Infected by Reb Zalman—Yes! By Bob Atchley, colleague of Reb Zalman and former Chair of Spiritual Eldering Institute

Imagine that there existed a benevolent virus that, once you were infected, kindled in you a hunger for a spiritual life, implanted an image of what the spiritual journey of later adulthood might look like, instilled faith that such a life was possible, provided practices and nurtured the motivation needed to stay on the path, and uncovered the compassion needed to bring that wisdom into the world by revitalizing the wisdom-keeping role of Elder. This isn’t science fiction. It actually happened to me and many others beginning in the 1990s.

I was infected by Reb Zalman in the spring of 1992. I was attending a conference on Conscious Aging, put on by the Omega Institute. I knew several people on the program, but had not met Reb Zalman. On the first day of the conference, Reb Zalman presented his view of Sage-ing as a process of spiritual growth that would enable elders to take up their ancient functions as wisdom keepers in ways that fit our 20th Century world. As someone who had been studying aging for more than 30 years, I knew Reb Zalman was onto something important. In the early 1960s I had found in my interviews that many older people were going well past formulaic religion to develop deeper spiritual understanding and that for the most part neither religion nor gerontology was developing or offering knowledge that could help them with this process. Reb Zalman’s charismatic presentation laid out a step-by-step process for nurturing this new vision. Reb Zalman’s vision infected my imagination.

The following year at the American Society on Aging annual meeting, both Reb Zalman and I gave talks in a session on spirituality. He talked about Sage-ing; I talked about late life spiritual development from a Hindu perspective. After our session, I had lunch with Reb Zalman and Eve. He accurately described my talk as “Vedanta without the curry,” meaning that I had described basic ideas in Vedantic philosophy without using Indian language, which I took as a compliment. Reb Zalman’s understanding of Vedantic and Buddhist psychology and sociology were spot on, and we had no difficulty at all crossing intellectual boundaries in our discussion. In little more than a half-hour, I discovered that Reb Zalman and I were compatible intellectual collaborators. We were both open, flexible, and focused on the spiritual center of things. Reb Zalman had infected me with his enthusiasm for collaborative study and enquiry.

In 1996, my wife Sheila and I decided that it was time for us to retire from Miami University in Ohio. We wanted to live in or near mountains, so Boulder was one of several places we visited in the Rocky Mountains. It did not take us long to select Boulder as our destination when we retired in 1998. Reb Zalman had accepted an appointment as World Wisdom Chair at Naropa University in Boulder beginning in the fall of 1996. I had not planned to seek another academic job, but Naropa needed a chair for their graduate department of gerontology and Reb Zalman encouraged me to take the job, which I did. Being able to hang out with Reb Zalman was an important incentive for me to join Naropa. Reb Zalman was helping me satisfy my need for dialog with Sages.
We had been in Boulder for just a week when Reb Zalman invited me to attend the “Monday Morning Group,” an eclectic mixture of spiritually-oriented academics, practitioners, artists, and activists who met at 7:30 A.M. each Monday morning at Reb Zalman and Eve’s home. Reb Zalman convened the group, and each week we would have presentations or be taught spiritual practices by members. The openness, acceptance, feedback, and social support offered in this group were extraordinary. We wandered in and around several themes: How do we nourish and refresh our connection to our spiritual core? How do we bring the transcendent levels of consciousness and awareness and spiritual knowledge that we develop on our spiritual journey into our everyday activities? How do we connect with other like-minded and spiritually-centered people to influence social policy? How can we nurture the spiritual experiences of children? I have regularly attended these weekly meetings for 16 years, and I can attest to the many ways that Reb Zalman quietly made himself available to be the spiritual glue for the group. He was always the Rabbi, but he was also an accomplished scholar of comparative religion who understood various spiritual doctrines and practices in terms of the basic functions they were designed to perform. Once you understand that, he said, you can then see changes that might be made to allow ancient ideas and practices to appear fresh in today’s techno-intellectual culture. It was no accident that Reb Zalman was the founder and chief flak-catcher for the Jewish Renewal Movement, the Sage-ing Movement, and a host of other spiritual and religious innovations over the years. I was infected by Reb Zalman’s gentle, optimistic, benevolent activism.

Sitting in the Monday Morning Group, I would watch Reb Zalman, dressed in sweatpants, flannel shirt, and bedroom slippers, put in his hearing aids and say, “Let’s go deep inside and see what comes up for us to discuss today.” That was all it took to set us off on 90 minutes of productive fun, which always ended with a prayer for healing. The sessions were frequently punctuated by Reb Zalman’s deep booming laugh and the twinkle in his eye when he would ask a tough question or tell a story. What kept us together for such a long time was that we enjoyed the process and had learned to love each other by openly listening to one another year after year.

Slow-cooking is a fine method of spiritual connection.

Being around the marvelous being called Reb Zalman week-in and week-out for many years affirmed for me that he was a master of all the qualities and skills of a Sage identified by Sage-ing International: openness, spiritual centeredness, flexibility, compassion, intellect, equanimity, presence, clarity, humility, sensing deeper questions, compassionate listening, having a non-judgmental, non-adversarial stance toward others, and comfort with diverse points of view. He did all this with good humor, a light heart, concern for the planet, and a good sense of when it was time to sing or tell a story.

Most important of all, Reb Zalman embodied his teaching. He was the teaching. We could learn the subtleties by just watching him do his thing. And oh how happy he was when he saw others work up their courage and begin to enjoy the ecstasy of integrity—walking their talk. Those of us in Sage-ing have been watching him for more than 25 years, so we are well-rehearsed and ready to step into his very big shoes. Reb Zalman made this easier by resigning from leadership roles in the various organizations he started. This forced us to re-create our leadership processes, which in every case I am aware of has made the organization stronger. This is certainly true for Sage-ing International. Reb Zalman was teaching us how to let go with grace.

The end of Reb Zalman’s life was a teaching also. Three years ago I had two long discussions with Reb Zalman about “the December Work,” in which we talked about what a graceful end of life is about and how to do your part in helping it happen. These ideas were brought together with great skill and authenticity by Sara Davidson in her book, The December Project, which was the result of two years’ work with Reb Zalman. His passing was the most graceful I have ever seen. He died quietly in his sleep, at home, with Eve by his side. He had planned and arranged to be buried in a beautiful cemetery plot high on a hill overlooking Boulder and the Great Plains to the East, with its amazingly wide blue sky. His body was buried in the ground, sans coffin, so he could literally return to his beloved Earth. He was laid to rest on Independence
Day, a most fitting time for such a free spirit, and toward the end of this process I looked overhead and four eagles were quietly circling, soaring high in the azure sky. Reb Zalman showed us how to die with grace—he was Grace, embodied for 89 years. Reb Zalman taught us that we can be grace, too. What a gift!

**From the Chair of Sage-ing International, Eston Williams:**

My spiritual life has been blessed with the teachings and example of two gifted rabbis, both of whom responded to God’s call to lead renewals of their Jewish faith. I learned about the first one at the feet of my parents who took me to Oak Forest Methodist Church most every Sunday. Jesus of Nazareth saved me from the lie our culture tells us when it says our worth as persons is based on our performance. But Jesus taught me that my worth was based on the fact that I was a precious son of the one he called “Abba.” And that “Abba” loved me before I did anything wrong or anything right. When I accepted that love, I promised to love “Abba” with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength and with all my mind. And to love myself and others as I have been loved.

I met the second rabbi when I read his book and learned that my value and usefulness as a person has no expiration date. Though my culture tells me I am “over the hill” because I turned 65 a year ago, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi taught me the I am still a precious son of God and that I still have a great deal to give back to this world that has given me so much. I am blessed to be on a journey called “spiritual eldering,” as outlined in his book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older.*

I was born a couple thousand years too late to actually sit at the feel of Jesus of Nazareth, but I did get to sit at the feet of my second rabbi. Well, actually it was on the front row of a gathering of sages in Loveland, Colorado in 2010. What blew me away as I listened to the wisdom of this aged rabbi was the childlike playfulness through which he shared his truth. I can still hear his laughter and singing with the ears of my heart. That other rabbi once said that unless we “change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3) No doubt Reb Zalman made it and no doubt he heard “Abba” say “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

**From CSL Pat Hoertdoerfer:**

*Reb Zalman: Spiritual Elder Extraordinaire*

When I heard the news that Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, author of *From Age-ing to Sage-ing* and founder of Spiritual Eldering Institute, died today, I cried for the loss of this incredible teacher. Then I wept with gratitude for the multitude of Sage-ing® gifts he bequeathed to hundreds of Sage-ing Leaders. Finally I sang a celebratory song that our lives intersected, his new vision of aging captured my mind, heart and spirit, and our Sage-ing community blesses my life and ministry.

Although I knew him only 13 years, two memories come quickly to mind: (1) his blessing upon us newly certified Sage-ing Leaders in 2013 and (2) his ongoing challenge to be an “Elder of the Tribe” giving birth to a more humane planetary
civilization. Through the use of modern technology, Reb Zalman blessed our 2013 class of Sage-ing Leaders with empowering words, loving-kindness and inspiring stories. He told us he was part of a lineage of elders from Hasidic rabbis, Sufi-masters, Buddhist teachers, Native American Elders blessing our Sage-ing work yet encouraging us to draw from all wisdom traditions in awakening our elder consciousness and thereby helping to shift the paradigm of aging in USA today. He exhorted us to harvest the wisdom of our life experience and to be elder activists, becoming healers of family, community and Gaia.

This week I am contributing my sessions to a Sage-ing® International - Spirituality & Practice Legacy E-course. While writing my final session I re-read again Reb Zalman's prophetic words, The rediscovery of our mystical traditions serves as a bridge to a new paradigm of eco-justice and environmental activism ... And elders who expand their consciousness have a crucial role to play in this endeavor. [From Age-ing to Sage-ing®] His Spiritual Eldering legacy is now passed to the next generations. As I take up this Sage-ing work with others, may our consciousness empower us to be more fully alive, actively engaged in community and guardians of Gaia. As I/we share your Sage-ing gifts, they surely will multiply!

With my deepest gratitude,
Pat
Rev. Pat Hoertdoerfer, CSL

4 July 2014

From long-time CSL Judith Helburn:
I will miss the wisdom, humor and compassion which Reb Zalman personified. My life changed in 1992 when a colleague of mine living in Denver called me and spoke of a remarkable weekend spent listening to the wisdom of Reb Zalman. As my friend spoke, my heart began to sing. I knew that this work was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I have not changed my mind. I called the Spiritual Eldering Institute in Philadelphia the next day and asked be admitted to the training program. When I first met Reb Zalman the following year, I was in awe--yet comfortable at the same time. I was fortunate enough to be in his company many times. What a mench! His legacy will live on.

From long-time CSL Gary Carlson:
I knew him mostly through the work he did in creating the sage-ing/conscious aging movement. I did get to attend a couple of workshops he did in the late 1990's, and appreciated his wisdom and generous spirit. I'm just so happy for what he gifted us through his work and wisdom, and am so grateful that he did the work on his "December Years" in the last couple of years, resulting in the beautiful book by Sara Davidson, based on her interviews and discussions with him. Gary
From a newer CSL, Judith Auslander:

Shabbaton 2012 by Judith Auslander

I had not even heard of Reb Zalman until I started a class in gerontology at Marylhurst University in 2010 which suggested a book called From Age-ing to Sage-ing. The book was not required reading, but sounded so interesting – especially since I just started my sixth decade and had no idea how to age except in regret for the lost years and my sagging body parts.

I read the book and was immediately transformed by Reb Zalman’s wise words. I went on line and searched for anything to do with Sage-ing. I found it nearly impossible to get a hold of anyone. People weren’t doing the work any longer, or were out of town, or never called back. I finally found a Saturday class at an institute and loved what was introduced to us. However, there was too low an attendance for the class to continue another weekend. Again, I searched.

Thank goodness for my tenacity, because eventually I was put in touch with the Sage-ing Guild and attended a weekend intensive which later led to my trained and certified as a Sage-ing Leader.

In 2012, I was lucky enough to attend a Shabbaton in Ashland, Oregon where Reb Zalman and his wife, Eve Ilsen, would be in attendance. In fact, they had been attending this Shabbaton for years. I immediately signed up. I got to sit in the front row and later at his feet as he sang, shared his wisdom, and laughed with us. Eve led us through a dance where we were able to abandon our inhibitions about moving to our own rhythm. It was one of the most important and memorable weekends of my life.

I was unable to attend in 2013 and very much wanted to attend in 2014, but I could not. Unfortunately, the May 2014 Shabbaton was the last one that Reb Zalman would ever attend.

Although, I missed my last chance to hear the Reb in person, I feel honored and blessed to have even been able to spend even one moment in his wise presence.

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Baruch Dayan HaEmet

With a heavy heart

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

It is with a very heavy heart that we must inform you that our beloved Reb Zalman

R' Meshullam Zalman Hiyya ben Chaya Gittel veShlomo HaCohen

took a few peaceful last breaths in his sleep, and slipped away from us this morning, July 3, 2014, at 8:40 am at his home in Boulder, Colorado.

In accordance with his wishes there will be a simple graveside funeral tomorrow, July 4, 2014.
There may be an opportunity for a local memorial gathering after the internment.

Reb Zalman was emphatic that he did not want anyone to travel to Boulder on this occasion.

We ask that you respect the family’s need for privacy at this time. The family’s needs during shiva will be posted at [http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/zalmanschachter](http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/zalmanschachter)

Memorial contributions and tzedakah may be made to ALEPH's Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi Endowment for Jewish Renewal [here](http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/zalmanschachter).

We will provide more details on the ALEPH homepage ([aleph.org](http://www.aleph.org)) as they are forthcoming.

May Reb Zalman’s Family, Friends and Talmidim be comforted among all those who morn.

Rabbi Jeremy Parnes
Chair, ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal

**Website Links to other Reb Zalman tributes, remembrances**


Article reprinted on Ram Dass website:
http://disq.us/8j781x

Sage-ing Communicator bulletin on Reb Zalman’s passing
http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs130/1105697167603/archive/1117853683492.html

Rabbi Allen Secher's YouTube Video—The 70+ Faces of Reb Zalman.
http://youtu.be/04jy_yQUrSI