

## ELDERHOOD and What Really Matters

You know, as a result of the custom at the time we were growing up, many of us heard a lie, either implicitly or explicitly as children, that

*“I don’t really matter”.*

That is a false belief, a terrible negative that cannot be allowed to continue, because it prevents you from showing up in life and stepping out as your beautiful, unique, weird and wonderful self with your own gift that no one else can give. That gift is the marvellous way that you can make a difference.

What really matters for you? Do you know? How often do you pause to consider it?

Then there are times when what really matters is crystal clear with no ambiguity whatsoever.

Like the time I was on my farm in west Gippsland, Australia last year. We had a herd of cattle and two bulls. One aggressive bull. My husband Martin was opening the gate to let the cattle out of their paddock and my job was to close the gate at the far end of the new paddock to shut them in. Now this wasn’t a metal or wooden gate, it was a TAPE gate – literally made of a material tape that carried the electric current from the fence on one side to the other side when it was hooked up. I was still unhooking the tape gate from its resting place when I heard hoofs thundering down the paddock behind me. Martin had opened the gate too early.

In sheer terror I looked around to see the bull racing down that pasture heading straight for me at full speed. I seemed to move in slow motion. I fumbled getting the tape done up while the bull breathed and snorted at me and scraped it hooves on the ground right in front of me. My hands shook wildly as I tried to hook up the gate. I was acutely aware that there was only a 3 cm wide tape separating me and an 860 kilogram piece of mad bovine fury who wanted to kill me.

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Finally, I got the gate done up and have never moved quicker to run to the ute and jump in – fully aware the bull could easily break through the tape gate and overturn the ute. He didn't. I took off.

My farming neighbor Colin still thinks it's one of the funniest things he's ever heard. "You've got to stand your ground, Di. Show 'em who's boss. Always take a donger with you, just in case, to give 'em a bit of a whack." Luckily my husband took it a bit more seriously, because he didn't like the bull either, and a few weeks later that bull left the property.

Besides the extreme situations like a matter of life and death! - and you all have your own versions - what really matters?

We all have our own ideas about this. But to hone it down, to put your finger on the essence, is not always easy. We need to pause life long enough to know what has heart and meaning at this point at this time in life, since what really matters changes over time.

This session is a chance for a short pause in life to reflect

If you think back over the years you may see changes or a different emphasis on what matters, a progression as we build on what we know and experience. At 20 we think we've found what matters – at 30 it's something else –at 40 we don't know what it is, but do know what it is not – at 50 we might start to question again – then from 50 or 60 onwards we are free to turn our questions into our quest.

What really matters changes according to our life-stage and the cards we're dealt at the time.

This talk is especially addressed to those of us who are "elders", in your 50's and over. The World Health Organisation says we become elders at 50; United Nations at 60. Part of my mission is to give elderhood new life. It is different to old age –

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being an elder is having a place of personal value and contribution in the community. It is not the same as adulthood – what thrilled or motivated us in adulthood loses its shine as we age. Our physiology changes as do our preferences, needs and the way we want to work and contribute.

Like going from childhood to adulthood, elderhood is new territory of a similar length to adulthood, say twenty-five years or so.

Physically, I admit there are some minuses. As I race toward 70 it becomes undeniable. But the minuses are over-emphasised. On the whole, we get *better* as we age. Possibly a little slower, greyer and harder of hearing, but overall, better. We tend to talk better, relate better, cook better, drive better, think better, feel better, love better, create better, work better, write better, make jokes better, give better . . . we just *are* better than our younger self.

That matters from the point of view of what we can give and contribute to the world and those around us.

So what really matters for you? And are you living your life accordingly?

It can be hard to find the space, to go beyond doing all the stuff of living to focus on this; to have our actions match what we know matters. Yet when you're up against the wall – really against the wall, like going through the last weeks and days with a loved one who is dying – then what really matters is right there. Crystal clear. Then you put it into operation. It is part of you, central to your world. You are focused.

During those times we are immersed in our truth. I don't know about you but I become more aware of the beauty in life – of what is beyond my reason and normal way of understanding. I like wonder and the exquisite world and the stars around us. I hope it's the same for everyone.

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As I grow older I spend less time in 'pass-times' without any purpose – activities that just fill in time. But I have more and more time for what matters. That includes everything that has purpose, including good relationships, rest, being in nature, time to play and laugh. Even a chore like sweeping the floor or doing the washing has a purpose in life, and with the right frame of mind I can turn them into a meditation or a work-out.

It's a bit like the reduction process in cooking –getting rid of the excess to savour the rich concentrated juice or gravy that is left.

First, we need to have the right ingredients – to know what is really going to make this special, distinguish what *doesn't* matter, and keep assessing it as the process goes on. For instance, a relationship that brings only negativity and bad feeling without resolution may be a bitter taste that you don't want in your reduction juice. So leave it out, or change the way you experience it.

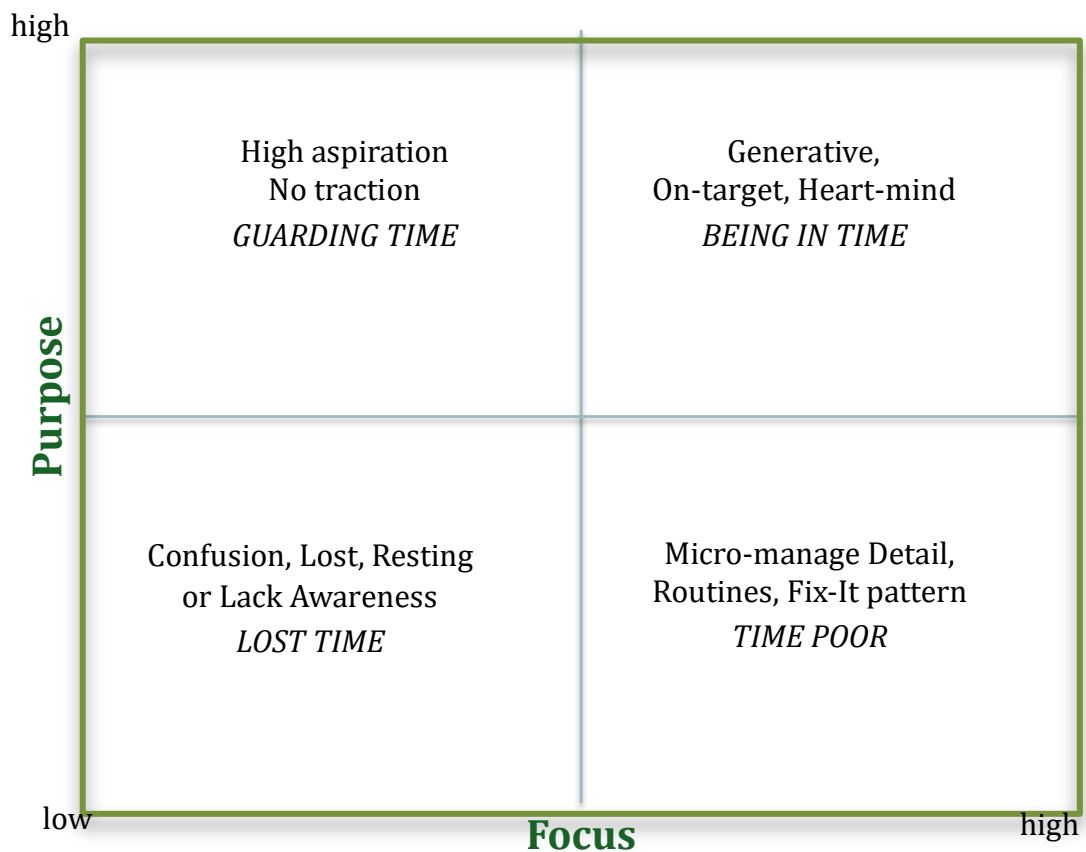
To put what really matters into effect, we are led to two things – purpose and focus. We can look at it this way . . .

### PURPOSE

This falls out of what really matters and gives us the Why – *why do it?* I think of it as the “**why with soul**”. It adds a sense of the growth necessary to act on the What in *what really matters*.

### FOCUS

Second, we must learn to keep FOCUS, keep skillful attention on what matters and the action we take to generate it. Keep watching the radar. It's like having a certain destination in mind. Like a pilot flying a plane or sailing a ship, we're going to get blown off course from time to time. So getting to our destination isn't just going in a straight line along one direction. It involves multiple twists and turns, zigs and zags. When we realise we have zigged off track, then we must zag back into alignment.



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My realisation after 10 years – this model is not directional. It is cyclic. Like the phases of the moon. Or the seasons. We all spend time in each psychosocial space in order to feed the soul. Each space has a purpose and creates balance.

Some years ago I was coming out of a black period in my life, when all fronts of life seemed lost, and I wrote a poem of protection and survival that I'd like to share with you. It's called "Let's".

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LET'S

Let's remember laughing so freely  
there's no censorship,  
just free together.

Let's recall walking all that time ago,  
with friends and in places

Let's bring those gossamer threads  
to us now  
and weave them to our future

Let's become self-luminous,  
can you imagine that . . . ?  
So that love and ecstasy  
outshine the loveless self  
inside or out  
to relax the knot at the center  
that will allow all this  
to unfold

Befriended by ways of life  
and taught by ways of death.

Let's be self-liberating  
flooded by what is radiant  
not brutal  
or madness and black  
but by what is natural  
and wonderful

then we have the option  
to travel a high road  
or a low road.

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Let's accept our truth  
and the most powerful stage  
of growth.

Let's become flooded with joy  
and refuse fear.

The dark times are valuable, and can make you aware and finely tuned to what really matters.

Soon I'll ask you to talk to each other about your ideas of what really matters to you. Who has something in mind already? Just keep that your in mind.

Staying *focused* on what really matters to you gives you purpose, direction and momentum. But it's not that easy to do. Let me explain by showing you some images.

Looking through my photos I realised that over the last 20 years, I had taken photos from almost the same place outside my backdoor on our farm. It was the same landscape, but the mood was very different. At the same time I had been working on the power and effect that place has on us in obvious and subtle ways, that by and large goes by, unnoticed.

See if you can let yourself go right into the image and feel of the place.

(Show overhead PHOTOS)

Who stayed focused on your idea while looking at the photos?

Being distracted can be insidious and it happens persistently without awareness. Become aware of distraction, aware of how we use our attention.

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Here is what really matters for me.

Having a vision really matters. My daughter, my grandchildren; my extended family and friends with all their weird and wonderful ways really matter. My work is central – it's the expression of my creativity, my love; the vehicle for my life purpose. All these aspects are undeniable. They really matter.

Yet having lost my husband recently, these aspects of life that matter most are also seen in the light of “non-attachment”, that everything is transitory, and changing. Given that, I wanted to go to another level in considering this because life goes on, even when the unthinkable happens. This is what I discovered –

Three things stood out, clear as a bell.

**PERFECT YOUR LOVE.** This notion was inspired by the Buddhist teacher and author, Jack Kornfield. A line in one of his books struck me because I'm someone who spends a lot of time and effort trying to perfect my work, to make what I write and the way I work with people the best it can be, as perfect as is possible, to give you the best. An impossible task, of course because perfection is endless. So what was I really trying to do? By perfecting my writing, coaching, facilitating, I was trying to perfect myself. Say no more. To change focus to perfect my love instantly comes closer to achieving what I strive for. I am lighter.

Discovery: The shift to perfect your love is to shift beyond the self. It is a step toward self-transcendence.

**COURAGE.** Courage is often mentioned as something we should aspire to. But what is it? It is more than responding to a risky situation, which is something more like valor. Courage is a long-cultivated internal resource that goes deep to the core. The root of the word is from Old French “cor” meaning heart. It is connected to spirit and taking heart, no matter what your state of mind. Courage is when your heart takes



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the lead and your mind co-operates no matter what dictates or excuses it tells you. Only a few weeks before my husband died, his strength fading, tubes and machines a constant, I asked, How are you, Sweetheart? He said, "Ready for today".

Discovery: To have courage is to never, never give up on what really matters.

**HOPE.** Without hope life is black, dismal. As human beings, even in the most extreme situations, we can generate hope. Victor Frankl showed this in his observations of the concentration camp prisoners – of those who survived the gas chambers, it was the ones who kept their alive hope who made it through. I witnessed my husband's hope glimmering even in the last weeks of his life as he was dying.

Discovery: We all have hope as a transformational gift. As human beings we can take a ray of hope and turn it into a full-blown sunrise.

When I manifest these 3 qualities, my life is rich, colourful, flowing. I'm in a spirited state of wellbeing. It's important thing to point out that we *manifest* these states – they don't come to us - and they tame being worried, angry or anxious. Like the song, "Always look on the bright side of life", I do it myself. I am the source of my inner state, whatever the situation. Whether or not I **remember** to manifest, hope, courage and perfecting love is another matter. It is easy to have amnesia when the chips are down.

But amnesia won't lead to growth. We need ways to be aware of distraction, and to wake up from usual patterns of thinking, to pull back the curtain between our mind and reality so we can see clearly.

One sure-fire way is to DO something that matters. Talking to others takes a step beyond thinking and visualizing. It's a step toward putting it out in the world, getting clearer, making it real.

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**Talk** to people behind you, Introduce yourself to 2 people you don't know.

### PROJECT

Think of something that really matters that you can do by the end of the year.

Talk to others about your project – give it a title and say why it really matters.

The main idea is to have a crack, get some momentum going.

Why?

To move on from “I don't really matter”

What would you do, who would you be, if you believe you do matter?

Those of you who were given the message directly or indirectly that “I don't really matter”, can turn that belief around now. You are in collusion with a lie when you act as though it is true by staying in hiding and dodging life, perhaps with promises of when the time is right, when you have enough money or another qualification, or when your folks have passed on, or simply when you feel better. To keep postponing your potential is to deny your natural grace and dignity and expression. To believe you do matter, and start acting as though you do matter, is to risk being alive.

As elders, we need to live as though our place in the world really matters

*“When we have lived enough life, experienced enough love and enough wounding  
and repeated the pattern of loss and renewal enough times,  
we become skilled at healing . . . at learning. Always this starts with your self first,  
through a deeply focused inner cycle of  
reflection and application.  
This cyclic practice builds the wisdom arts.  
It builds the elder.”*

- *The New Elders: Practicing the Wisdom Arts, Diana Percy*

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If we keep on considering what really matters as we grow older, because it is an ongoing process not like a place we arrive at and don't need to bother with anymore, we will grow in discernment and move closer to fullness in life.

I'd like to leave you with another poem I wrote. It's called "An Invocation", but it's really a poem.

### An Invocation

May we come fully into our elder potential, our agency, and magnanimity

May the offering that we deliver on whatever scale, large or small, be wholehearted and unconditional.

May we reclaim and model the grace, dignity and authentic power that true elderhood bestows.

May we each live our life as though it really matters.

Thank you

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### Notes

“We’re not old, we’re recycled teenagers.” (old lady humour on Pinterest)  
This attitude disrespects the reality & worse, *discounts the potential* of elderhood

- 1 Aspire - have a Future focus,
- 2 Streamline life - pursue positive relationships
- 3 Purpose - be part of something. Meaning & purpose come from serving, giving, helping, realising ‘it’s not about me’.
- 4 Gift/talent– do what you love, what you’re good at, however humble
- 5 Reflect - make regular time for being in Flow – being engaged, when time stops, investigating your life

The experience of many people as they start to age, from around 50 or 60 years onward, is that they don’t really matter. Many feel they don’t matter as much as younger people. It can be hard to think otherwise when our experience is to be ignored in a cafe while youthful people are served; or to be invisible and left waiting at a counter while others are attended to.

Most of us over 50 were born into a time where kids were seen but not heard. We were taught that we did not matter. Wherever it originated, it’s a false belief. To turn it around, we need to step up in life and be seen with grace and dignity and stop colluding with a lie that we don’t really matter.

When we step up, we make a difference. We really matter.

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In my work as a counsellor and coach, I need to be aware of what really matters for my client, because that distilled awareness will open the door to their purpose and the way ahead.

What really matters? Do we give ourselves time to pause and consider this as life changes? And when we know what really matters, do we live it? Do we make the space? And does our daily conduct match what we know?

Is all this just narcissistic? self indulgence?

No, it's about Personal mastery – collective wisdom

PM consists of self-awareness – at any one time, knowing what you feel, think, the way you are conducting yourself, and knowing your intent,,

self management – that arises from emotional intelligence and psychosocial intelligence, the awareness of your interactions and relationships with others,

and self-fulfillment – vital so you're not living vicariously through others or becoming withered inside; fulfillment is distinct from greed, it is opposite, because unlike greed that depletes others, fulfillment generates wellbeing.

That's personal mastery side.

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The more developed our PM, the better the collective wisdom. In fact, the better the collective, the community. Full stop.

If you transform yourself, you transform your world.