

The Deep Caring Crossroads: A Life of Generativity or Stagnation

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Let us set the stage: We are watching the final scene from the *Godfather* cinematic trilogy. Michael Corleone (as portrayed by Al Pacino) is staring out over Lake Tahoe in deep despair. By many standards Michael is a very successful man; he has led numerous “organizations,” and he is wealthy. He is also a very powerful and influential man in some ways – but is alone and estranged from all that is important in life. Michael just had his brother killed and has virtually no contact with other members of his family. He is aging before our eyes – so very different from the youthful Michael Corleone in the first *Godfather* movie who, straight out of the military after WWII, was to be the future of the Corleone family by forming a legitimate and respectable business. We see this future in the eyes of his father, Vito Corleone (played by Marlon Brando). Sitting in front of his beautiful home on the edge of Lake Tahoe, Michael envisions no future in terms of his own organizations or his enduring contributions to society. He is “burned out,” soulless and stagnate; a rotting, even lifeless entity who is without purpose or direction.

Michael Corleone has become alienated from four different deep caring roles, the roles which this book defines as *generative*. He is alienated from his family (the first role), from people he could be mentoring and organizations he could be building for the long-term after he is no longer around (the second role), from the traditions and culture he could sustain (the third role) and from the communities he could potentially serve and enhance (the fourth role). Our book focuses on these four deep caring roles and the choices that each of us makes in seeking to achieve a fulfilling life of generativity – or like Michael Corleone, falling into a life of stagnation.

There are many choices available to each of us during a lifetime. These choices can lead us to a self-renewing life or to stagnation and decline. Many of these decisions concern the way and the extent to which we care about other people, our heritage and our community. Michael Corleone, the second generation Godfather, made choices throughout his life that were concerned with what he should care about and how he should engage this caring. And his

choices led to stagnation and despair for Michael as he sat at the end of the third Godfather movie beside the still waters of Lake Tahoe.

We make choices. We may suffer from the wounds of betrayal and alienation—in some ways the violation of our life covenant—but we still have a chance to turn toward new purposes. We can shift from the wounded leader to the generative teacher. We can be transformed from the person who was left behind to the person who is helping a new generation lead the way into the future. Though we may have lost the opportunity to play an active role as parent to our children, a second form of parenting is available in abundance during late midlife. We can be parents to our organizations, to people for whom we serve as mentors, and to young people in our community. We can savor the joys of caring for our grandchildren and can become valuable volunteers in nonprofit organizations. Just as life seems to take away opportunities for active leadership, public recognition and parenting, it offers a second opportunity for new forms of parenting.

Many ways in which to be a “parent” are available at all points in our life. We can be a parent not only to children and other people but also to ideas, subordinates, people we mentor, institutions, communities, and even cultures. Erik Erikson (Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick, 1986, p. 37) describes this expanding notion of generativity as “a vital strength of care [and as] a widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident; it overcomes the ambivalence arising from irreversible obligation. Thus, [it] attends to the needs of all that has been generated.”

In essence, our need for generativity concerns two primary factors. First, generativity is about extending our presence and influence with our own children, with the next generation, with our heritage, and with our community. We become gardeners who tend the garden. We want the flowers, the trees and the plants to live long after we do and to represent, in some important and tangible way, the manner in which we make an appearance on this earth. We want the garden to reassure us and the world that we made a difference. This point was tenderly and melodramatically conveyed in both Lerner and Lowe’s *Camelot* and Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

At the beginning and ending of *Camelot*, we see King Arthur preparing for battle against Lancelot, his dearest friend. In many ways, King Arthur looks a bit like Michael Corleone. He is beaten down and has lost any sense of purpose or meaning in life. With despair Arthur, like Michael, is reflecting on the broken state of his kingdom and, in particular, his round table and code of chivalry: “Right makes might. Not might makes right!” It is only when a young boy is discovered by Arthur and displays his own fervent commitment to the roundtable and code that Arthur breaks out of his depression. Arthur commands the boy to return home: “Run boy run.” He sends the boy away so that the tales of Camelot “might not be forgot.” The abundant garden that Arthur has tended can now be restored by this representative of the next generation and other young men and women who witnessed this “one, brief shining moment of glory that was known as Camelot!” We can only wish that someone could have redeemed Michael Corleone, for there is very little that is noble or good about his adult life; the deeds he has already done are probably damning him to eternal stagnation.

In the case of Capra’s *Wonderful Life*, George had sacrificed a fulfilling life to serve his family and community. George never was given a chance to get out into the world. He wasn’t even sure if the other half of his covenant—making a difference to his family and community—was fulfilled. As in the story of King Arthur and many other Capra movies, (e.g., *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Meet John Doe*), the principle character in *Wonderful Life* is a former idealist who is now burned-out and disillusioned.

Like Arthur and perhaps Michael, George was on the edge of turning into a grumpy, discontented and alienated human being. He was becoming of little value to anyone as a parent, spouse, business owner or community leader. Erik Erikson would suggest that George was about to move toward the opposite pole—*away from generativity to stagnation and despair*. Clarence, the angel-in-training, rescued George at the last minute—just as the little boy rescued Arthur. Clarence showed George that he had made a profound difference, that the lives of people around him in Bedford Falls would not be the same without his sacrifices.

There is a second primary factor in understanding the path to generativity. *Generativity is about caring for that about which one truly cares*. We can’t attend equally to every flower in

the garden; we must determine which of the flowers we care about most and then devote deep, caring attention to them. So in life, we must identify those few things about which we truly care when we reach our Autumnal years. This is what generativity is all about. Like George in *A Wonderful Life*, we want to touch the important people in our lives and accomplish things as men and women of Autumn that leave a lasting impression. And like King Arthur, we want to know that in some way we have secured our immortality.