

## VIII. Generativity One: Raising Children and Engaging Projects

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In his founding conception of generativity, Erik Erikson focused on the opportunities, challenges and gratifications associated with generativity (vs. stagnation) as it takes center stage during the middle years of our lives. Erickson did not consider child rearing to be a sign of generativity, and he did not focus on project building among young men and women. In some ways, therefore, we are going against Erikson in proposing child raising as the first generativity role that we often engage during our early adult years. This is an important aspect of generativity because we experience deep caring when we raise our children, and when we initiate projects related to a set of values or goals that are particularly important for us. We also begin our investigation of generativity with child-rearing and project-building because of the lingering impact these early forms of mature caring have on our lives. We propose that the early dynamics of caring in what we are calling Generativity One continue to influence us when we interact with our grown children, when we become grandparents, and when we serve as guardians in passing the torch for projects and organizations about which we deeply care.

We also believe it is important to focus on generativity at this early stage because a decision *not* to have children can have a lingering impact on our lives. In addition, a Generativity One decision may involve setting aside our dream of initiating a project associated with a life vision. Or it might involve operating inside an existing organization rather than starting one's own organization. Such decisions not to engage actively in Generativity One are just as important as decisions to engage in more typical Generativity One activities like parenting.

### **Generativity One and Leaving Something that Lingers**

In his book on *The Active Life*, Parker Palmer (1999) employs a wonderful and quite poignant metaphor about dropping one pebble in a basin of water. At first the water in the basin is impacted by the dropped pebble. The ripples in the water serve as clear evidence of the pebble's impact. However, the ripples soon die away and the water no longer has any memory of the pebble's impact. We similarly often wonder whether our life is having an impact. Does the water (our world) remember anything about our existence and presence? While Palmer has

identified a profound existential issue that each of us must often confront, we gently offer a slightly altered metaphor. We chose to replace the basin of water with a lake. The pebble is dropped in the water and the ripples spread out across the lake lapping on the shoreline. While the ripples soon die out, there are usually small indentations on the shoreline. This suggests that our own impact on the world might not be immediately observable, but somewhere on a distant shore the impact can be found. We have made a difference. . .

Frequently, our impact is discovered many years later in the lives of our children, grandchildren, and perhaps even great grandchildren. While the distant shore is not far away in term of space, it is often far away in terms of time. Similarly, the lingering impact of our work in life might be found in a project we have initiated as its influence cascades across many other segments of our society. Everything changes a little to accommodate the minor intrusion we have made on the fabric of our community, social system, nation or world. We tread on the earth and leave an imprint. This is what Generativity One is all about.

Early on, and certainly by the time we are young adults, we hope that something endures beyond our life. We hope there will be a legacy, a remnant that endures. As Parker Palmer has noted, we don't want to believe that the water has no memory of the pebble. We give birth to children and begin a project during our young adulthood often in hopes of leaving a mark on a distant shoreline. Furthermore, we often need help in leaving this mark, especially if it involved giving birth to one or more child and raising it. Thus, the first generativity role is often engaged in relationship with another person. There is *collaborative generativity*. While joint generativity is to be found in Generativity Two, Three, and Four, it is particularly prevalent in Generativity Two. We find in an enduring, intimate relationship the opportunity to bear and raise children. In this chapter, we turn to stories of first order generativity told by couples about the challenges and gratifications that come from shared generativity.

Not all adults find generativity in the raising of children. Some find generativity in a special project they initiate while in young adulthood or even later in life (e.g., lobbying the state legislature for a special cause, starting a not-for-profit organization, planting an annual community vegetable garden). In many instances, we have found that these projects are also shared with a life partner. In this chapter we weave together the narratives of child-raising with stories about conducting a mutual project because we believe these processes are often parallel.

And for many of the people we interviewed, a shared project is their "baby" and should in no way be diminished by being relegated to some secondary role or defined as a "surrogate" for the child-rearing process. We turn first to the central question in the engagement of first order generativity: should we raise a child or initiate a mutual project?

We rely in this chapter on interviews conducted over the past twenty years with men and women who have been involved in an enduring intimate relationship.

## **Should We Raise a Child?**

Many of the people we interviewed early in their adulthood decided to have children, thereby replicating the standard family-oriented social structures of our society. In most cases, these men and women gave birth to one or more children through an intimate relationship with their life partner. Others decided to have children through adoption or *in-veto* fertilization; these people clearly moved outside the standard social norms and structures. In some instances, couples cannot give birth to children themselves. Others decide not to have children, either because they have their own careers to pursue or because they simply didn't want the awesome responsibility of raising children. In other cases, young adults live in areas where it is very difficult or impossible to adopt children, or have decided that the available avenues for having children (adoption, surrogates, artificial insemination, etc.) are too problematic or emotionally disturbing to pursue.

The decision of whether to have a child is often of central concern to contemporary couples, for child-rearing is no longer an automatic requirement of marriage or other long-term relationships. Given the liberalization of adoption and *in-veto* fertilization rules and regulations, gay and lesbian couples and heterosexual partners who are not married are not freed from the decision about whether to raise children.

Many young adults and couples also confront the issue as to whether to independently or jointly conduct some long-term (even lifelong) project, such as starting a business or participating extensively in an avocation, hobby or recreational activity. In some of instances, the men and women we interviewed decided to begin a joint project in lieu of having children; In essence, they turned to "rearing" a mutual project and investing it with the emotional commitment and caring that is usually associated with child raising. In other cases, the decision

to begin a project had little to do with the decision about raising children; these young adults either decided on a project in addition to raising children or started their project prior to child-rearing.

The decision of whether to have children often is complex. It is very expensive to raise children, and couples having dual careers may have little time or energy for child-raising. Here is an example: Like the fabled couples of old, Glenda and Kurt were "childhood sweethearts" who came together as a couple when they were both fifteen years old. They spent all of their early married years living in close proximity to their parents. In this respects they are very traditional; one might almost call them "quaint." When it came to a decision about having children, however, Glenda and Kurt were much more closely attuned to contemporary values and concerns. Like many young couples who are faced with major financial challenges (for example, the high cost of home ownership), Glenda and Kurt were ambivalent about having children, and they weighed the impact that children would have on their carefree and mutually gratifying lifestyle. They were married eleven years prior to having their first and only child. Glenda and Kurt's joint decision was also impacted by their observing the child-rearing styles by other couples they knew. If they were going to have children, they wanted it to be different from other young parents who seemed to give up everything in order to have children.

First order generativity is in part about "doing it better" than other parents, including one's own parents. Glenda and Kurt wanted to retain at least part of their old life if they were to have children. Glenda indicated that:

Part of what kept us from having kids for so many years was Kurt's side of the family. His one brother has three kids, his mom was into having grandkids, and it was real important in that family to have kids. I said to myself, no, I don't want to do that. I want to play and be a kid myself!

Their decision to finally have a child was vaguely formed and never really definitive. As with many couples, the ultimate decision was based on biology rather than on economics or direct acknowledgement of the desire for Generativity One: Glenda became pregnant. Kurt describes the process:

We never specifically said "Let's have a baby." We talked about it and agreed that we were in a position to have a child now, but we didn't want to commit to it. We looked realistically at what it would mean to our lifestyle and concluded that having a child would stand in the way of us going out Friday evenings with friends on the spur of the moment. We really thought about that, and it made us hesitate. And then, when it happened, it was just lust!

Although they never fully acknowledged it, Glenda and Kurt did make a decision by allowing the relaxation of birth control procedures to determine their future life. They were very thoughtful about reforming their relationship to accommodate a child, and what appears to be an impulsive act on the surface was actually long-considered.

### **The Divorce and Second Marriage**

The decision about whether to have children is moot in many instances among contemporary men and women. They are either now single parents—having never been married or having gotten a divorce— or have joined together with another person who produced children from a previous relationship. The issue of Generativity One now carries over to responsibilities faced by the single parent or a new couple relationship. Thus the question becomes not whether to have children in their lives but, rather, the extent to which they choose to continue assuming responsibility for parenting these children. At the same time, the question might also concern the extent to which both parties of a new couple relationship are actively involved in rearing children who are already present, and whether the couple will have children of their own to raise along with those already present. As we all know, things can get quite complex.

We now briefly consider the generativity issues associated with being a single parent. In directing our attention to this Generativity One challenge, we turn to things learned from our community Sage Leadership Project in Western Nevada County, CA, and, in particular, to the second of our four *Featured Players*. We call this gentleman Dale. At age 78, Dale now lives with his second wife in Nevada City, CA. Dale served for many years as a senior telecommunications executive -- working initially in New Jersey and then later in Chicago and San Francisco. He had two children by his first wife and was divorced while working in Chicago. Both of his

children remained living with his first wife, and Dale saw them infrequently while living and working in Chicago:

My son is 50 and my daughter is 49. During their first nine years we lived in New Jersey. I was mostly home and enjoyed being a fully engaged parent; we played together, went to church, fished and camped, and enjoyed month-long vacations in Ocean City, MD. When my children were nine and ten, respectively, their mother and I divorced after 15 years of marriage. In those days there was no requirement for joint custody, so my ex-wife simply took our children back to her hometown of Columbus, Ohio, to live. I was devastated and greatly missed my children. Because I traveled a lot with my new job in Chicago, however, I was able to see them for a long weekend every two months or so; we always stayed in a Columbus motel, ate at a local Pizza Hut, and bowled. During their growing-up years I also telephoned often and wrote lots of letters to my son and daughter. I especially remember writing a letter about “lessons learned from my own life” when each of them turned 21. During their college years I visited to see my son play football and my daughter star in plays. Since the time that my son and daughter each married and had their own child, my current wife and I visit with them each year during Christmas and summer vacations.

This brief summary about the complex relationship between a divorced father and his children is replicated in the lives of many of today’s men and women. The children stay with one parent and spend time with their other parent only on weekends or only a few times each year. It is often a devastating experience for both parents, and particularly for the parent who does not have primary custody of the children. The dream of Generativity One is often shattered because the aspiration of the parent to be with his or her children all of the time while they are growing up is set aside. If the parent with custody moves away with the children, or if the parent without custody moves elsewhere, the separation generates difficult choices: should the parent without custody stay in the community where the children live or move to the same community as the parent with custody? How much of a sacrifice should the divorced parent make – especially given the anger and sense of betrayal that are often experienced by both parents.

There is another ingredient that plays out in the life of Dale as a parent. After the divorce, his children occasionally visited him in Chicago, and he sometimes visited them in Ohio; but he

never really had a full-time "home" with his children. This resulted in a *generativity gap*. Best understood, Generativity One most often is envisioned and enacted in a highly tangible manner: "I provide a home. I provide security. I am there to tuck them in bed every evening." True, some degree of parenting security for children is provided through child support or regular alimony payments, but this is simply not the same thing as full-time Generativity One. As one of our other community Sage leaders noted, "It's not just a matter of providing a 'home' for my children; there is also the absence of a complete family." He reported that the children would stay at his home, but at the end of the day there was still someone "outside" his home--namely, his ex-wife. No matter how much he was enraged by his ex-spouse, her absence was "haunting"—at least until there was a second person in his life who helped to care for his children. This is the topic to which we now turn.

Many couples involved in second marriages decide not to have any more children. Sometimes this decision is relatively easy for the couple to make; at other times it is quite difficult and often remains an unresolved tension within the second marriage. Here is a case in point: during the interview in which Hillary and James participated, Hillary indicated that she and James decided not to have children because Hillary had her own grown children to care for from her first marriage and because they wanted to begin saving for their retirement (even though both of them were only in their 40s). Hillary had left Generativity One behind her and was moving on to another generativity role. James nodded his head in agreement. He then frowned and began to crush the soda can he was holding between his hands. Hillary didn't seem to notice his reaction and continued smiling and talking about how wonderful it was to be a parent. She had to keep raising her voice as James continued to make more and more noise crushing the can. James then jumped up, reminding Hillary and the interviewer that he had to get ready for a hunting trip, excused himself and left the room. The interviewer's immediate impression was that the subject of child rearing was uncomfortable and possibly painful for James and that it may have been a great loss to him not having had his own children. He missed, and perhaps longed for, the fulfillment of his own first order generativity. As in the case of many second marriages, the first generativity role was not aligned between the two members of this couple. It may have been particularly painful for James, given that Hillary gave rather spurious financial reasons for not having children with James.

James and Hillary were not alone in experiencing this generativity dilemma. Another couple, Kathy and Dave, also decided not to have children together. Unlike James and Hillary, however, they seemed to agree that this was the best course to take. Dave had children from his previous marriage and although Kathy never had children, she did not wish to have any. Both felt that having a child would be unfair to themselves and the child as well. At fifty years old, Dave explained that he could not look forward to spending the next twenty, perhaps his last living years, raising a child. Furthermore, he felt it would be unfortunate for any child to have an older father who could only share his life for a limited period of time. Since Dave had six grandchildren, he cherished his role as a grandfather and the fact that he had been able to enjoy his children through to their adulthood. He was enjoying a second fulfillment of first order generativity as a grandparent (about which we will have more to say later). Although Kathy was only thirty-eight years old and capable of child bearing, she had chosen likewise not to have any children. Both felt they sacrificed themselves in their previous, abusive marriages—Dave to his wife and children, and Kathy to her demanding husband. Both remained cautious about letting anything come between their love for one another.

As in the case of many couples who are in second major relationships, the problem of child-rearing for Kathy and Dave did not go away with their mutual decision not to have children. They began living together in Dave's house shortly after they met and prior to their marriage. Dave and his first wife had been separated, and she had moved into her own place prior to the filing of divorce papers and the subsequent final divorce. Because his first wife had been very neglectful of both children, Dave retained custody of his two teenagers. Neither Dave nor Kathy anticipated difficulties with the children, which arose following Kathy's entrance into his home. Both were caught up in their new-found love and had not looked realistically at the process of moving in together. Dave's children presented the first major obstacle in their establishing a home together. Dave's second fulfillment of generativity was being haunted by the remnants of his first fulfillment as a parent.

Kathy was not well received by Dave's two children, for they challenged her as a potential mother figure. Dave felt he was not prepared to mediate between Kathy and his children, and he felt a strong obligation to his children. Like many men of his generation, Dave assumed Kathy would adapt easily to the role of mother. Dave assumed that child-rearing was deeply



embedded in the DNA of women, but Kathy never anticipated the duties of being a mother and resented Dave for imposing this function on her. As a result, Kathy moved out of Dave's house into her own apartment for a while. Dave agreed to make other living arrangements for his two children; his son, recently graduated from high school, enlisted in the Navy, and his daughter went to live with her mother for the last year of high school. Kathy and Dave could now for the first time live alone together.

Problems continued to exist for Kathy and Dave, even though the children were now living elsewhere. The most important were financial, as is often the case for couples with children from previous relationships. Kathy believed that Dave's children were demanding too much money from Dave, and that they were capable of working for extra money like many teenagers their age. In addition, while Dave was working his late shift as a truck driver, Kathy claimed his children spent many late evening hours out partying with the money their father provided them.

Dave listened patiently to Kathy when she expressed her fears that the money was being used for alcohol and drugs. His children, however, claimed that Kathy was just trying to ensure that their father kept all of his money for her and, contrary to her allegations, they were not spending money on alcohol and drugs. Dave found himself again caught between his children and wife. Kathy and Dave decided that Dave's daughter would continue to receive money, but only a fraction of the original amount that Dave provided. Since his son enlisted in the Navy, Kathy believed that he no longer needed financial support from his father. Dave agreed. In addition, Kathy and Dave decided to pool their incomes during this time to pay jointly for the mortgage on the house (which Dave had previously owned with his first wife) and any other expenditures.

Unfortunately, Kathy began to grow very dissatisfied with her work environment. She left her job and could not find another. She soon found that being at home was very isolating. In addition, Dave now provided all of the income for both of them. Thus, while Kathy and Dave's child-rearing and related financial issues were resolved for a short period of time, they soon faced new challenges regarding finances that impacted their ability to resolve issues associated with the parenting. They risked moving from a shared generativity to a shared and highly destructive stage of stagnation.

Child rearing often becomes even more complex and challenging when raising children alone. Dottie had two children from a first marriage and did not want to have any more, despite being pregnant with Ricardo's child. Dottie felt that her teenage son and daughter were "terrible." Her daughter was still living with her and hated Ricardo and her son had just run away, first to live with his father and then to join the Army. Her pregnancy was a loaded event for Dottie. Her second marriage had been to a man who wanted children, although Dottie felt she could not handle more than the two children she already had. Ricardo had initially seemed willing to give up having his own children, but ultimately he left Dottie for a younger woman.

When Dottie became pregnant with Ricardo's child, she knew she wanted to have an abortion. But she needed a lot of support from Ricardo about this decision. Ricardo, however, was unable to discuss the issue with Dottie. He didn't want to influence her decision, he "couldn't talk about it," and he felt she had to decide for herself. Still stung by the rejection of her second husband, it was very difficult for Dottie to make the decision to have an abortion without Ricardo's support. Ricardo became very angry when Dottie kept pushing him to discuss his feelings, and he decided to move out. Ricardo did not return. Dottie now faced the prospect of being a mother of three children. She was not feeling generative and became caught in an untenable state of despair and stagnation.

And here is different Generative One situation: Margie and Gene started living together at Margie's residence within a few months after they first met. They chose to live in Margie's house in large part because she was the primary parent of an eight year old boy and ten year old girl. Gene had been married twice before but had no children. Four years after they began living together, Margie and Gene decided to get married. While they raised Margie's two children together, very little was said about these two children during our interview. Perhaps this was because they didn't consider these children, now teenagers, to be a part of their own identity as a couple; instead, they were seen as part of Margie's past life. We concluded that little Generativity One seemed to exist in this couple's shared life. We found many similar examples in our interviews of children who seemed to be caught existing in limbo between several different relationships rather than being identified as central to one existing relationship.

Margie and Gene focused most of their attention on the decision to have their own child. Margie had made it clear to Gene before they made a commitment to one another that she did not want any more children. However, six years after her marriage she shifted from that position and decided that having a child would be a good idea. (Apparently, the decision about giving birth to a child was left in Margie's hands. The assumption, once again, was that the woman would be the primary source of Generativity One when it came to child-rearing. Perhaps this also occurred in Margie's first marriage, given that her husband seemed to have taken little interest in his children after his divorce from Margie.) Unfortunately, some men and women seem to limit their sense of responsibility for a child to the confines of their relationship with the other parent of this child. When the relationship ends so does their child-rearing commitment.

A year after Margie had changed her mind, she and Gene stopped using birth control and she got pregnant. But this decision had some unexpected costs associated with it. Most of Margie and Gene's friends at the time were single. Margie and Gene reported that they lost some of their single friends when they decided to have a child, and it was a hurtful experience. They also lost some free time together and a sense of spontaneity. On the other hand, it was clear during our interview that their four year old daughter played a powerful role in their relationship. According to these-doting parents, their little daughter "ran the show." Margie even felt that Gene devoted too much time to their daughter, and that they didn't take trips as a couple the way they had before she came along. The time they spent together on hikes and other things always involved their daughter.

Margie was clearly a good and loving mother to her new daughter, but she was feeling sorely neglected. This was Gene's first child, and it was "a cherished dream come true." Margie, however, was in the midst of a mid-life struggle with having had one family, as well as a career in a helping profession. She was not content to return to the totally child-centered mode of her earlier life, yet wanted to support Gene in his new-found love and appreciation shown to their daughter. Like many dual-family couples, Margie and Gene were at different individual stages of interest in their own child-rearing careers and wanted to find an appropriate and mutually-satisfying compromise with regard to their joint-childrearing career as a couple.

In some cases, we found that the young adults we interviewed didn't have to worry about fitting children into their busy work lives because they were unable to give birth to their own

children. This inability to have children can often be a source of considerable stress and strain in a relationship, unless the young adult couple can direct their energy and desire to create something together toward another valued end. Ted and Velia, for instance, had been trying to have a baby for five years. According to Velia "trying to get pregnant put a strain on our relationship for about a year." Furthermore, she believed that the strain could reappear again in the near future if they continue to be unsuccessful in their efforts to have a child. Fortunately, Ted and Velia have other projects that provide meaning; they both thoroughly enjoyed renovating their cabin in Wyoming. Ted indicated that when Velia moved into his Wyoming retreat ten years ago he knew they had become a couple, for no other woman had ever stayed for more than a day at this retreat. So this place represented the heart of Ted and Velia's relationship. They "felt like a couple" when working on the cabin and buying furniture for it. While Velia had to travel elsewhere to attend graduate school, she returned as often as possible to Wyoming; their reunion was always special because of the romantic and central role played by the Wyoming retreat in their lives together.

### **Should We Start a Major Project?**

Many of the people we interviewed for the enduring, intimate relationship project faced the issue of whether to have children, as well as beginning a project that represented something of great value to one or both of them. Such projects can take many forms, ranging from raising animals to mounting a major corporate venture. Regardless of the breadth or depth of the commitment, a project becomes an important source of generativity for people and often helps to define the distinctive character of the individual. In addition, it provides the individual with something to hold on to when the going gets tough.

Take Larry and Harold, who exemplify a heightened commitment to a specific project: building a home. A couple for six and one-half years, Larry and Harold had similar careers that led directly to their mutual project. Larry was a thirty four year old architect, while Harold was thirty one and was a successful retail designer/architect. Their commitment to building a beautiful home was widely-known and admired in their local community. It was a spectacular home in terms of both design and detail, and it contained the backbone of the rich story of Larry and Harold's relationship from its earliest development.

In arriving at their home, the interviewer walked through the corridor of a large apartment building and into a garden. Tucked away behind a cluster of tall apartment houses, Larry and Harold's cottage stood out in stark contrast against its urban environment. As their story unfolded, it was clear that the detailing was a blend of both their personalities and characters. Harold's diverse art work, which ranged from oil paintings to ceramic sculptures, was displayed in the living room. The clean, sharp detail of the structure and the modern leather sofa was a touch of Larry. The old, stuffed chairs sharply contrasted with the newness of the sofa and were indicative of Harold. Downstairs there were two bedrooms with a veranda connecting them. A hot tub was hidden in the corner, overlooking the garden in back. Beyond the garden, the cityscape rose in full view. The second floor consisted of a carefully designed kitchen with a dining area connecting to it. Behind this was a large, yet cozy, living room, with a fireplace and high ceiling. Both Larry and Harold's art was displayed in this room. On the bookshelves were photos and books, representing their separate lives and their life together as a couple.

In this brief vignette, the interviewer had insightfully captured the essence of generativity in both members of this couple. They both loved to host other people and demonstrate their shared commitment and expertise in providing a richly sensuous environment in which to live and work. They had created "the good life" by surrounding themselves with their own art work and architectural design, and by creating an environment that reflected their common tastes as well as the individual tastes.

Much as a shared interest in architecture, design and visual beauty provided the basis for Larry and Harold's mutual project, music and a love of Poland had kept Mick and Sheila's relationship alive during the past twenty years. As a defector from Poland during the late nineteen seventies, Mick had a deep, abiding interest in the culture and political liberation of Poland. Sheila shared this interest. Having been raised by first generation Polish parents, Sheila and Mick met as performers at a House of Poland social gathering. They still played together at House of Poland events, and they sang together during evenings in their home where Mick had built a recording studio.

Mick and Sheila produced their own recordings and gave or sold them at their performances. Their songs were all written by Mick, while Sheila assisted with vocal arrangements. They

loved being able to perform in their own home studio because their home itself had taken on special significance for them. They had bought their home five years ago, and it was in miserable condition. They renovated the house themselves and built their studio into their home. Their interviewer noted that every detail of their home reflected their unique tastes and their love for one another and their music. Clearly, for Mick and Sheila, Poland, music and home are the three children they have raised and are still nurturing. Each of these children required considerable effort and one of them (Poland) went through its own adolescence during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Mick and Sheila worry a great deal about its future prospects and hope someday soon to be able to travel back to their beloved Poland.

## **Conclusions**

In some instances, a project overlaps with one or more of the other roles of generativity we have identified. It is not unusual, for a project to be deeply embedded in the shared value system of a couple. Many partners mutually invest substantial time and money in political campaigns, public causes, or various public service activities. A church or synagogue or other type of religious institution plays a major role in the lives of many individuals. In some instances, a project overlaps with one or more of the other roles of generativity we have identified. It is not unusual for a project to be deeply embedded in the shared value system of a couple. Many partners mutually invest substantial time and money in political campaigns, public causes, or various public service activities. A church or synagogue or other type of religious institution plays a major role in the lives of many individuals. We also found several instances where the establishment of a home went well beyond the normal level of concern for a couple and became the couple's special, mutually-shared project. Generativity Four (and Three) are alive and well!