

## **4: Culture & Tradition**

**Words of Wisdom**

**Medicine Wheel**

**What is an Elder?**

**We should be as  
water, which is lower  
than all things yet  
stronger than even  
the rocks.**

*Oglala Sioux*



## WHAT IS AN ELDER?

“Elders are not born, they are not appointed, they emerge as the sum total of the experiences of life, they are a state of being.”

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“You see, the elder, the concept for me is like if you go into a strange land and you don't know the country and you're swamped and there's [bad places to travel] and there's good places to travel. So the ones who have been longer are the good guides because they know how to get around the swamps, who know where to go, and so on. It doesn't matter if there's a trail. They know that country . . . So there are in fact guides who have been there who have each individually lived through their own hell and have found their way and they are in fact guides. So if you are going into a strange land, and God knows, it's strange to so many young people. And they can avoid all that and ensure you a good trip.”

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“It is not surprising that many of the people recognized as ‘Elders’ have lived through difficult times, both personally and politically. Some have had problems with the law, with alcohol, with family separation; some have seen such things happen to others. What they have in common is the fact that they learned something from those experiences, that they turned to the traditional culture for understanding, support and healing, and that they are committed to helping others, especially those of similar background.”

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“When you ask an elder for advice about tradition, you are also asking for a kind of honesty and purity and the best of tradition itself which was the spiritual as well as the everyday. Elders are practical, they have practical situations to attend to. You can confide in them and just ask for direction and help yourself.”

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“Aside from the issue of age, a person becomes an ‘Elder’ in the ‘eyes of the community.’ That in itself is a process, as one Elder said, ‘part of the process of life’. Elders, however, are also practical people—people who live and make choices within an everyday life. Being an Elder requires a certain quality of person. It is also informal and something in tune with the cycle of life, with the natural way that things work.

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“Through the process of accumulating knowledge and experience, some individuals begin to show an aptitude for talking to people and helping them in ways that contribute to a better life. This aptitude is acknowledged by the community in seeking them out, for discussions, for teaching, for public lectures. This in itself is a process as it happens slowly overtime so that by the time a person reaches the age of Eldership, the community begins to ‘recognize’ them as an Elder, as one who is able to communicate the teachings in a meaningful way.”

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**“So an elder is a very high quality of person and someone who never asked to be called an elder but is deserving of that title and of that respect, and it's other people who recognize that person. There's no process that I know of where you can make someone an elder. It's a term of respect and recognition given by the people because a person has lived that life, has followed it, given those teachings from birth, has followed them through life, has lived it and practised it and now he can give that back, with the understanding. So that makes it even less in number how many elders we have.”**

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**“Approaching an elder is a little bit like going swimming. The first time, some people are scared of water, but after they get used to it, it becomes natural to them. And so, we have to do as much as we can to get rid of the artificial barriers that are there. People are shy to go—reluctant to show their ignorance, that they don't know how to do it.”**

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**“The Elder I approached said that all you have to do is start talking to the Elder and things will happen—that starting the conversation, establishing the relationship is what is important, not judging the seriousness of what might be said. She said that was the nature of this kind of guidance and encouraged me to come again to talk, informally, that the conversation would take care of itself. My perception of approaching an Elder, before this discussion, was that it had to be done in the ‘proper way’, within a traditional framework, and I wasn't sure what this was. This perception is likely one shared by many people, Native or non-Native, who have not had previous experience with working with Elders. In reality, the most difficult part was beginning, then the Elder helped with the rest.”**

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**“Native elders are living links to the past. Their vivid memories have the vitality, immediacy and authenticity of those who have experienced the transition from traditional ways to the new. In the short space of two generations, they have gone from travelling the coast in canoes to flying in floatplanes...Not even the social upheaval of losing nine out of every ten people to raging epidemics in the nineteenth century, not even the disorientation of changing to new, cash economy with a more complex technological base, not even the acceptance of a new cosmology and religion, none of these broke native pride in the past or native ties to ancestral lands and waters. This is remarkable continuity. This is what the elders are about.”**

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**“Elders are the people who are the cornerstone of our culture as they are the keepers and teachers of traditional teachings. They are the link with our past, our present and our future. They are spiritual leaders and teachers but also have the wisdom and the experience to provide very pragmatic guidance and advice on how best to improve and ensure the physical, mental and spiritual health of our community.”**