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We have much to learn from our elders

By David Suzuki with Faisal Moola

As I approach my 75th birthday, I find myself often thinking about mortality. I'm in the last part of my life, and that's reality. This is the time when we must fulfill our most important duty: to reflect on a lifetime and then sift through the detritus of experience, observation, and thought in order to winnow out lessons to pass on to coming generations.

The most influential elders in my life were my parents. Although they were in their 30s and 40s when I was a child, they seemed much older and wiser. They taught me lessons that have guided me and that I have tried to pass on to my children:

"Respect your elders." They weren't referring to themselves but to older people, who by virtue of having lived a life, deserved respect.

"You are what you do, not what you say." With today's barrage of information, spin, and propaganda from politicians and corporations, it's important to look at a record of action rather than be deceived or confused by words.

"If you want everyone to like you, you will not stand for anything." When I was in high school, I was elected president of the student body. I told my dad that I wanted everyone to like me. He told me that no matter what one stands up for, there will always be those who disagree with you.

"Whatever you do, whether it's washing dishes, scrubbing floors, or working at a job, throw yourself into it with all your energy." I have learned that when I do a half-hearted job, I get a half-hearted experience.

My parents lived through the Great Depression, which shaped their values and outlook. They taught me those values:

"Save some for tomorrow." This was a recurring theme and, of course, a value held by any true conservative.

"Live within your means." This meant that if you didn't have the money to buy something today, you saved until you could. This notion goes against today's easy access to credit, which encourages going into debt.

"Share, and don't be greedy." Implicit in this lesson was the notion that helping someone today was in your interest — to build relationships for the inevitable day when you would need someone to help you.

Perhaps most importantly, they taught me that I had to work hard to earn money to buy necessities in life, but that I mustn't run after money as if having more than others would make me better or more important.

I'm lucky to have arrived at a time in my life when I am freed from the encumbrances of making money, seeking fame and power, and showing off. We elders have no hidden agenda and can speak the truth. One of the most influential groups in the peace movement was the Retired Admirals and Generals Against Nuclear War, warriors who had played by the rules through the military ranks, but once retired, could speak openly and honestly.

During the '80s and '90s when battles raged over forestry practices, one of my most formidable opponents was the CEO of a large forestry company. Arguing that dioxin production in pulp mills was minuscule and that his clear-cut logging was allowed by government, he bellowed, "My job is to make money for my shareholders. If you don't like the way my company operates, your complaint is with the government because everything we do is within the law." On retiring and being freed from the corporate game, he became a generous supporter of my foundation. Maybe someone should start a Retired Corporate CEOs and Presidents for the Environment.

In First Nations communities, elders remain the bedrock of society. In conversations with First Nations people, I am struck by how often they tell me, "The elders say..." or "I have to ask the elders."

In today's youth-obsessed world of rapid technological developments, we too often marginalize elders when their experience is most important.

Elders remember a world that changed more slowly, when "disposable" was not a description of products, when sharing, reusing, and recycling were simply the way we lived. Elders remember a time when family and social activities were the central focus of life, not shopping and owning stuff. Elders remind us that life can be rich and fulfilling without all the toys.

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<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/blogs/science-matters/2010/11/we-have-much-to-learn-from-our-elders/>