

# The Elder Tales

## Elder Tales & the Third Act

The Third Act of our lives is as much about *attitude* as it is about *age*, so transitioning into it can happen at any time from about 45 onwards.

As we transition into the later stages of our lives a range of choices opens up to us: to become an *elder* or simply to become *elderly*; to use our energy and experience to act upon and transform our world or to drift passively into the fog of decline and loss; to be a generous sharer of our gifts or a possessive hoarder of them.

These choices and challenges are not new. Our ancestors have struggled with them through the ages. What, if anything, can we learn from them? The Elder Tales, handed down through generations of storytellers, give us particularly rich insights into how our own elders thought a good third act should and could be lived, and a chance for us to see that living a productive and satisfying Third Act today is in many ways not that different from the past. The context may have changed but the principles are pretty much the same.

## What are the Elder Tales?

- Stories that offer guidance about how to navigate the challenging transition between the Second and Thirds Acts of our lives and to develop the grounded qualities of elder-hood.
- Stories that make clear the inter-relationships and differences between the First Act of our life (Youth Stories), the Second Act of our life (Hero Stories), and the Third Act of our life (Letting Go & Transforming Stories)

Elder tales suggest that the great task of the first half of our life is to win the treasure (whatever that treasure may be); and that our great task in the second half of life is to give it away.

Another way of saying this is that the journey of the first and second acts of our lives is to build a strong, resilient, and adaptable sense of ego by developing an awareness of the importance of self. The task of our third act, conversely, is to dismantle our sense of self-importance ... the better to serve both ourselves and our communities.

## What are Elder Tales about?

- Ordinary people in *fantastical* situations grappling with basic human challenges
- The developmental practices for wise and mature elder-hood: warning of the pitfalls and signposting the possibilities
- They're not about growing *up* but growing *old* – mapping out pathways for psychological, social, and spiritual transformation

**Fortune & The Woodcutter** (adapted from Chinen 1989)

### **Reading below the surface of Elder Tales**

Like dreams, the content, themes and imagery of folk tales are highly symbolic and these days we've largely lost the art of interpreting them. As a result a first reading may leave us puzzled, disappointed and dismissive of them as rather childish and trivial. But a deeper reading can be rewarding. Here's a quick guide to the key themes and symbolism of many Elder Tales:

The main characters are usually poor but this shouldn't be taken literally. **Poverty** reminds us not to gloss over or underestimate the challenges of growing old: loss of loved ones, health issues, lower libido, and more. So poverty does represent **loss** and **decline**, but more specifically it represents the **anxiety** and **confusion** that accompany transition. In this case the transition from our Second to our Third Act for which so little support exists.

**Forests, lakes, and oceans** represent the great but somewhat scary richness of our **unconscious** mind. When a woodcutter collects wood in the forest or a fisherman casts his nets for fish you can be sure the storyteller is telling us that the character needs to retrieve something psychologically important that is currently hidden from him or her.

The main characters of Elder Tales are often in rude good health. **Physical health** represents **psychological health**.

**Happy endings** are the norm in Elder Tales. This is not because they are trying to indicate how things really are ... but **how things could be**.

The presence of **magic** or **treasure** is common in Elder Tales. In Youth and Hero Tales these often represent material possessions and riches. Not so in Elder Tales where they tend to represent **psychological and spiritual insights**.

### **One interpretation of Fortune and the Woodcutter**

The woodcutter represents a man transitioning from the second to third act of his life. His marriage, his two grown sons, and 30 years of hard work, indicate his status as a pragmatic experienced man who well knows the meaning of loss and suffering.

He no longer expects *Fortune* to come looking for him (as the main character in a Youth or Hero story might well do).

After a lifetime of work he decides to take to his bed. This is not a passive act as it might at first appear but a particularly active, assertive one which represents the need to erect clear boundaries. Many people at retirement age find they are swamped with requests for their attention and that time is not their own. In such situations it can be hard to make meaningful choices. Slowing down and being more present means being able to notice more and therefore being able to make better choices.

Taking to one's bed also represents the deliberate changing of old routines and habits in order to let new events emerge in one's life. If the Woodcutter hadn't stopped working he wouldn't have been home to meet the Stranger or lend him the mules.

If the mules had been working for the Woodcutter they wouldn't have been able to bring home the treasure. The mules thus represent the fruits of the old man's hard work, knowledge and skills honed over many years. And the treasure, as psychotherapist and author Allan Chinen points out, is '*his return on investment.*'

There is an innocence too about the Woodcutter. He lends his mules to a stranger asking only that they be fed and watered. Had he not been so trusting *Fortune* would not have come knocking on his door. He dances with his wife without a care for what the neighbours might think. The re-connection in the Third Act with the child-like qualities of the First Act: innocence, trust, joy, wonder, and intuition is a common theme of Elder tales.

Finally, there is *generativity*. The Woodcutter shares his 'wealth' and still has more than enough for himself and his wife. A core theme of Elder tales is the practice of transforming society by giving away the 'treasure' (whatever that might be) that enriches the Third Act of our lives. Unlike our Second Act in which many of us spend huge amounts of effort and energy striving for success, this story suggests that if we are ready and open, 'magic' will return to us in the Third Act of our lives and often when least expected.

*Sources:*

*The Brown Fairy Book, Andrew Lang (1904), Various publishers*  
*In the Ever After, Allan B Chinen, Chiron Publications, 1989*

### Ten developmental practices suggested by Elder Tales for transition into The Third Act of our lives

- accept decline, loss and death as inevitable aspects of the natural cycle of things *and* stay as sharp, awake, and psychologically active as possible
- change old habits and routines: make room for new things to happen
- be open to 'magic' as it arises
- accept your life for the *gift* it has been and the *gift* it continues to be
- accept yourself as you are yet continue to work on your 'stuff'
- move beyond social convention and over-reliance on the rational so as to re-connect with child-like innocence, spontaneity and intuition
- let go of *narrow* ambition; pursue ambitions that meaningfully support and develop yourself and/or the community
- shift from a focus on things and possessions to an empathic awareness of human relationships and motivations
- be open to re-enchantment and the natural world; affirm and practice whatever brings you alive
- be playful with the idea that it *may* be possible to redefine, transform, and transmute self and society