



EMBODY

By Sossity Chiricuzio

Perspectives

Embody - Who Are The Queer Elders At Your Table?

by Sossity Chiricuzio, PQ Monthly

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What does it mean to age, as queers? What is our role, what risks and rewards do we reap, and what respect are we paid?

Myself, I never expected to live to be eighteen. Figured either I'd die at the hands of some angry man, or we all would. It seems today we don't live in the same fear I remember from my childhood—of the immanent threat of the big red button that brings down nuclear destruction—but perhaps it's just one more thing we're jaded about. One more thing outside our control.

Once I reached my mid-twenties, I was sure I'd finally figured out who I was and who my people were. That I'd found a way to survive and just had to help spread the word and we could figure out how we could all have enough. My hippie parents hope for a world of people who would save the world somehow survived my disassociated teen years, transforming in my mind into an art colony of queer

polyamorous community, bonding over compersion and social justice and barter systems and new age witchery.

I'm in my forties now, and while every decade in this body has been more joyous and fulfilling, and the experience I've gained serves me well, that safe gathering place where I can contribute in ever evolving ways while building a common safety net has yet to materialize outside of precious moments, planned events.

Our culture permeates the myth of elders depending on their children and grandchildren to provide for them. Never mind that even heterosexuals don't all have children. Never mind infertility and miscarriage, complications and alternative life choices. Never mind the children who will need care their whole lives, or the ones that leave, or die, or disagree, or never connect. Never mind that obligation is a thin thread to hang your quality of life from, even when it's tempered with love.

I am currently partnered and hope to continue to grow older by their side, but then what? We're both radical artists, prioritizing social justice over commercial value to thrive while also using our bodies in labor to survive. We rent, and carve out occasional slices for our savings, and buy tiny love tokens, and almost always eat at home. We have few vices and barter for most of our body care, but we're still right up to the line on the budget every month. There's no superiority or better living points there; every vice is a survival strategy, and something ads sell us every day. All of them could be regulated or removed if you live in a managed care situation, along with privacy, self expression, sexuality, safety, and competent medical care. Given that my social security wouldn't even cover rent now, much less in 20-30 years when I'll finally have toiled long enough to earn a rest, I ponder all this often.

Assuming I survive that long, what does it look like? Will young queers visit, help fix things up around the place, listen to my stories? Will I live among lovers and friends and family as shamelessly as I do now? Most of the systems currently in place are broken, render us invisible if they even let us in.

I think about this defiant goatee on my chin, a present of my thirties that I hid until the wisdom of

forty kicked in. Would a nursing home let me stroll my gender defiant femme self through the halls, leopard print bedecked and sassy, or would they insist I hide my wrinkled cleavage behind polyester, shave my chin, lower my voice, not entertain fellow octogenarians in my room after hours? Would they finally succeed in quieting my voice and cutting my ties?

Perhaps you have a good job and a retirement plan and a house you own. Perhaps you're even wondering how I could let it get this far, let myself get five years from fifty with no plan B—but if so, I think you are an exception. Even to those not born to it, poverty is just one good job away from your doorsteps these days, and a community built mainly on social capital is built on shifting sands.

The truth is, the system has already silenced thousands. The truth is, we silence them as well. Who will take care of you, and who are you taking care of? Who are the elders at your table?

There are several queer elder organizations in Portland, and one housing community, and yet I'd never heard anything about them in conversation or activist circles until I went looking online. At events and gatherings, I'm often one of the oldest people in the room, and even though I've not at all yet earned the mantle of elder, I find myself holding that space. Wishing for someone who can reach further back in our history, who can reflect our growth outside the bubble and see their struggles rewarded in our faces.

There are issues of time and resources, of semantics and politics and personalities. Of respect.

This is not about pity, or duty, though I do feel we have a responsibility to those that have broken the ground we now find easier to walk on. This is about connection. About building a stronger foundation for all of us. About love.

Do you know anyone at least 10 years older than you? 20? 40? What assumptions are you making about queers who are older than you, and have you done anything to challenge them? Do you include elders in your gaydar, or the outreach for your event or organization? Do you read history, and send

thank you letters to those warriors still alive?

Those answers could predict your own future.

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