me and with our fireside conversations. We discuss it at length and come away with some answers, but many more questions. Each night, sitting around another fire, our conversations dig deeper into what it means for us to be a wise elder. Clearly it is different than the traditional picture painted by Maroba, although many features are similar.

Perhaps most importantly, the idea of elder, for us, is distinct from being old. Those of us who aspire to being elders in our communities know that we are older; what is most important to us is a sense of vitality and purpose, a sense that we still matter and can make a difference in our own lives and in the lives of those around us. We aspire to a purposeful sense of self in elderhood.

We live in a culture that celebrates youth. Many mid-lifers, being members of-or close to-the baby boom generation, have been among those who have celebrated youth most enthusiastically. Now, though, finding ourselves no longer young-chronologically -we wonder about this emphasis on all that is new and fresh. We wonder about our place in the world and all that we have to offer as a result of our life experience.

Much of our fireside discussion comes back again and again to picturing the traditional setting of elders and tribal groups around the fire. The place of respect that elders are accorded in such settings represents a sharp contrast to how older adults in our society are often seen.

What strikes us vividly about this is the degree to which the elders in traditional societies earn and accept the respect they are given. It's not just that they are acknowledged by their people; that is a given. As importantly, they claim themselves as vital resources for their communities. Becoming an elder is, for them, an active step that involves staking out a place of power that one has achieved. We see this represented clearly by the place taken around the traditional fire. A person closest to the flames has to have something valuable to bring forth and must take the initiative to do so. In this way, he or she claims that place of respect at the fire.

This idea of "claiming" one's place at the fire illuminates our discussions. We see this step of owning our power as the missing piece to the role of elders in our society. We recognize that, at least to some degree, we have accepted our culture's picture of aging. We realize it is time for us-individually and as a group of people in the second half of our lives-to create a new picture of vital aging. It is time to claim our own places at the fire. A new language emerges from our discussions. We begin calling ourselves the "new elders." New elders are people who use the second half of life as an empty canvas, a blank page, a hunk of clay to be crafted on purpose. These are people who never stop reinventing themselves.

For new elders, the past predicts but does not determine the future. New elders live the second half of their lives in ways characterized by an aliveness and vitality that is grounded in a deep sense of purpose and a refusal to-in the words of Dylan Thomas-"go gentle into that good night" as did many of their forebears.

For a world-renowned example of new elders at work in the world, we think of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter. By teaching Sunday school, building low-cost homes for Habitat for Humanity, and working for reconciliation in fledgling democracies, the Carters have committed themselves to continual reinvention through giving and growing. They are putting to use the deep wisdom they have developed over their long and useful lives. They are experiencing a sense of liberation that only comes to us when we have discovered who we truly are and how best to express that.

Late one night, sitting alone, gazing into the firelight, I have an experience that seems to bring it all together. It is an odd and almost mystical experience, no doubt informed by the setting in which it takes place: a starlit night in an African baobab forest, the fire burning brightly. Around me, just beyond the firelight, the eyes of many animals wink on and off in the surrounding darkness.

As I stare into the fire, I reflect on four questions that, in our ongoing discussions of new elderhood, we have pondered at length:

Who am I? Where do I belong? What do I care about? And what is my life's purpose? The answers to these questions, though elusive, seem key to becoming a new elder. If we could only answer these questions, we would each discover new ways to become the new elder we aspire to be.

Staring into the fire, I suddenly see not just one flame, but four: four flames, one for each of the four questions. The first is the flame of identity-who am I? It is the flame of our life's stories. Recalling our story is the means by which we rediscover and reinvent ourselves in the second half of life. The second flame is the flame of community-where do I belong? It is the flame of our place. Refinding our place in the world is the means by which we embrace a sense of intimacy for the second half of life.

The third flame is the flame of passion-what do I care about? Renewing our life's calling is the means by which we stay connected to the world and mentor those who will see to things after we are gone.

And the fourth flame is the flame of meaning-why am I here? This is the flame that illuminates our life's purpose. Reclaiming our purpose is the means by which we find creative expression and make a difference in the lives of those around us. The four flames are not utterly distinct from one another. They dance together in pairs, in trios, and as one. And yet, as I watch them, I begin to sense a framework for addressing the questions that must be answered should we aspire to become new elders.

And so from that fire, this book has emerged. This book is about living on purpose in the second half of life. In the second half, the reward for surviving is the freedom to become yourself.

It is to answer Maroba's question: Who are the elders of our tribe?

We are . . . if only, like Maroba, we claim our place at the fire.