

# **A Life of Deep Caring**

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The musical “*Pippin*,” by Stephen Schwartz (of “*Wicked*” fame), is about the nature of deep caring. It involves the search for life meaning and the beginning of all types of generativity. The protagonist, Pippin, searches for meaning in life as the son of Charlemagne first through warfare, then through lust, then through revolution against his father, then through governance (replacing his father), then through exploration of religious practices and other pursuits, and finally through leading an ordinary life. He runs away from each path – initially including leading an ordinary life with a widowed woman and her son. Finally, he comes to realize that the woman and her son are really what he wants in life, and where true meaning can be attained even if in a rather mundane, day-to-day, and non-dramatic manner. Pippin is discovering generativity.

Schwartz' protagonist, Pippin, has initiated a journey of discovery not unlike Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz and many other protagonists in novels, plays and myths (as noted by Joseph Campbell in his examination of dominant world myths). The difference between Pippin and Dorothy is that Pippin is traveling on a path toward other-orientation (generativity) rather than on a path back home as is Dorothy. Perhaps this is because Dorothy is much younger than Pippin. What might Dorothy's journey be like if we were to provide a narrative of Dorothy years later in life when she is a caring parent, modeling the attitude and behavior of Auntie Em. Perhaps, as a mature adult, Dorothy would become a mentor or guide to young women who are restless about growing up in Kansas. She might even set up a scholarship program so these young women can spend a summer in a foreign land (if not Oz), or she might help to establish a museum that features the artifacts of traveling magicians and peddlers (like the Wizard). These would be portraits of Dorothy's journey to deep caring outside herself and her desire to return home.

## **The Life Choice: Generativity or Stagnation?**

Like Michael Corleone, King Arthur and George Bailey, we have choices to make. Do we choose generativity or stagnation? Do we undertake the risk of teaching and learning? Or do

we accept the *status quo* and refuse to take a risk? When we are stagnant rather than generative we continue to do the same old thing. We settle for mediocrity, allowing our dreams and personal aspirations to wither away. We come to resent and even block the ideas and achievements of younger people. We dwell on the past, while abandoning the future. Typically, stagnation sets in because we are afraid of change. We don't believe for some reason that we can keep up with the next generation.

In our own work as coaches and consultants to mature men and women, we find they often speak of personal fears associated with confiscated dreams of the future. They have sacrificed in order to realize personal aspirations and to fulfill dreams about family, career, and even retirement. What happens to so many during late midlife? They no longer have a future, for the future is right now. They have confiscated it and must now either savor the present day or create a new set of plans for the future. This is the process of generativity. Alternatively, if they live primarily in their past with old dreams, they are not the generative guardians that Vaillant identified. Instead, they are regressive defenders of a past that sometimes never really existed, and they don't want the past to be incorporated into the present. This is the process of stagnation.

Ironically, men and women who have spent most of their lives planning and saving for the future often find the creation of a new future to be terrifying. Yet, the creation of a new future is critical if they are to be generative—if they are to recreate themselves for the final acts of their lives. Bill Bridges (1980, 2001) associates this time of rebuilding with his concept of the “neutral zone.” This is a state of limbo that resides between the old realities and new possibilities. While the neutral zone is a difficult place in which to dwell, it is also a place that is filled with special bonuses: mentors, spiritual guides, new loves, rediscovered old loves, new dreams; furthermore, the new future is often joyfully and insightfully created in conjunction with the younger people they are mentoring or with whom they are collaborating. All of this is in conjunction with other members of their organization and community with whom they are building their new future.

This series of essays are about the different ways in which deep caring is manifest. They are about mentoring other people, honoring others and artifacts from a past era, about helping to

better our own communities. Our work is about men and women who move beyond themselves--extending both time and space--seeking to outlive themselves by leaving something of value behind for which they deeply care.

In the next set of essays we offer a brief explanation of each generativity role. In subsequent essays we build on these descriptions by illustrating each role with many narratives about generativity that were derived from in-depth interviews that we conducted as part of two projects over the past two decades. We particularly focus on the lives of two senior women and two senior men who participated in one of the two projects. We call them *Featured Players*. They agreed to provide additional personal narratives about how each of the four generativity roles has interacted and played out in their lives.

### **Deep Caring: Historical Roots**

Throughout these essays, we also explore the nature of deep caring and link it in many interrelated, though different ways to the four roles of generativity. It is important to note that we are not the first to connect the processes of generativity to the deep caring commitment. Some insights and assistance in this regard come from Jerome Wakefield (1998), who provides a link between deep caring and generativity and also some historical insights about both. Wakefield (1998, p 156) notes that Erik Erikson, the first person to extensively explore the topic, considers generativity to be engaged through "three main kinds of activities: procreation, productivity and creativity." Following up on Erikson, Kotre (1984) identified four categories of generativity: "biological (the bearing and nursing of the infant), parental (the nurturing and socializing of the child), technical (the teaching of skills), and cultural (the creation and passing on of the culture's symbols)." (Wakefield, 1998, p. 156)

While these two typologies of generativity seem to be very similar to those offered many centuries ago by Plato, Wakefield believes there is a major difference between Plato and Erikson/Kotre's formulation. An important distinction is between two care-oriented motives: (1) instrumental and (2) instinctive. Wakefield proposes that Plato offered an instrumental version of caring. According to Plato, caring is "an instrumental action aimed at ensuring that generative products are as good, long lasting, and reflective of the self as possible" (Wakefield, 1998, p. 157). For Plato, generativity is birth: "the generative moment comes when the individual wants

to externalize his or her creations; simply having ideas, for example, is not enough. The urgent is not just to live on through replacement but to do so specifically through the birthing of aspects of one's inner self" (Wakefield, 1998, p. 173).

Conversely, in his formulation of generativity and caring, Erik Erikson (and later Kotre) offers a more instinctive and less "rational" assessment of the caring motivation. However, like Plato, Erikson and Kotre offer a wide-ranging set of activities they consider to be generative and that fit into their three or four-fold typology. Everyone seems to agree that generativity is manifest in many ways (Wakefield, 1998, p 171).

Desire to nurture the young, to be remembered, to be productive, to compose a symphony, to discover scientific truths, to develop oneself for one's society, and to achieve just laws and institutions are not derived from the same motivational mechanisms. Generativity is to this extent a bundle of mechanisms with varying specific functions.

How is the stage set for these caring acts and for the engagement of generativity? How does one prepare for a generative role, or what qualifies one to engage in generative acts? And most importantly, what do generative actions look like in the real world? We will have much to say in response to these questions as we flesh out the four generativity roles and move into the lives of our four *Featured Players*—and even more broadly the participants in our two projects.

