

The Guru-Elder Spectrum

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The novice, coming into any community of power, will encounter many impressive people -- charismatic, sure of themselves, and with that secret look that hints they are "in the know". Look out!

It can be intoxicating to enter such company. I don't limit this to magical groups -- colleges are bad for it, too.

Everybody needs context and recognition in a new social group. That's natural. But it is all too easy for the newcomer to latch onto the first person of power who deigns to take notice, and the chances of a disastrous choice first time out appear to be better than random. Just because someone has lots of personal power, they're not necessarily any nicer.

I place the powerful at two extremes- at one end are the Gurus, at the other, the Elders. Which do you want to spend your time with? It's your decision, of course, but here's how to judge where a new acquaintance falls on the Guru-Elder Spectrum.

(By the way, this isn't just for other people- use it on yourself, too, as I do. If it reminds you of Bonewits's Cult Evaluation Framework, there's probably a reason.)

1. Flash vs. Substance. The baby Guru can be very flashy. Her (or his) tools may be unique collectibles, her clothes may be sombre or jangly with chains and bells, but she's always Making A Statement. If the Guru is older and subtler, the flash may be less evident, but it's still for the benefit of spectators.

The Elder, on the other hand, may or may not be fascinating to look at, but her appearance will be an outgrowth of her own personality, independent of onlookers.

2. Control vs. Respect. The Guru will tell you what to do and believe, who's cool and who's not, and will work hard to impress you with how right he is about everything. Subtler Gurus will indicate these things by what they do or don't attend to, tones of voice, or perhaps just a lifted eyebrow.

With your Elder you often don't know what he thinks. He will listen, reserve judgement, and respect your choices even if you don't.

3. Hot vs. Cool. The Guru is usually ready to act; the Elder will prefer to wait and consider.

4. Defensive vs. Defended. Your true Guru loves a conspiracy, whether she's its victim or it's perpetrator. She takes offense easily (sometimes sneaking some off the plate even when it hasn't been offered). She defends things that don't need defending (e.g. Deity) and can be anger driven, petty and vengeful.

The Elder isn't driven to and fro by casual conflicts, but slips between insults and threats with scarcely a wobble in her course. (But Gods help you if she ever really gets angry with you!).

5. Always/Never/No Way vs. Sometimes/Maybe. The Guru lives in a world of absolutes. To him, us/them, safe/unsafe, trust/fear are all set out like roadways to be followed, real barriers instead of arbitrary patterns.

The Elder? He knows that the world is a world of change, and that the things dividing most people are transient and often trivial at even a year's distance. The Guru does a Fast Fry reality; the Elder puts his on the back of the stove to simmer.

6. Self-conscious vs. transparent. As mentioned before, Gurus worry about appearances. She will avoid doing something because of what other people might think. True, the other people she's "afraid" of may be people she considers wise and experienced; people well worth impressing. No matter, if her feeling about them stops her from doing something her heart demands.

The Elder sits on the ground and plays marbles with the kids, she wears the ugly swim cap at the Y because she hates the hair in her eyes, she politely declines to learn the latest scrying techniques, preferring tea leaves or daydreams. And if someone, even someone she respects, has the gall to try to impose their preferences upon her, she won't hesitate to tell them off.

7. Visible vs. Invisible. It is such a pleasure to be around a flashy, splashy Guru. He's harnessed his power, but hasn't (or won't) rub it down and put it in the barn. So it gallops around all over the place, and very pretty it is, too.

The Elder, though, can fade into the background so effectively that you may not even know he is in the room. In conversation he more often than not steps back and leaves you with the floor, smiling and attentive.

He is secure in his invisibility. What does it matter if he's not displaying his beautiful, powerful true nature at the moment? Nobody's keeping score, and his spirit won't fade for being kept in the dark for a bit.

8. Kindness. The Guru is sometimes kind, sometimes not. Perhaps she is great with everybody except a few intolerables, or perhaps kind in person but deadly in gossip, where she reasons it "won't hurt" to let her opinions hiss and snarl. Or she may have persons she has decided are worthy to be her enemies, whom she opposes in all things. One way or another, she has enemies and/or victims.

The Elder makes kindness a habit. She is often wary of people, slow to allow confidence to bloom, but also slow to "attack" in any sense, and quick to forgive. She knows that trust is a quality keyed to the nature of its object, and trusts people in accordance with their nature.

She has neither enemies nor victims -- just others whose frailties and troubles she respects and allows for.

9. The fishhook vs. the moving wave. The Guru will often be concerned with whether you are with him or not, whether or not you have fully "joined" whatever-it-is. His "hook" is no less sharp if he thinks he's helping you than if he were a classic con artist. Either way, he feels you are a fool if you don't take up his path, and he doesn't suffer fools gladly.

The Elder will, perhaps, show you his way, sometimes only by following it while you witness. But if the moving wave of his surety isn't sufficiently strong to draw you with him, he doesn't give it a second thought.

What will following a Guru get you? Excitement, an interesting life full of dangers, sudden changes of direction, serious differences, uncrossable chasms, enemies and fools. Adrenalin! Is that legal in this province?

The Elder way is nowhere near so fancy. Interest in all things awaits you, hope and patience, relationships broken but slowly, securely mending, simplicity and security. It's your choice, always. Have fun.

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