

X. The Enduring Role of Generativity One

William Bergquist and Gary Quehl

In prior essays, we borrowed primarily from previous research that we conducted with men and women who were involved in long term, intimate relationships—though we also introduced some insights from our Sage leaders as we addressed the role of Generativity One in the creation and maintenance of lifelong projects. Now, in this essay, we draw extensively on our work with coaching and consulting clients--men and women who were often experiencing the challenges of mid-life.

With regard to grand parenting and guardianship of an organization or project, we go beyond what we learned from our clients. Specifically, we make extensive use of our third source of insight: interviews from our California Western Nevada County Sage Leadership Project. We also turn to the narratives offered by our four *Featured Players*. Before turning to these matters, we focus first on the often-challenging transition from being parents of children and adolescents to being parents of mature offspring.

We Continue to Parent

Generativity One does not disappear as we grow older: That is one of the dominant themes in this set of essays, and we believe it provides an important contribution to the literature on generativity. The first role of generativity not only doesn't go away; it provides many of us with an opportunity to "do it better" as we grow older. Many years ago, Barry Osherson (1986) wrote about the "wounded father" and poignantly described the difficult relationship that often exists between the father and his children during the early years of parenthood. He writes about the alienation that has existed with the father who worked a full day in a large factory and came home every evening and wanted to be "left alone" to recuperate. This narrative seems embedded in the 20th Century account of "organization men" and "men in gray flannel suits", as well as the "working stiffs" who spent their lives on an assembly line. This storyline also seems relevant for working men and women of the 21st Century who are deeply engaged in their work— and who are impacted by the Internet and digital communication technologies. They often find no boundaries between their work life and home life. (Bergquist, 1993).

The later years in the lives of these "wounded" men and women can be "redemptive." As older adults, we can do a better job in relating to our children because we may now have more time to devote to them, and because we may have also transformed ourselves in terms of interpersonal sensitivity and orientation to the issues of control and authority. To exemplify this point, we turn to one of our four *Featured Players* from the Sage Leadership Project. We call him Dan and note that in his life before retirement, he was a high-powered physicist and successful university president. When Dan retired, he moved with his wife to Nevada City, California, and was one of the senior community leaders who participated in our Sage Leadership Project. Dan has this to say about the shifts that have occurred in his own parenting style:

I see my parenting role in this stage of my life as being very different than when my children were six, 15, or in their 20s. I have come to play more of a caring, loving advisor/counselor role and have thought a lot about this. The difference, in one respect, is when I get calls now from my children—and even going back 20 years or more—my parenting is at their initiation, not mine. There is an implicit understanding that they can take any advice or discard it. My advice is given in love, and it honors their own decision making. I have found that this way of parenting has been more valuable to my adult children than how I parented when they were younger.

Perhaps most important, I am no longer dictatorial. As I look back, my early role in parenting as a father certainly could have been improved. I have often reflected on why I wasn't able to parent then as I do now. My current parenting role and style is much more fulfilling to me and valuable to them, and I feel a whole lot better about it. I wish I could have had these capabilities when my children were young. I was direct and intense as a parent; my wife called mine an AA personality. Now I actually learn my role in parenting from watching my children parent their children. It has been an interesting learning experience. I get insights because they really parent well. There has been a role reversal.

To further illustrate this shift, we return to the interview with Dale, another of our four *Featured Players*. Dale led a difficult, challenging, but often gratifying life as a divorced parent who was not able to "grow up" with his children. However, he continues to be a parent and finds new challenges and new moments of gratification with his children. As in the case of most parental

relationships, Dale has a differing adult relationship with each of his two children. Let's begin with Dale's description of the relationship with his grown daughter:

My continuing parenting role has been a bit different for my son and daughter over the years. My daughter and I are very close, and we talk and e-mail at least once a week. She has always shared her intimate life with me and asked for advice when she needed it. The understanding has been that she could take my advice or leave it on the table. I especially remember a visit that I made to my daughter's home in Illinois. She is an ordained Episcopalian priest and was struggling with her bishop over the question of the legalization of gay marriage in Illinois. I was proud of her when she decided to go against her bishop's decision and joined the movement to promote this cause. When gay marriage was finally approved in Illinois, my daughter was the first clergywoman to marry a gay couple. I am very proud of her, and she knows that.

What about the relationship with his son?

My parenting role with my son has been warm and meaningful for both of us, although he has never entirely forgiven me for the divorce. He and I e-mail and talk on the phone a couple of times a month, but he is more guarded in sharing his thoughts and life experiences than is my daughter.... unless I encourage him. He still turns to me for advice, however, and I have been happy to help him think through challenges—especially about his work life and now his own divorce. He lives in New York and has had a very successful professional life. Like my relationship with my daughter, I am very proud of him.

Here we see the challenging relationship between Dale and his son as they both grow older. (This is often the dynamic and profoundly interesting relationship we find featured in novels and movies; we need look no farther than the widely-acclaimed novel and movie: *The River Runs Through It*.) There is a second theme in this narrative about Dale and his son. It concerns the lingering resentment of Dale's son about his parent's divorce. It is not unusual for a son to line-up with his mother during a divorce proceeding, just as it is not uncommon for a daughter to align with her father. Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and other psychoanalytically-oriented observers of the human condition often write about the special bonds that are built between mother and son and father and daughter. Generativity One gets complicated when we bring this dynamic into

play while exploring the evolving relationship of care between parent and child as they both grow older.

As we saw in the case of Dan—and as we will continue to see in our assessment of the other three generativity roles—men often become more interpersonally-oriented, emotionally-sensitive and interdependent as they grow older (more "feminine" in a traditional notion of femininity). Women, on the other hand, often become more assertive, goal-oriented, and independent as they grow older (more "masculine" in a traditional notion of masculinity). Yet, the dynamics between father and son, mother and daughter might be frozen in the "olden days." The son may continue to view his father as a withholding, competitive rival and often a betrayer of the mother's affections—especially if a divorce has disrupted the marriage and family dynamics. This might occur even though the father has been trying for many years to reclaim his relationship with the son he seemed to have lost somewhere in the past. Similarly, the daughter often still views her mother as someone who sacrificed her life for other people (abandoning her own identity), even though her mother may now find vitality and purpose in her personal and public life.

To emphasize the fact that Generativity One is alive and well in many lives of the mature adult with grown children, we now turn to the life narrative of the third *Featured Player* in our generativity play. We call this person, Sally. She is the mother of two grown children and has been married to her husband for more than 50 years. As we noted earlier, Sally got deeply involved in the Washington, DC, political scene. Like most mature women and men, Sally has a life of her own and is now savoring her retirement years. As we will see in future chapters when Sally's civic engagement is featured (Generativity Four), she has a very busy life that helps her meet generativity needs other than just parenting. Yet, she finds herself being pulled back into the Generativity One role:

My son just turned 52, and my daughter was 56 in September. So, they can be considered mature adults. I call myself "the Ancient"; I will be 75 next April, and that will be a big one. In terms of parenting my own children, my daughter Carol quit her job at age 56 and said she was going to become a missionary in Africa. This did not surprise my husband and me because we had our own history of giving back during our very busy professional years; in a way her following in our footsteps was sort of a parenting thing.

There was a point in time after Carol quit her job that we thought she would do some consulting while getting things in order for her assignment in Africa. But that didn't happen. She sold her car and condo, put everything in storage, and started living with a friend rent free. This continued for eighteen months, and Carol seemed to be living the "Life of Riley." My husband and I, her brother and all of her friends really began to worry about her. We all wondered, "What in the world is she doing? Is she really going to Africa? Or is she just playing around? Is she a lost soul at 56 years old?"

My husband and I had a weekend with her and her friends on her 56th birthday. Coming away from that her best friend asked at dinner, "Carol, what are you doing? It seems as if you are just spending more and more money." So what do we do the next day *on her nickel*? We went to a special wine tasting up in the hills outside Sonoma, where she convinced her father to join the wine club with her. Well, why did she need to join this wine club if she is going to Africa? She merely said that when she left for Africa, the membership would be her father's.

This is where Sally becomes the Generativity One parent again -- but in a new way:

Well, we go home, and I am fit to be tied and so is her father. I called our daughter-in-law, who had become very close to Carol (all of Carol's mail was now going to her home). I asked what she thought was going on with Carol, and she said that she and Carol's brother were also very concerned. I suggested that we do an intervention. We decided to have our daughter-in-law and Carol's very close friend and I sit down with her to try to find out what was going on.

Lo and behold, Carol and our daughter-in-law and I had lunch the next day, and Carol said she was preparing a list of things that needed to be done to get ready to leave for Africa. It was clear that Carol had a systematic plan for getting her passport and other important things that needed to be accomplished between then and next March. I concluded that this had gotten to her because I had initiated the conversation with her friends, and the love and concern and focus on this situation made a difference. It's all part of the great mystery called life. I discovered that you never are not a parent of your children, and I learned that how parenting takes place must shift.

In some cases, the issue is not determining when and how we serve as parents to our grown children; rather, it's about the ongoing responsibilities we have as active parents to a child who is disabled, who faces profound emotional problems, who is struggling with addiction problems, or who has simply never left home and parental attachments ("failure to launch"). Unlike the temporary challenge of Generativity One parenting that faced Sally, we find other parents like these who must engage in an ongoing manner with their adult children. To illustrate this point, we introduce our fourth *Featured Player* from the Sage Leadership Project. We call her Lisa, and she is faced with a difficult, ongoing Generativity One challenge. Until her retirement in 2000, Lisa was a clinical psychologist in Boston. Here is the description of her ongoing parenting challenge:

I am 70 years old and I took care of my very ill mother for many years until she died in 2005. I am also responsible for a developmentally disabled nephew, Bill, who will be 50 next year. This continues to be a major responsibility. I learned very early by observing the lives of other developmentally disabled adults that if they do not have a life independent of their parents, they will be lost at age 50 or 60 when their last parent or guardian dies. And this is devastating for them!

Parenting Bill has been the most challenging thing I have ever done, and it continues to be difficult. When I take him back to his independent living facility in Redding, I drive away knowing that he will be sad and lost for a time. But I also know that he has friends, a workshop program, a support system, and a social life that is independent of me. It is in this way that I am parenting Bill as his guardian.

In these examples of the four *Featured Players* from our Sage Leadership Project, we witness several different ways in which Generativity One continues to be with us—even when we have grown older and moved on to one or more of the other generativity roles. As we will see throughout this set of essays, each of the four generativity roles is always present on the stage even if not in the spotlight. We also find that Generativity One lingers as a dynamic factor with our work in organizations, even if we move during our adult years past the role of Generativity One founder, burden-carrier, problem-solver and strategist. We often continue to lead, despite our best intentions.

