

Learn age-old secrets of life

By Ruth Ostrow

I ATTENDED a beautiful ceremony a few weeks ago. The main speaker was introduced as an Aboriginal elder. Everybody clapped and cheered as the silver-haired woman spoke of her life and the meaning that she had found.

You could feel the respect that this stately woman commanded, as someone who had lived through many turbulent decades, witnessed so much suffering and so much progress. A wise one who carried in her head the mystical secrets of a way of life and the dreaming of a generation.

And while I listened, I felt suddenly sad that in Western society we live without real tribal elders to guide us.

Instead of shamans full of wisdom about the world, the environment, our spiritual lives and our culture, we have politicians to head our society.

Those who carry our precious souls on their shoulders, determine matters of law, destiny and the fine balance between communal, family and individual needs, are anonymous professionals, often chosen more for grades and ability to perform than profundity.

Our religious leaders often come from outside of our own tribes, and follow texts and dictums that are handed down by other leaders in other cultures, sometimes bearing no relevance or significance to the real-life dilemmas we face.

There is no sense of tribal elders, familiars, coming of age through our society, placed on podiums and pedestals, and urged to guide us with the hard-earned experience they have gleaned.

Instead, older members of society are called geriatrics, forced to retire from their positions or are pushed out by younger talent, put on mind-numbing medication and often locked away in homes away from eyes that can't tolerate the concept of death and ageing.

Having travelled through much of Asia and India where older men and women are considered gurus (teachers) and revered, it is heartbreaking to come home and find our streets so devoid of rich, diverse and often very humorous elderly life.

In the late 1980s, I worked as a journalist in Israel where old people roam the streets like kings and queens, and often live at home with the family until they die.

In such a culture, you can glean a wealth of information just riding the bus. The eccentric grandmother sitting next to you will provide gems about history, life, love, passion or home-brewed philosophies that were derived from surviving the Nazi death camps.

The recent bestseller *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Hodder) reminds me of my years talking to these marvellous souls. It's the true story of Mitch Albom, a journalist who seeks out his former college professor when he discovers that the old man, whom he hasn't seen for 20 years, is dying.

Morrie's philosophies and conversations, with their Zen humour and pearls of wisdom, were meticulously and lovingly recorded by Albom, who realised that in his old teacher he had found a mentor, a seer, an elder living in some backblock of Boston, undecorated, unsung and teeming with knowledge of life.

So, too, are there many such people living among us - our mentors. But instead of being encouraged to teach, write, given government grants to pass on the richness of their years, they are largely shrugged off. Just another oldie driving too slowly, clogging the road. "Shouldn't be allowed to drive!" yelled a young man out his window last week.

Our advertisements are geared to the young. Life has stopped for those whose bones and hair have grown thin. And while BBC productions such as *Waiting for God* or *One Foot in the Grave* are admittedly very funny, the ageist titles speak volumes about how older people are portrayed on TV.

Indeed Paul Cox's film *Innocence* was deemed controversial for depicting older souls as having a vital sexuality, although I can certainly vouch for the fact that, during my years as a relationships writer, the letters I received from people in their twilight years - many of whom had lived through the decadent 1930s in Europe or been swingers in the '60s - were resplendent with erotic energy.

Our tribal elders are among us. If society won't tolerate or recognise them, then we should seek out our own Morrie Schwartz. Find our own gurus as they do in Eastern traditions.

Those who no longer have grandparents or older parents can always borrow someone else's. Let's face it, it's a lot easier to relate to other people's family.

I write this, too, out of frustration for my own fate. For "they" are "us". And do I want to be silenced or dismissed as "a silly old bat" in three decades? It's a question we should all start asking ourselves because it is we who will reap the fruits of the world we are creating now.

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