

# **Four Ways to Be Generative**

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We express and experience generativity through the enactment of four different, though interrelated, deep caring roles. First, there is the generativity that we experience as parents—even when our children are grown-up and we are no longer their primary caretakers. Indeed, caring about our children does not fade away as we grow older; rather, it takes on a new form and is accompanied by the delight that comes with seeing our children succeed in their own lives and finding their own distinctive identity. The expression of this first mode of generativity need not be limited to the care for children we have raised from birth. We all know of extraordinary men and women who have taken care of children via foster-care, adoption, or serving as a nurturing uncle or grandparent. One of our dear friends joined with his gay partner to raise a boy from a broken home—a dramatic example of this first type of generativity.

Second, there is the generativity that comes with caring about young men and women who are not part of our immediate or extended family. This type of generativity often is engaged when we are older and in a position of some power or influence in an organization. We care for the next generation of leaders or the next generation of craftsmen and artisans in our field. We often are generative in this second way through our role as mentors. We run interference for younger people or for those who look up to us. We collaborate with them on projects, such as writing a book together with a newcomer in the field. We serve as role models that new people in our company emulate through job performance, personal values, and even life style. We serve as mentors when we listen carefully to younger people talk about their problems and accomplishments. We serve as mentors when we encourage our protégés to take risks or to push beyond initial achievements. We sponsor younger people by inviting them into our world, our exclusive club or inner group.

There are innovative ways in which this second way of generativity is expressed. For example, we know several insightful leaders in American higher education who make effective use of senior level executives who are on a leave-of-absence from their

corporations. They teach for a term or two in the college's business school or liberal arts program, and many of these executives are in late midlife. They thrive in educational and training settings that allow them to teach and reflect on learning they have accumulated over the years. (Bland and Bergquist, 1998) In a way, they are "saved" by the college or university by serving as counterparts to King Arthur's young boy or George's angel-in training.

Often our generative interests in collaboration and teaching are melded into a single plan. We co-teach with someone who is younger or less experienced. We invite a younger colleague to join with us in consulting another organization or within our own organization. These can be some of the most enjoyable and gratifying encounters that we will experience. It doesn't matter if it's teaching about woodwork with a younger colleague at a local community center, coaching boys and girls on a little league team, coordinating a technical training program for line supervisors in a company, or conducting weekly case conferences with new associates in a law firm. It's all about generativity.

When in a state of stagnation, we tend to isolate the younger generation, often viewing young people as rivals and potential usurpers of the throne. When in a state of generativity, we welcome the younger generation and help to prepare them for new leadership. We are reminded of a trip we took to the French Quarter in New Orleans many years ago. We went to *Maison Bourbon* to hear Wallace Davenport, a legendary jazz musician. While Davenport was playing, "racket" (hard rock music) from across the street was invading the beautiful soulful sounds of his quartet. We went up to Davenport after his set was finished and commented negatively about the quality of music coming from across the street. Davenport cut us off and declared with considerable passion that hard rock music was the future and he was very glad it was there, across the street. Davenport could have resented the intrusion and competition. Instead, he chose to be generative and embrace and support the new music. *We* were curmudgeons—not Davenport! We find much of the same attitude among the musicians portrayed in the remarkable post-Katrina TV series called *Treme*.

There is a third way in which generativity is expressed, what George Vaillant (2012, p. 155) identifies as guardianship: "Guardians are caretakers. They take responsibility for the cultural values and riches from which we all benefit, offering their concern beyond specific individuals to their culture as a whole; they engage a social radius that extends beyond their

immediate personal surroundings.” Their domain of concern is no longer just their family, their organization, or even their community. They now care about the more fundamental legacies in their life and engage this caring through their wisdom and integration of soul and spirit. While this third way to express generativity can be identified as a form of resistance to change, or as an overdose of nostalgia, it also can be seen as an expression of deep caring for that which remains valid in contemporary times and which continues as a source of wisdom regardless of its date of origin or the quaint way in which it is stated, painted, or sung.

Generativity is to be found in yet a fourth way. We witnessed this when we conducted a two-year research project on Community Sage Leadership in Western Nevada County, California. Fifty men and women (ages 25-55) were identified as emerging sage leaders and interviewed in-depth on the same set of key life questions. Another fifty men and women (ages 56-90) from the same communities (Grass Valley and Nevada City, CA) were identified as senior sage community leaders and also were interviewed on these questions. In writing the project book (*The Sages Among Us: Harnessing the Power of Civic Engagement*), we identified a very powerful, unifying theme—especially among the retired senior sage leaders. These men and women were generative in their care for the community in which they lived. Unlike many other retirees who had retreated into gated retirement communities and often stagnated there, the fifty senior sage leaders found enormous gratification in their involvement with local arts councils, environmental action groups, hospitality organizations, and many other initiatives that enhanced community development.

When we are generative in late midlife we establish, support, or help to expand networking in our community. We move beyond our own family and the organizations in which we have worked. We are particularly suited at this time in our life to such roles as teacher, trainer or coach to the leaders or managers of nonprofit organizations or community action forums. In many cases, as we noted in *The Sages Among Us*, the role of community-based generativity is not necessarily to start something new, but rather to support and build on that which others have begun—and it is contagious (Quehl and Bergquist, 2012, p. 90):

. . . as part of their generativity, many senior sages report that their “job” in working as a volunteer is to build on the accomplishments of their predecessors. Rather than starting something new, which might bring personal

recognition and ego gratification, these dedicated seniors value continuity and honoring past contributions. Their passion is contagious, as is their appreciation for work already done. This enables them to generate new energy as well as re-kindled old passions. They re-interpret the existing vision of their organization so community members can see the often unacknowledged value inherent in work already done, and will continue to be done by the organization. One of our sage leaders described this way of being generative as “leading quietly.”

As we noted above, these community-based generative services are not just about quiet leadership; they are also about voluntary community engagement (a key ingredient in any attempt to increase “social capital” or “community capital”). In keeping with this spirit of generativity, one of our sage leaders noted, “We don’t retire, we just quit working for money.” George Vaillant (2012, p. 166) offered the same observation with regard to his Harvard grads: “community-building is a career of its own—one of the really great ones.”

Insofar as men and women are serving in generative roles when working with other people, with an organization, or with their community during senior years, they are likely to be more inclined than ever before to exert authority in a collaborative and nurturing manner. And as they teach and mentor, they are also willing to take less credit and be less visible as they age. They already have acquired whatever power and recognition they are likely to get in their lives. They have had their “day in the sun.” These men and women now gain more gratification from watching their organizational or community or cultural “children” succeed than from succeeding themselves. They have shifted from a primary focus on their own success to a focus on significance—making a difference in the world. They care deeply.