

# THE WISE ELDER

*What is it and why should you hope to become one?*

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In her 72 years, Karen Carnabucci has enjoyed two very different careers — the first as a journalist with the former *Intelligencer Journal* (now LNP | LancasterOnline) and her current one as a psychotherapist and educator.

You could say one directly led to the other.

During her time at the newspaper, Carnabucci wrote many stories related to families and mental and emotional health, but an interview in 1985 with a woman who started a program using experiential therapy turned out to be life-changing.

“I was so enchanted by this kind of therapy that I eventually moved toward changing my career,” Carnabucci recalls.

She went back to school and began working in various settings to study and perfect what would become her specialty — psychodrama, a form of therapy developed by European-born physician Dr. J.L. Moreno that incorporates improvisation and other activities. Eventually, she founded the Lancaster School of Psychodrama and Experiential Psychotherapies.

“I saw how changes could be made when people were given permission to experience their lives rather than



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just talk about them,” she says.

Getting in touch with one’s life experiences is an important component of “Embracing the Role of the Wise Elder,” an upcoming retreat for professionals in various fields that Carnabucci will offer along with her colleague and fellow educator, Linda Ciotola.

The topic of “eldering” is growing in popularity, Carnabucci notes, perhaps because a large number of baby boomers — herself included — find themselves growing older.

“Do we want to become older like the generation be-

fore us and what they modeled for us, or do we want to get older in a different way?” she asks. “I think that is probably for everybody to sort through themselves.”

We spoke to Carnabucci about embracing the role of the wise elder.

The interview was edited for length and clarity.

## **How would you define a wise elder?**

So many times when we talk about growing older ... we often talk about retirement. What are you going to do after retirement? Or sometimes we talk about illnesses or difficulties with

health. But we don’t often talk about what it means to grow old in a more soulful way and to look at what we have harvested for our lives.

When I’m talking about a wise elder, we’re harkening back to the fact that people who have lived a long time have gained life experience, obviously some people more than others. ... They have learned from their life experience, and they have important wisdom to share with others, especially the younger generations. It comes not necessarily from book learning. It especially comes from life experience.

## **What are some of the qualities of a wise elder?**

A wise elder accepts being old, accepts being an elder. In our society we generally don’t like this idea of being old. We love it when people think we’re younger than we really are. We do our best to look as young as possible. So I would say the first thing is simply accepting the place in life that indeed we are older, and we have something to share out of life experience, and it’s something thoughtful.

Wise elders honor the learning that they have earned, and they consider

**ELDER**, page 6

## RECOMMENDED READING

Karen Carnabucci offers these resources to learn more about becoming a wise elder:

- “The Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul” by Connie Zweig.
- “From Age-Ing to Sage-Ing: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older” by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller.
- “Aging as a Spiritual Practice: A Contemplative Guide to Growing Older and Wiser” by Lewis Richmond.
- “How to be Old” by Lyn Slater.

## Elder

Continued from 5

how to apply their learning in today's world. They also respect the ideas of youth, younger people who are naturally full of enthusiasm and possibilities. This means that the mentoring of younger people is infused with respect and understanding of their developmental role.

I think many times ... we still feel competitive. We haven't lost that competitive edge from when we were younger. We want to be the best or the brightest or the smartest or the richest or whatever else that might be. I think the value of becoming older is that we can encourage and support and advise and nurture younger generations, and we take pleasure in that and there's no longer a need to feel competitive as we perhaps did when we were younger.

### How does American culture differ from other cultures in the embrace of the wise elder?

From researching, from talking, from meeting people in other countries, I can tell you that in other cultures elders are valued. I think it is particularly true of Eastern cultures ... I think it's true in indigenous cultures, whether it's the Native American cultures or other indigenous cultures around the globe, that there is great value placed on what elders bring and what elders have to share, and there's great value in attaching oneself to an elder person and learning from them.

In our culture, we seem to worship youth and we seem to worship everything that is new and everything that is the latest trend. And I don't know that we seek out so much people to mentor us or to advise us who are older.

I know as a younger person I wish I had caught onto that earlier in my own life. My own life would probably have been, in my younger years, a lot smoother if I had found someone or a couple of someones to mentor me. Probably around the age of 35 I finally woke up to that and my life has benefited because of that.

### How do you get the younger generation to see the value in the older generation?

I'm still asking that question myself. I certainly have seen many younger people who don't have a lot of interest in older people. We become invisible a little or maybe a lot. ... One of the absolute things I love doing the most is when younger therapists and other healers come to me and they want to learn from me and that is truly right now the most exciting thing because they are actually seeing my value.

### Is there an age at which you're considered an elder, wise or otherwise, or is it an organic process?

I suppose that Social Security says 62 or 65, and that's the truth of many things where society gives us benchmarks. ... I think that people need to claim their elderhood. I do not like the phrase "senior citizen." It seems to me seniors are the last grade in high school for me. I'm personally on a campaign



I'm personally on a campaign to revive the word 'elder' as a respected role and a respected place in life.

— Karen Carnabucci

to revive the word "elder" as a respected role and a respected place in life. I think it's about perhaps claiming it, where we look inside ourselves and we claim the role. We claim: I am now an elder. I have something to offer the world. Not so much in perhaps production in terms of what I do or what my job title is ... but I have something to offer the world, just because of who I am and how I have lived and what I have learned.

### What steps can we take to reflect on what it means to be older?

I'm a big advocate of journaling and I'm a big advocate of elders, parents, grandparents and so forth writing down life stories



#### IF YOU GO

"Embracing the Role of the Wise Elder," a three-day workshop on aging with grace for a variety of professionals who either work with older people or who are themselves growing older, will be held Friday through Sunday, Oct. 6-8, at the Lancaster School of Psychodrama and Experiential Psychotherapies, 313 W. Liberty St. For more information or to register, visit [realtruekaren.com/events](http://realtruekaren.com/events)

and genealogical information for the younger generation. Maybe it's a scrapbook or maybe it's an actual written word or maybe it's a series of essays. Those are really good ways to reflect on one's life, not just what happened, which is very important, but also, what did I learn from this experience? And not just the top layer of what I learned, but maybe there's a second layer or a third layer that says I really gained something from this experience, whether it was really happy and amazing or somewhat painful and difficult. I learned something here that feels important and gave me particular direction in life.

I think also getting together in smaller groups in which people feel safe and comfortable, where people can share about their experiences and make meaning, reflect. It would also be fascinating to have an intergenerational group where we have older people and younger people sharing their experiences without any idea that anyone is better or worse or smarter or not as smart, but just to have people sharing life experiences and what they're learning from those experiences. And also giving people lots of permission to ask advice from the older generation, which maybe they'll take and maybe they won't take. That's OK. What would you do in this situation, or what did you do, and would you do

it again knowing what you know now?

### How can psychodrama play a role?

Psychodrama is based on theatrical principles, one of which is that we naturally take and play roles in life. Sometimes we stick to a role long after it's useful — for instance, the mother who is cutting up the meat on her teenager's plate, the father who constantly reminds his adult child to remember to fasten the seat belt. It's healthy to consider the roles that we play and if we need to learn — and master — new roles.

### What about older people who don't seem very wise?

We've all crossed paths with older people who are difficult, judgmental, argumentative, rigid and even mean. These people don't seem to fit into the role of the wise elder. I see them as people who are stuck in self-defeating roles — perhaps that of the victim, the fearful one, the bully. What we see is their unprocessed suffering. They haven't taken the time to look deeply into their lives and find ways to transform their pain into lessons that have been learned — and therefore, wisdom.

### It sounds like becoming a wise elder is a very personalized process.

I'm still on that journey myself. What does it really mean to be older? What exactly is my role? How do I want to live without pretending that I'm younger? How do I want to contribute? Maybe it's things people do already: volunteer work, starting something new, initiating a project.

I would like to think it goes even deeper than that. I think it's a stance about how I am living my life. How am I living my life for myself? Contentment with exactly how I am. ... Do I really genuinely enjoy what I'm doing? Am I doing what I do because I don't want to do anything differently? Am I still in the old role? These are questions for exploration.

There's another phrase that often shows up that I've noticed when we talk about older people and it's: We're not slowing down. Is there something wrong with slowing down or do we have to be constant achievement machines? That is something that I have asked of myself and, in fact, I personally am slowing down. I still enjoy the doing and the contributing, but I think that it's totally OK for us to take time to rest, to contemplate, to be, and I wish our society would make more room for that as well.

### Do you consider yourself a wise elder?

I think I'm getting there.