The Early Days of Spiritual Eldering

Bahira Sugarman

Twenty-eight years ago, Reb Zalman came to us in Gainesville, FL, the week before his 40-day retreat at The Lama Foundation in New Mexico and for 6 days we fasted and purified ourselves in all the worlds. And, oh, what a Shabbos we enjoyed in the renewal of Light inside ourselves. As you know, Reb Zalman’s 40-day retreat led to his understanding that a new paradigm for aging was essential for our changing Age.

Reb Zalman invited Shaya, then a tenured faculty member in the Department of Religion at University of Florida, to attend the first Spiritual Eldering workshop held in Florida at The Canterbury Retreat Center. Shaya came home and said: “Bahira, you have to do this amazing Work!” Who had time for one more wonderful focus in my already crammed schedule? Still, I agreed to go to the next workshop at Canterbury.

Meanwhile, Reb Zalman invited Shaya to attend a workshop in San Francisco for people interested in teaching the Spiritual Eldering work that Lynne Iser helped organize. After the workshop, Shaya engaged Reb Zalman and Lynne in a feedback process that he and I had been practicing for years. Feedback became an irreducible component of the Spiritual Eldering Work.

Shaya recognized that in order to pass on this seminal work a supervised course of study was essential. Reb Zalman asked Shaya to create this training program and Shaya enticed me to join in. While teaching with Reb Zalman and Shaya at Omega, it became crystal clear to me that this Path was destined to be part of my spiritual evolution and that I was truly committed to this worthy process.

Co-creating and implementing the Spiritual Eldering Leadership Training Program and graduating more than 70 Certified Seminar Leaders from this rigorous program has been a phenomenal exercise in flexibility, inner growth and holy service. We always knew that to teach at deeper levels we had to walk the talk.

We learned from those we mentored and were grateful to our growing faculty, Marian Eisner, Rich Kessler, Rev William Cox, Dr. Anita Herman, Sister Paula Cooney and have great gratitude for Lynne Iser who was the glue that kept it all together on a shoestring! What a privilege to teach this work to thousands of folks in different venues: small groups, workshops, conferences, retreat centers.

In the early years of assisting Reb Zalman teaching this Work at Omega, I had a dream to bring other healing professionals deeper into this work to incorporate it in their practice as a way to help heal the world! What a start we already had with Lynne putting together the Spiritual Eldering Newsletter as a means for fundraising and for cultivating members and new seminar leaders. And Judith Helburn stepped forward to write the Spiritual Action Newsletter for seminar leaders those many years ago. And what great gratitude to you and those who continue to spread the Work and walk the Path of Sage-ing®.

Our ongoing work continues to strengthen and expand the message and methods of Reb Zalman in the conscious aging movement. Our teaching expertise in the “classical method” has provided a solid ground from which other training programs developed including Rosemary Cox’s Sage-ing® Circle Facilitators.
Late in 2001, with Lori Miller as the Second Executive Director of the Spiritual Eldering Institute and after the Spiritual Eldering Board hired David Chernikoff as Director of Education, Reb Shaya and I requested and were granted Faculty Emeritus status in the Spiritual Eldering Institute and we continued to contribute to the world at large, graduate more Certified Sage-ing® Leaders and work behind the scenes.

Lynne Iser, the First Executive Director, originally compiled the Spiritual Eldering Workbook with our input. Then, in 2005, after Shaya and I had been teaching for more than ten years at Omega and other venues in the field, I undertook the huge project of editing, refining and recompiling this as The Aleph Sage-ing® Workbook with Linda Corsair’s beautiful photography and the help of Reb Shaya and Lynne. We then offered our labor of love as a contribution to the Guild even while Reb Shaya and I were in the midst of fulfilling Reb Zalman’s next directive to us: to bring the Sage-ing® work into Jewish venues.

Reb Shaya and I subsequently developed The Aleph Sage-ing® Mentorship Program and are delighted with and grateful for our Co-Directors and faculty: Lynne Iser, Rabbi Nadya Gross, Rabbi Victor Gross. As with Spiritual Eldering, this program is unfolding in an organic way. Our first graduating class from Spiritual Eldering totaled 8; our first graduating class from the Aleph Sage-ing® Mentorship (October 2011) totaled 7. We are so pleased to have Annie Klein, one of these first graduates, attending this Conference. Reb Zalman named each graduate of this program Vatik or Vatikah/Wise Elder.

Reb Shaya and I continue to deepen our practice and teaching and welcome folks from all spiritual paths to come and learn. Our recent graduates are already teaching the Aleph Sage-ing® Work.

We also thank each and every one of you for your dedication, perseverance and major offerings of time and talent to the formation and continuation of the Guild that continues the Work of our beloved Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the Work that we all share, helping to effect positive change in the now shifting paradigm of aging in this culture.

We feel honored and appreciated by you for our efforts and contributions on the path of eldering. May your Work continue to nurture and sustain the Sage-ing® Guild that will bear sweet and delicious fruit upon its strong branches. And may you all be blessed with whatever is best!

Peace, Light and Overflowing Love

Reverend Bahira Sugarman and Rabbi Shaya Isenberg

Faculty Emeriti, Spiritual Eldering Institute

Co-Directors of the Aleph Sage-ing® Program