Throughout Asia, and indeed across the world, historically, art forms and practices have been transmitted from one generation to the next in an all-encompassing nexus of teaching and learning, giving and receiving. This may take the form of an intimate, lifelong teacher/student relationship; may take place within a holistic, nurturing community; and/or may be part of a system of court or similar patronage. Such transmission has ensured a depth of detailed, nuanced knowledge and practice in highly specific art forms and styles and a firm, natural foundation in both refined technique and profound spiritual understanding. At the same time, the intense and often isolated manner of learning and practice has sometimes limited the broader education or knowledge base of many traditional artists.

In more recent years, certainly in the late 20th and early 21st century, these time-tested modes of transmission, these deeply ingrained knowledge pathways, gradually have been giving way to a new kind of teaching and learning. This may take the form of an intimate, lifelong teacher/student relationship; may take place within a holistic, nurturing community; and/or may be part of a system of court or similar patronage. Such transmission has ensured a depth of detailed, nuanced knowledge and practice in highly specific art forms and styles and a firm, natural foundation in both refined technique and profound spiritual understanding. At the same time, the intense and often isolated manner of learning and practice has sometimes limited the broader education or knowledge base of many traditional artists.

Of course tradition is never stagnant and has always both produced and accepted change over time. Yet the changes at this moment in history seem more profound in that, they reflect a huge transformation in the entire milieu and ethos in which the arts are taught, learned, and practiced—not simply a transformation in style. Anecdotal evidence observed and gathered during 40 years of travel and study in Asia leads me to conclude that, in many cases, the generation of artists now in their 60s—that generation born near or shortly after the end of World War II—may be the last generation trained entirely or primarily within traditional systems of giving and receiving. When this generation is gone, something of great significance may be lost, something lying far beyond technique and form. It is therefore critical to create opportunities for these artists to convey to the younger generation some sense of this elusive wisdom. Likewise, younger artists should be given an opportunity to share with their elders the challenges they face as young artists in contemporary society and the creative energy and

**Council of Elders—An Intergenerational Dialogue**

**Knowledge Pathways for Traditional Arts in the 21st Century**

Since 1976, Ralph Samuelson has pursued a dual career as a foundation professional, facilitating and supporting Asia-US cultural exchange and as a performer and teacher of the Japanese bamboo flute, shakuhachi. From 1991 to 2008 he was the director of the Asian Cultural Council (ACC), a foundation whose program was established in 1963 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd, to support cultural exchange in the arts and humanities, between the United States and the countries of Asia. Prior to his tenure as director, he served as the foundation's associate director (1983-1990) and as program associate of The JDR 3rd Fund (1976-1982), predecessor of the ACC. He currently serves as Senior Advisor to the ACC and as a consultant to other organizations engaged with international exchange. A graduate of Cornell University, Ralph Samuelson has an M.A. degree in ethnomusicology from Wesleyan University. He was trained in the classical style and repertoire of the Kinko School of shakuhachi by the late Living National Treasure Goro Yamaguchi and other leading Japanese musicians, and is recognized as one of the foremost shakuhachi players and teachers outside of Japan.
ideas they have incorporated from the lives they are living in the new world of our times.

Several years ago a well-known choreographer of contemporary dance in one Asian country was invited to another Asian country to offer a choreography workshop for young dancers who had trained in traditional dance forms within academy settings. The guest choreographer had spent time in the host country many years before and was deeply drawn to traditional dance idioms there. While he was impressed with the creative energy and ideas of the students in the workshop, he was deeply dismayed to discover how much they had lost the connection to the spiritual foundation of the dance, and to the interwoven relationship between the dance and its associated music. Indeed, the close integration of different genres and of technique, with spirit, to create a unified whole, are distinctive hallmarks of the arts of Asia.

Proposal: A Council of Elders

We are living in a time of unprecedented speed-of-change. Changes in how art forms are transmitted are part of larger changes within society. Following and often interspersed with periods of colonialism, political upheaval, and war and turmoil, modernity brings new ideas, new economic and social models, and sometimes progress. However, it also brings dislocation, confusion, and questions of identity. We are witnessing a transformation, but what is gained, what is lost?

For those of us engaged with the traditional arts of Asia, this is the right time (and indeed may be the last time) to bring together older artists who have trained within traditional knowledge systems and younger artists whose education reflects the world of today. I therefore want to encourage the convening of a diverse group of artists in a “Council of Elders” (more accurately, a council of elders and youngsters), a give-and-take gathering to explore knowledge pathways; modes of teaching and learning; technique, style, and spiritual understanding; and creative expression.

Tradition and change in the arts of Asia is too big a topic to address in one gathering. Different countries, regions, communities, art forms, and individual artists are affected in different ways by forces of change. In Japan, for example, traditional music continues to be taught by hereditary teachers, but the leading young musicians of today are often graduates of a university music program. In Java and Bali, traditional dance has been taught within a chain of government arts academies since the mid-20th century. In Southeast Asia and elsewhere, traditional crafts have often been revived and supported by the international marketplace.

To begin a regional and intergenerational dialogue and exploration, I propose an initial Council of Elders gathering in 2012, a prelude to what I hope can be an ongoing series of discussions and workshops. To simplify the process, this first step would focus on the performing arts and would comprise of no more than 20 core participants, up to 10 elder/younger pairs representing different art forms and countries across Asia. The group dynamics might work best if each pair consists of a teacher and his or her student, and if, in most cases, one person in each pair can communicate in English. The group would come together over a period of several days in a program of discussions, workshops, and performances, all to be thoroughly documented and reported. Institutions in Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, and India have already expressed an interest in hosting such a gathering, and I can envision an annual rotating series. Future programs could draw in other parts of the world as well, and participants could be expanded to include scholars, students, administrators, and others. The recording of artists’ oral histories should be an important component of this work, ideally with the cooperation of a museum, library, or research institute with a commitment to traditional arts.

The African proverb, “when an elder dies, a library burns to the ground,” reminds us that indigenous knowledge is deep and powerful, and if it is not carried forward to the next generation, much can be lost. At the same time, traditional arts are organic, always changing with the inner and outer lives of the practitioners and their communities. The “Council of Elders” is one attempt to look at tradition and change in the transmission of art and knowledge, at a most unusual time in human history. The project is now in an early planning phase, and a planning/advisory committee is being formed. Suggestions, ideas, and comments from readers of this journal are most welcome indeed.