

# The Fruits of Conscious Eldering

by Ron Pevny, Contributing Editor

ON ONE OF THE CONSCIOUS ELDERING retreats that I lead, a participant in her early sixties shared something that had a powerful impact on all present. In reflecting on her intentions for her retreat, she spoke of two significant older people in her life. One, who was in relatively good physical health, was difficult to be around because of her seemingly constant anger, bitterness, and negativity. She was old and miserable. People avoided her because she was a drain on their energy and joy. The other was a woman who, while not physically healthy, attracted people like a magnet. In her presence they felt joy, serenity, optimism, peace. People saw her as an elder whose radiance and wisdom lifted their spirits. Our retreat participant affirmed her intention, on this retreat and on her journey ahead, to grow into a radiant elder rather than a joyless old person; and she shared her questions and concerns about how to accomplish this.

The aging process seems to bring out either the worst or the best in people — magnifying and emphasizing the flaws and shadow elements of some of us; amplifying the wisdom, radiance, and compassion in others. The question carried by those of us committed to becoming peaceful, fulfilled elders is, “How can my aging bring out the best in me?” The inner work known by rubrics such as “conscious eldering,” “conscious aging,” “spiritual eldering,” and “Sage-ing” holds important answers to this question.

The journey from late middle-age into fulfilled elderhood is facilitated by inner work that is focused and fueled by conscious intention. This journey can lead to the pinnacle of one’s emotional and spiritual development. Undertaking this journey is in fact what our lives to that point have prepared us for. And as conscious elders, our service to our communities and to the community of all beings can be profound. Carl Jung succinctly expressed this potential: “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own...”<sup>1</sup> The word *conscious* is key to understanding the wide range of ways that the inner work of eldering may be done. It is also key to the distinction



We talked about this special breed of journalism he was drawn to and how important it was to bear witness to atrocities that take place far from most of the world's eyes. He believed entirely in the power of photojournalism to change the world, to enlighten hearts and minds, and to bring justice and possibly comfort to those who are suffering the most. His deepest commitment, from the very beginning, was to honor those he photographed and bear witness to their struggles.<sup>2</sup>



Chris Hondros was the product of the great American melting pot. His mother, Inge, had been born in 1936 in that part of eastern Germany which Poland annexed in 1946. His father, after whom he was named, had been born in Greece. His parents, child refugees after World War II, had met and married in New York. They moved to Fayetteville shortly after he was born, and he grew up in a large house and extended family that included his father's Greek parents and his younger brother Denos.

Everyone's life traces back to the mysterious, always improbable, intersection of two other lives. This is true whether your parents first met on the playground in pre-school or — like Chris's — were war-weary refugees washed ashore from the chaos of distant lands and forced to negotiate the intimate commerce of their shared daily life in a language that was alien to both. The embryo bursts forth from this fusion of two lives. To put the metaphor to further use: Perhaps, like its nuclear counterpart, the fusion creates a cache of latent energy.

When viewed from outside, Chris's life for its first 28 years seems to move within a predictable orbit. Then, at the point of inflection, a firewall is breached and the latent energy is unleashed. In the 13 years that follow, the distance he travels away from the immigrant Greek community of restaurateurs and shopkeepers of his childhood in Fayetteville rivals the distance his mother and father traveled in the journey to his conception.

How does one explain this? How does one account for those uncommon few among us who — in dramatic and undramatic ways — seeing

# Dreams and Elder Initiations

by Harry R. Moody

“IS THIS ALL THERE IS?” Peggy Lee asks in her famous song. Whether we have fulfilled our hopes in life, or realized that we never will, the question is still the same. “Is this all there is?”

That question invites us to begin a journey. It is the Call, the first of what I have described as the “five stages of the soul” in which the Call is followed by Search, Struggle, Breakthrough, and Return.<sup>1</sup> Though this initial invitation may come to us at any point in our lives, in later life it often comes with particular power and urgency.

The Call is an *awakening*, the moment when this inward dimension we call soul comes to life — that moment when we “come to ourselves” and ask the perennial questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What is this life all about? These questions prove painful because, as James Hollis puts it, by midlife what we have become — the strong ego we have built — is frequently our chief obstacle to listening to the Call.

The inner voice demands to be heard — demands we begin the journey. Jung warns us of the price we pay if we ignore the invitation: “Only the man who can consciously assent to the power of the inner voice becomes a personality.” Everything around us, however, conspires to keep us from hearing this “still small voice.” We avoid looking inside ourselves because:

Looking in will require of us great subtlety and great courage — nothing less than a complete shift in our attitude to life and to the mind. We are so addicted to looking outside ourselves that we have lost access to our inner being almost completely. We are terrified to look inward, because our culture has given us no idea of what we will find (Sogyal Rinpoche).

In ancient Shamanic traditions, the Call was recognized as an opening to initiation into the world of the spirits; this Call to initiation would often come through our dreams. The potential shaman who hears the call through his dreams ignores it at his peril: “Most shamanic traditions take

