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Generative Humanity

We need a rope to hold onto, extending deep into the past, reaching far into the future. We cannot afford to be static, but we do need a place to stand.

He began to make his heroic treks sometime in the 1960's. If you were religious, you heard of his deeds and took hope from his promise in Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*. If organizations or families were your thing, you found him in *The Temporary Society* of Warren Bennis and Philip Slater. Were you turned on by technology? Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* was the epic for you. By the new generation? You could worship with Charles Reich in *The Greening of America*. The name of the hero was Transient Man; he was deified in a decade that discovered change, as though for the first time.

Transient Man, argued theologian Harvey Cox, was to celebrate the rising tide of secularization and rejoice over the anonymity and mobility that made it possible. For anonymity delivered him from the law, and mobility gave him choice—in personal relationships, in ideas, in values. As a result, secular man was freer, more tolerant, more open to change. Tradition was disintegrating, long-term acquaintanceships declining, impersonality on the upswing: it was all—praise the (secular) Lord—just a hint of things to come.

Bennis and Slater were less euphoric about the increase in temporary relationships, but they made one thing clear: the tide would not turn, so we had better learn to move—to be flexible, to tolerate ambiguity, to "get love, to love and to lose love." Mr. Toffler was more obvious than they in his separation of the sheep from the goats. The elect were the "people of the future." They quickly used and disposed of things, places, people, ideas, organizational structures. They worked in Manhattan but lived in Columbus, Ohio; they jetted from Pennsylvania to see a dentist in Germany; they commuted a thousand miles each week to teach a course in philosophy. Theirs was the freedom and exhilaration of a coed on spring vacation in Fort Lauderdale: "You're not worried about what you do or say here because, frankly, you'll never see these people again." Those Mr. Toffler cast into darkness were the critics who wanted to get off the escalator lifting them to the superindustrial society. They were "people of the past and present" warding off the onslaught of the new, clinging to ideas of loyalty and commitment, "less adept" at the "business" of handling temporary relationships.

And Charles Reich . . . well, in the face of the oncoming Consciousness III, loose and experimental, innocent and vulnerable, symbolized by hitchhikers, knapsacks, sleeping bags and the open road, he emitted his ultimate cry of reverence: "Oh, wow!" Affluent, liberated, on the move, these heroes and heroines of popular social science were also appearing with each new moon in the pages of *Playboy* and, later, *Playgirl*. They sowed more seed than ever before. They opened their thighs to more than ever before. But no one noticed—no one wanted to notice—that the seed they sowed was dead and the wombs they exposed were made of stone.

Sex has been separated from generation; genitals have been reduced to eroticals. (A few years ago, Rollo May saw that sex had been separated from love—both by the Victorians and by us.) So be it. I am not discussing sex here, nor am I targeted on *Playboy* or *Playgirl*. But I am concerned about Transient Man and the fact that he, like the playboys and playgirls of temporary relationships, appears incapable of producing and caring for offspring.

I am not sure how prevalent Transient Man is (though I can safely assume that part of him is in anyone who chances to read this article). But I have watched him enough to feel confident that he has little of what Erik Erikson calls generativity, a "concern for establishing and guiding the next generation." Man on the move simply cannot be tied down long enough to a single place, be it spiritual or physical, to be a parent—again, spiritually or physically. As Slater admitted in *The Temporary Society*: "It is, in fact, difficult to imagine ways of integrating the rearing of children with temporary systems."

I write in the hope that the image of Transient Man may give way to one of Generative Humanity, that we begin to see and hear more of adult men and women able to locate themselves in a continuity moving from past to future, able to select the best from what has preceded them and pass it on to those who come after. I say this not because Transient Man is unreal (he is all too real), but because, as a mythical hero, he is incomplete and sterile—a spiritual eunuch. Or, as Erik Erikson put it in his recent *Dimensions of a New Identity*: "We have gone through something like a century of youth. When, pray, is the century of the adult about to begin?"

It would be well to pause for a moment on Erikson's concept of generativity. The word's primary meaning is procreation, but it connotes more,

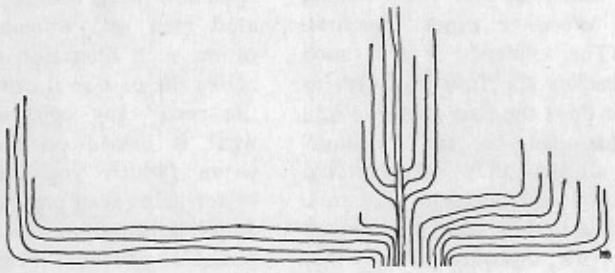
much more: productivity, creativity, caring for one's sector of the world. Indeed, parents may have many children but remain nongenerative: self-indulgent, uncaring, "stagnant." On the other hand, a monk may strive to settle his "relationship to the care for the creatures of this world and to the charity that is felt to transcend it"; he may concern himself with "what in Hinduism is called the maintenance of the world"; he may view spiritual progeny as a welcome trust and have much to pass on to them. Childless, he is nonetheless generative.

It is curious that, of the eight stages of the life cycle originally set forth by Erikson in *Childhood and Society* (1950), the fifth, that describing a conflict between "identity" and "role confusion," preempted the attention of Americans. It was not "generativity crisis," but "identity crisis," that became a household term, and Erikson could ask in 1973: "Is there any other country which continues to ask itself not only 'What will we produce and sell next?' but ever again, 'Who are we anyway?' " And it is interesting, too, to hear Erikson speculate on the reasons for America's hospitality to his concept: immigrants, we had to leave behind an old identity and forge a new one; impelled by change, obsessed with newness, we became more conscious of the need for a core of self-sameness in the midst of flux; glorifying youth, we latched on to an idea that would elevate adolescence to a state of semi-permanence.

As Erikson views the life cycle, one does not become generative until one has an identity, a sense of "being at one with oneself," a feeling of "affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future as well as its history." When one reaches that point —and feeling continuous with one's people, their past as well as their future, is part of it—he or she becomes capable of intimate relationships and, after that, of generativity. In Erikson's elegant summation: "In youth you find out what you *care to do* and who you *care to be*—even in changing roles. In young adulthood you learn whom you *care to be with*—at work and in private life, not only exchanging intimacies, but sharing intimacy. In adulthood, however, you learn to know what and whom you can *take care of*." There is a necessary sequence here: unless we first know and value who and what we are, we shall face the next generation with empty hands.

One day in May a mountain woman in North Carolina breast-feeds her infant son and places him on the ground, fondling him with her toes. It is the first time she has done so. "This is your land," she says to him, "and it's about time you started getting to know it." Then she tells Robert Coles in *Immigrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*: "The first thing I can remember in my whole life was my mother telling me I should be proud of myself. I recollect her telling me we had all the land, clear up to a line that she kept on pointing out. I mean, I don't know what she said to me, not the words, but I can see her pointing up the hill and down toward the road, and there was once when she stepped hard on the earth, near the corn they were growing, I think it was, and told me and my sister that we didn't have everything that we might want and we might need, but what we did have, it was nothing to look down on; no, it was the best place in the whole world to be born—and there wasn't anyplace prettier or nicer anywhere."

So she passes on her earliest, and perhaps her best, memory. Another mountaineer, this one from Deep Hollow, Ky., leaves no doubt regarding the source of his feelings for his children and his land: "We want them to remember their first years later on as a real good time—when they had a lot of fun, and when they learned all about the hollow and how to take care of themselves and do things out there up the hill and in the woods and down by the stream . . . . My boy Danny has got to *master the hollow*; that's what my dad used to say to me, all the time he would tell me and tell me and then I'd be in good shape for the rest of my life."



One reaches into one's personal past and one's people's past for the continuity to deliver to the future. The Huichol Indians of Mexico journey to the land of their ancestors to hunt the sacred peyote. Ingesting it, they spend the night singing and dancing, then staring into a fire, alone with their thoughts, present at the creation of their people. Some of the children have made the journey, too, brought along to partake in the ritual and begin to learn, even as their elders rediscover, "what it means to be Huichol." Identity and generativity in the same sacred event.

When one's society is stable and predictable, that is, when one's community has been doing things the same way for generations, identity, intimacy and generativity come easily, innocently. One knows his place, the place of contemporaries, and the place of successors, for these were carefully taught to him. But when a society is in flux, when understandings of "what it's all about," when descriptions of one's role as citizen, or worker, or intimate friend, or sexual being, turn over in the marketplace ever more rapidly, then identity becomes a matter of self-conscious struggle; and generativity, well, its "crisis" seems never to be reached.

Perhaps this—the transiency of people and events in our lives so vividly described by writers like Cox, Bennis, Slater, Toffler and Reich—explains America's infatuation with "identity crises." Our zones of permanence shrinking, we become stuck in our development on the question of who we are. Small wonder that our spiritual seed is dead, our spiritual wombs barren.

Is Transient Man "healthy"? Herbert Hendin, a psychoanalyst who has just completed a six-year study of college students, thinks not. The

"flexibility" of the "temporary" young really comes down to a painful confusion of identity, he wrote in a recent issue of *Harper's*. "Increasing numbers of young people do not want the sameness, the continuity, the unity of personality once thought to be the cornerstone of identity." Instead, they pursue disengagement, detachment, fragmentation, emotional numbness—the safest way to "handle" the "busi-

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ness" of temporary relationships. "It is becoming harder to grow up to be a man or a woman in this culture," Hendin wrote. "The suicide rate among young people (those aged 15 to 24) has risen more than 250 percent in the past 20 years."

Significant are the attitudes of Herbert Hendin's subjects toward generation. Among young women there is a widespread feeling of "motherhood as male assault, the lethal shot that ends your life." Caring, perhaps the key word in Erik Erickson's descriptions of generativity, is felt to be a self-destructive trap. Raising a child "is widely regarded as an unrelieved chore with no objective rewards." Is it possible that attitudes toward children say more than anything else about attitudes toward the self?

We must be able to generate. Not produce more offspring, but produce offspring who are not crippled, who are capable of standing somewhere, of committing something. If it is for the good of our progeny, it is for our benefit, too. It helps us to be pinned down by the direct questions of youth. Through them we are accountable to the future. I think, too, that some of the mental health of a population whose average age is increasing will revolve around feelings of generativity won or lost. If more are childless, there remains (as a psychoanalyst might put it) generative "energy" to be sublimated. A 90-year-old arthritic woman speaks in Coles's *The Old Ones of New Mexico*: "I am rich with years, a millionaire! I have been part of my own generation, then I watched my children's generation grow up, then my grandchildren's, and now my great-grandchildren's .... Now, I ask you, how much more can a woman expect?" That sense of well-being, that kind of health, is what more and more of our people may well come to envy.

The trick, of course, is to be generative—and to feel some of the fixity which that quality presupposes—in an era of flux. A generative adult in a society of temporary systems welcomes change but brings something to it. Abigail McCarthy recently reiterated something she said after the tumultuous 1968 Presidential campaign: "I cannot wish that the campaign did not happen. Through it I crossed the barrier into the world of my children and of all the young people to whom this world really belongs. I see the world now as they see it. I feel a sense of surprise that it is so easy to lay aside what once were rocklike basic assumptions, as I look at injustice in the fierce light of their outrage. But I do not wish to have so many older people in a headlong rush to join the young. What I would like to bring with me is a sense of the past, its continuity in the present, and a sense of identity stemming from the past which enables each one of us to withstand the assault of change" (*Commonweal*, 9/12/75). In these words, there is concern for those to come, a willingness to learn from them, and—the "and" is critical—a desire to bring the past to bear on the future.

To be generative, therefore, is to stand in the middle, to receive from the "elders" and pass on to the "young." One need not be in the middle of life, however. The very young can be the "elders" in a given situation, fourth-graders, for example, serving as "cross-age helpers" for first-graders. (The evidence is that such helping teaches the fourth-graders as much as it does the first-graders.) And 90-year-olds can be the "young," aware of all that they have received from cultural and personal ancestors. One is in the middle only in the sense that he (or she, of course) knows that receiving from the past is the condition for giving to the future. One is "young" and "old" at the same time.

To be generative, however, is not to be a hollow conduit for history's relentless passage to the future. As youth, we must fight the older generation, stripping ourselves of the immaturities with which they have burdened us. And as elders, we must present the young with a set of values that we have reworked into a coherent whole, so that they, in turn, have something solid to confront, battle and rejuvenate. Conflict assumes that the protagonists care. Let us, therefore, learn how to fight. Let the young learn how to receive from their predecessors, neither taking all nor rejecting all. And let the old learn how to transmit to their successors, neither autocratically nor with indifference.

For the autocrat ruthlessly (and for self-aggrandizing motives of his own) stuffs the past down the throats of his offspring: "Do it my way!" It is he who feeds the fantasies of the "futuristic" writers who wish to sever all ties with the past. But the laissez-faire adult abandons his progeny with a permissive, "Do it any way you wish." To him, that is conferring freedom. But, to them, it is receiving indifference. What we need is connectedness, a sense of belonging strong enough that we wish to fight (and love) each other, prior generations as well as ones to come. We need a rope to hold onto, flexible but strong, extending deep into the past, reaching far into the future. We cannot afford to be static, but we do need a place to stand.

In the past few years we have heard much of Radical Man. Being generative is being radical, if we take that word to mean returning to the roots rather than tearing up by the roots. Many cries have been uttered, too, for liberated men and women. But all too often, such liberation selectively perceives the past so it can hatefully "cut the cord"—any cord. In such cases, what is passed on is an autocratic vision (which you had damn well better believe) of precisely what "freedom" is, blind to the fact that one person's freedom can easily be

another's tyranny. Liberating generativity, in contrast, recognizes that a restructuring of oppressive roles must flow from a knowledge of the collective historical imagery of one's sex, race, ethnicity or religion. To be free we must have a sense of self-worth. We must know not merely how "bad off" our people were in the immediate past, but also how good they were in some other past. To take one example: what lies in the past of Woman, what is buried in our mythical unconscious about Her, is far more powerful than what one hears from the strident, sterile fringes of the "movement."

Perhaps we can understand, then, why books about Transient Man, even though they look to the future, are not generative. Alvin Toffler brainstorms brilliantly about technological futures, but, extrapolating only from what is most recent, he is unable to evaluate. He cannot select, on the basis of humankind's experience, which of the scenarios is best for us. Others throw up their hands before the inevitable or, worse, fall in adoration before it, and Reich's filidolatry is as telling of despair as Bennis and Slater's fatalism. One needs a sense of where he has been before he can decide on the course to be followed in the future. Indeed, in the moment of physical procreation, at the time when something entirely new is conceived, a whole history of the race is poured into a single cell.

So, we move as a nation to the celebration of our roots. We are a land of many traditions—religious, ethnic, cultural, social, sexual—some of them in atrophy. It would be tragic to forget where they lay or, worse, mine them only to melt them down. When Erik Erikson concluded his Jefferson lectures, he asked that a current way of saying good-bye be understood in a deeper sense. His final words were: "Take care." To that, I would add another farewell taken from a children's game and hope that it, too, be understood in a similar context of generativity. "Pass it on."

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