

## **Generativity: Reshaping the Past into the Future**

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There's a creativity that lies between the generations, touching everything from genes to values. We are not mere conduits to the future, blindly passing legacies through. We shape what comes to us, and we have an obligation to shape it well.

That's the thought I'm left with after 25 years of studying generativity, a concept that goes back to 1950 and Erik Erikson, a psychoanalyst better known for his work on the identity crisis. Erikson, who looked at the influence of culture on human development, defined generativity as "a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation." The mark of a mature adult, he said, was the ability to look beyond yourself and care for others.

That ability is esteemed in all religions, so it's not surprising that the word faith has come up often in research on generativity. Erikson himself used the term, saying faith was needed to make a child a welcome trust of the community. He was talking about faith "in the species." Later researchers referred to faith in human nature, in a

system of laws, in a higher struggle or simply in God.

Like faith, generativity entails a lifetime process. To understand it, I have drawn on empirical psychology, psychoanalysis, life stories, teaching tales, history, biography and insights from various religious traditions. What has resulted, in several books, is an outline of the generative process — a map, if you like, of creativity underwritten by faith.

### **Facing the Past**

Every life begins with the past, and so does the generative process. By early adulthood, we begin to see and understand the influences we've inherited, often unawares. Some are far from benign.

"I was robbed, really robbed," said a woman who suffered brutally at the hands of her parents. She was robbed of her childhood.

"Devastated" was the word used by a man whose father wanted nothing to do with him--and told him so face-to-face. The early lives of these individuals make it clear, as the Hebrew Scriptures say, that the sins of parents are often visited upon their children.

The generative process begins with facing the past and coming to terms with destructive legacies. How you do it matters.

Psychoanalysis tells us that inner protection is necessary, and that some defenses — sublimation and humor, for example — are healthier than others. Research by psychiatrist George Vaillant has found that men who used healthy defenses in their 20s and 30s became generative in their 40s. With healthy defenses, people can literally block the passage of a destructive tradition. They can act as buffers, absorbing blows from the past while shielding the future from damage. In their later years, they will draw enormous satisfaction from seeing their progeny free of the very scars they carry.

### **Finding a Voice**

Benevolent legacies present problems too.

One man's earliest memory of life symbolized his dilemma entering adulthood: He is in church, sitting securely in his mother's arms while looking in awe at his father, who is preaching the word of God. The young man's problem? How could he ever be as great as that man--and still be himself? It took geographical distance, a marriage, and most of his twenties to figure it out. But he did. He became a preacher like his father, but he spoke with his own voice. Because he did, a tradition could continue.

Finding a voice is an essential part of the generative process, whether in the context of stopping the bad or passing on the good. Psychology understands the process as forming an identity: you find a voice with which to speak. Religion prefers the language of calling: you find a voice that speaks to you.

### **Creation**

A voice takes you to the heart of the generative process: creation. What we make may flow from our roles as parents, teachers, citizens, workers--or volunteers who simply want to give back. The possibilities are endless: a family quilt, a technical breakthrough, a neighborhood organization, a movement of religious reform. Our creation may be as tangible as a cathedral or as formless as a relationship. The work may take months or years--or decades.

We may be tempted to view such creations as coming *ex nihilo*, forgetful of all that preceded them. In the perspective outlined here, the process is seen as shaping, in novel ways, what already exists. It is a perspective that has received a congenial reception among scholars from Japan, Korea, and China.

## **What Have I Wrought?**

However we view creation, it leaves problems in its wake. After Martin Luther started his reformation, fellow friars disbanded, changed the Mass, destroyed sacred images, banned music from church and married — none of which Luther wished to see, all of which he subsequently preached against. In the Genesis narrative, God has the same problem. At first, he looks at his creation and sees that it is good. A few chapters later, he takes a second look and sees otherwise.

There is a painful irony here. If we receive a mix of good and bad in life — and we do — we end up passing on such a mix. Psychologist Dean Keith Simonton reminds us that highly esteemed creators produce more good works than others do, but — something we forget — more bad works as well.

What to do about the bad? The answer of the God of Genesis is built into life itself. It's selection, the very mechanism of evolution. God salvages the good in what he has made and sends a flood to destroy the rest. A choreographer once put it this way: he had to "kill the darlings." The darlings were pet ideas that did not fit into a composition's whole.

A moral exemplar studied by psychologists Anne Colby and William Damon made a different kind of selection. In order to work with Mexico's poor, she denied necessities to her own children. There were times she gave her kids' shoes to others with bare feet. She couldn't have it both ways. She had to choose between two goods.

### **Saying Good-Bye**

When creations mature, they need to be released. "I feel separated from the wonderful thing that was created," said a woman of saying good-bye. "It slips like water through my fingers."

Sometimes we release our creations too soon, but most difficulties of release involve the opposite: a refusal to let go. A mother once told me how hard it was to stop rescuing her adult children, even though she knew that doing things for them prevented them from becoming self-sufficient.

Martha Graham's children were the dances she choreographed for herself, and for many years she refused to let them go. No one else could perform them, or even film them. They were hers; they were *her*. To see them "in" the body of another would have been the end of all she knew herself to be.

## **Faith Again**

Letting go takes faith, for as our creations depart we experience a deep uncertainty. Matters are now beyond our control. The world seems dangerous, our products vulnerable. What will be their ultimate fate? How should we respond to it?

There is a strand in many religious traditions that addresses these very questions. The Christian writer C.S. Lewis says, "You forget forever proprietorship in your own works. You enjoy them as if they were someone else's." The Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* counsels "nonattachment" to the fruits of one's actions. Buddhists tell us to act as if the future of the universe depends on everything we do, while laughing at ourselves for thinking we can make the slightest difference.

"The source doesn't care what happens once it gives into being," says Joseph Campbell of this common strand. "It's the giving and coming into being that counts."

There is more to it, however. In a Taoist story, when a farmer's horse runs away, his neighbors offer their sympathy. The farmer merely shrugs: "Who's to say what's good or bad?" He turns out to be prescient, for the very next day the horse returns with a herd of wild

companions. Now the neighbors rejoice for their friend, but his reaction is the same: "Who's to say what's good or bad?" Sure enough, on the day after that, his son tries to ride one of the wild horses. He breaks a leg. "Too bad," say the neighbors, but the farmer will have none of it. The very next morning an army comes, drafting recruits. They spare the farmer's son because of his broken leg.

The story tells us that nothing is final, no matter how things may seem at the moment. We will never see the ultimate outcome of our efforts. What we need, therefore, is faith.

For me, the faith required by generativity is symbolized by a woman, a revered family figure, who lost her eyesight during her granddaughter's pregnancy. When the baby was born, and the woman held her for the first time, she said, "She's beautiful! I can't see her, but I know she's beautiful."

At the end of our lives, at the end of the generative process, we need to *know* the way that woman did. We need her kind of faith.