

XI. The Enduring Role of Generativity One as Leader and Grandparent

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In the tenth essay we focused on our continuing role as a parent. Generativity One remains in place throughout our life. In this essay we explore two other ways in which generativity one continues to play an important role: (1) as leader of an organization and (2) as grandparent. We also address the most challenging dimension of generativity one: the death of a child or end of a cherished project.

We Continue to Lead

There are essentially six ways in which senior men and women address the issue of "retirement"; in our framework this involves finding how to engage or disengage from the major projects in our lives. Several books and articles have been written on this topic. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller make profound observations about the process of moving from "age-ing" to "sage-ing" (Schachter-Shalomi and Miller, 1997), while Marc Freedman describes the "encore" careers in which mature men and women engage (Freedman, 2008). We commend the inspiration and insights offered by these authors, but we propose there are more options than they identify—and that the decisions being made by mature adults are often much more complex and challenging than the processes they describe. We here briefly identify and analyze each of the six options and connect each to the challenges of shifting Generativity One roles.

Option One: Shifting Careers

This is the option being described by Schachter-Shalomi, Ronald Miller, and Marc Freedman. It involves shifting the skills and knowledge that one has acquired during their "working years" to a second career (often moving from a for-profit organization to a not-for-profit organization). This often involves a transition from Generativity One to Generativity Two, Three or Four.

Option Two: Remaining in Same Professional Career

This is the option chosen by many mature adults who operate within a specific profession. They continue to work as physicians, architects, psychologists, accountants, veterinarians, etc. It is in the professions that seniority is often viewed as an asset rather than a liability. The 60 year old physician is seen by his patients as being "wiser" than the young doc straight out of medical

school (think Dr. Welby), just as the 45 year old man seeking a psychotherapist is much more likely to choose the 55 year old shrink than her 32 year old associate. In a few professions in which technology plays a major role (engineering, architecture, geology), there may be a preference from the younger person; but even in these instances those who are new to the profession will seek out a mentor or, at the very least, want to associate with an older person who has gained a strong reputation and knows the professional landscape.

The key to being successful and satisfied with this career option is the challenge of finding a way to remain professionally vital, despite often doing the same kind of work and facing the same kind of problems each day. How does one avoid burnout as a college professor who has taught history for forty years and sat on every major university committee at least once or twice?

Option Three: Retiring from Any Position of Formal Accountability

This is one of the two traditional options. The woman who has spent all of her life in a large corporate setting finally gets a chance to breathe fresh air. She does not want to spend any more time in a stress-filled environment. While she might want to do some volunteer work, she avoids taking on administrative responsibilities and sitting on interminable committees. Instead, she seeks active work with children or helps to build a home through Habitat for Humanity or sings in the local community chorus. This career path is often associated with the experience of women hitting the "glass ceiling." They move up through an organization, being given career advancements because of their knowledge, skills and hard work. Then they hit the organization's ceiling with regard to the highest position that a woman is "allowed" to hold. This is an invisible ("glass") ceiling that can never be formally acknowledged, but the ambitious woman knows the ceiling when she hits it. It is not unusual at that point for the woman to leave her organization and formally retire (or start her own business -- Option One).

It is even more likely that the male retiree seeks something that requires no formal accountability. This is especially the case when a man has lived out a life fulfilling traditional societal expectations about the male as bread-winner and "leader of the band." While there may not have been a glass ceiling awaiting this man as he moved up through the organization, there were often long days and nights of work, stressful meetings, and insensitive and often "stupid" bosses with whom he had to contend. Thank goodness for retirement!

Career Option Four: Avocational Dabbling

The ultimate escape from accountability is to become an avocational junky, doing a bit of everything "just for the hell of it!" We take up photography or act in a community play, not because we ever expect to be any good at this work, but because it is a challenge and a joy. In official psychology this is called "autotelic" (self-gratifying) behavior. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes this as the search for "flow" (the experience of being completely present in a moment that provides both challenge and support). The original meaning of the word "amateur" was not about someone who is bad at performing some skilled task; instead, it was about deciding to engage in a particular activity as a pastime—just for the love of doing it (the word "amateur" being derived from the Latin word "amator" or "lover").

Career Option Five: Remaining as Leader

As in the case of career Option Two, the mature adult remains active in the role of Generativity Two. He continues to be an active leader in his organization. This leadership can take on many forms and may require a shift in the leader's functions. The leader might remain in an active management role, showing up to work each day and continuing to provide direct supervision and keeping "his hands in the business." Alternatively, he can move up to a position of "chair of the board" or an emeritus position that still allows the leader to influence policy and strategy without having to "roll up his sleeves" every day. This second variation on career Option Five is strongly reinforced in many traditional Asian cultures. The mature male leader is expected to move outside the active role of manager when he has reached his fifties or at least his sixties. By that time, he is expected to have either retired (Option Three or Six) or become an advisor or overseer ("chairman of the board" or some comparable position). It is considered a sign of failure for an older male to remain actively involved as a manager in his own organization.

While the active leader may be discounted in some cultures, he is also the protagonist in some wonderfully touching novels and movies about the senior citizen who conducts his one last battle. Think of the final scene in Lerner and Lowe's *Camelot* or the near final scene in *Robin and Marion* when Sean Connery, as Robin Hood, and Robert Shaw, as the Sheriff of Nottingham, engage in their final battle. Or, for that matter, think of Sean Connery playing the aging Indiana Jones.

Career Option Six: Escaping from It All

Not all the men and women have chosen to remain active during their senior years. They have moved past the role of Generativity Two and have in many instances also decided not to engage actively in the roles of either Generativity Three or Four. Instead, they have decided to leave it all behind and to truly "retire." In some cases, Option Six isn't really a choice: there are medical issues to address or a disability that leaves them unable to actively engage the world. In other instances, it is a matter of social-economic class: these men and women simply do not have enough money to think of anything other than surviving from day to day on a meager income.

For those who are comfortably situated in life, it might be a matter of priorities: "I would just like to golf" or "I am delighted to spend my day with friends playing bridge." Or "I spend my time working in the garage on my old Buick", or "I don't know what happens to my day each day; it always seems to fill-up with something or other."

Sadly, in some cases it is a matter of burnout that has resulted from a stressful life and career. The outcome is stagnation rather than generativity of any sort. It is not uncommon for such mature adults to "hide out" in a retirement community that is "siloed" from any contact with younger people or people who are different from them in terms of race, culture, or socio-economic status. While this should not be taken as a generalized statement about all who live in these communities, it is important to recognize that the isolation which tends to occur can have a profound effect on the openness to various generativity roles. In short, these men and women are now "free" from the responsibilities of job, parenting, and civic responsibility; they have often not taken the next step, which has to do with "freedom to do something."

Generativity One and the Next Generation: Grand Parenting

Although we have known about its inherent joys for a long time, grand parenting apparently is "the new rage." (For example, watch a movie such as *The Princess Bride* where grandpa played by Peter Faulk gets to read an enchanting story to his grandson.) We have known for many years about the new ways in which we get to relate to children as grandparents and about the "second chance" that some of us get to be loving and playful caregivers. One of us observed in an earlier book focusing on men and women in their 50s (Bergquist, Greenberg and Klaum, 1993) that

many mid-lifers, especially men, find they do a better job and gain more gratification in their role as grandparent than in their role as parent.

The “new rage” is based on an opportunity for a first or second chance at being a caring caregiver. And it is also grounded in a newly-evolving opportunity to be a vital, healthy adult who is likely to live many years and savor numerous chances to be a high-quality grandparent and even great grandparent. Apparently, a new model is emerging based on the theme of vital grand parenting. Several years ago, an AARP Bulletin featured the actress, Jane Seymour, being a “glamorous 63-year-old who wears the label “grandmother” proudly.” (Graham, 2014, p. 10). In this article, the author declares that boomer women can redefine their role in contemporary society. We label this “rebooting” as the continuing role of Generativity One caregiving throughout our adult lives:

It's a whole new form of grand parenting . . . thanks to the boomers. That 76 million-strong cohort has redefined just about everything it has touched, from childhood and adolescence to careerism and parenting—and, now, grand parenting as well. Boomer women in particular, who came of age during the feminist movement, have tended to shrug off traditional roles, opting instead to “have it all” – balancing jobs, hobbies and a supermom style of parenting that would have exhausted their own full-time mothers. So it's not surprising that as their children have kids, these new grandmas are remaking the role in ways that differ dramatically from the nanas, nonnas, bubbes, amas and abuelas of yesteryear. [Graham, 2014, p. 10]

Similar narratives have been offered by a diverse set of notable women, ranging from Hillary Clinton to Whoopi Goldberg and Leslie Stahl. These serves as yet another example of Generativity One operating throughout our adult lives. It continues to play an important role for many of us, even as we grow older and engage the other three roles of generativity.

Men also have an opportunity to “reboot” their role as grandparents—especially given the proclivity of mature men to become more interpersonally-oriented during mid-life. This portrayal of men as re-booters and re-molders of their own parenting style when becoming grandparents is reaffirmed by Dan, the first *Featured Player* in our generativity story. In reflecting on his life as a grandparent, he says:

Regarding grand parenting, I see myself having a very different role. My oldest grandchild is 13 and the youngest is two. As a grandparent, I don't have nearly the impact on shaping their young lives because I don't have the same responsibility that their parents have. Sometimes I observe some of their parenting and say to myself, "I wouldn't do it that way." But I never say this to them, nor do I pass judgment on how they parent their children. I see them engaging in a healthier parenting role than I did with them.

Grand parenting for me involves lots of story-telling. I tell stories about my childhood, including some of my experiences that were very difficult for me as a youngster. One time I told a story when our entire family was together. It was about a major flood that occurred in 1955 when I was 17. It was awful, and a number of people died. One of my grandchildren drew a picture of the story, and it brought back a bunch of memories that I hadn't thought about for a long time. My daughters had never heard this entire story before. What came out was my deep expression of feelings, and this moved them and me.

Like Peter Faulk in *The Princes Bride* and many other grandparents, Dan becomes a story-teller for his grandchildren. As with many grandparents, Dan also becomes a temporary parent—a role that is common in many traditional societies where multiple generations live in the same home or complex:

As a grandparent, I see my role as a care-giver and a protector in many ways. When their parents are away and my grandkids are with my wife and me, I become a temporary parent. And "temporary" is a very important word. I am their guardian and take that role very responsibly. When my grandkids were very young, and we were taking care of them, I used to ask, "Aren't you ready for a nap now, because I need a break?" This reflects my view that we are blessed because we don't actually have children at our age.

Dan also exemplifies the special role of grandparent as playmate, silly performer and the reborn-child:

Speaking about grand parenting, I really like to play children's games and read with them. I love to do this. Even my grandchildren who are approaching teen years enjoy hide-and-seek, for example. I get lots of joy from that. I trace this to the fact that I didn't play a lot of games when I was a child; I lived on a farm and had no siblings. I was

surrounded by loving adults, but I didn't play a lot as a child. I did when my kids were growing up, and now I am completely free to just be a kid myself!

What a wonderful opportunity for Generativity One on the part of Dan. Here we see the former university president playing games with his grandkids— a wonderful sight and a lovely and loving experience for both grandpa and grandkids. And what a healing moment this is for Dan to do the playing he never did as a child himself and (we suspect) never did as a hard-working and accomplished leader of a large and very traditional organization.

We find that generative grand parenting is not just a source of renewal for the grandparent and a frequent source of great joy for the grandchild; it is also sometimes a source of much needed support for the parenting child who is in trouble, who is trying to hold down a job as a single parent, or who simply could use a healing hand in a world that makes many demands on a young parent's life. While in many societies the extended family is common, with grandparents living with or nearby their children and grandchildren, this kind of "automatic" and socially sanctioned support is much less common in contemporary Western societies. Family systems tend to be much more disengaged, and it is fortunate to even have two parents living together with their children. We return to the narrative of Lisa, our fourth *Featured Player*, whom we noted earlier has faced many challenges in being a parent to her disabled nephew. Lisa is also facing challenges as a parent to her grandson. She exemplifies what we call *necessitated Generativity One* on the part of a grandparent:

I . . . grand parented my grandson, Bart, for a couple of years in my home while my mother was having health problems. The day my grandson was born I asked myself whether there was a "special grandmother love," because I had learned when my own child was born that I had a special kind of love I never knew existed—until I experienced it. I see grandparent love as very much like being a parent, but it is "sweeter" because I didn't have the same responsibility as when I was a parent. When my grandson lived with me, that sweetness began to change because I had become a parent again. Bart said to me one day, "Ga Ga" you're different." We sat down and talked about this, and I explained that the things I let slide couldn't be allowed any more. He understood this.

Now that my grandson is in high school, I am no longer his playmate—although he did ask me this summer to join his Dungeons and Dragons group; he asked if I would be "the

healer,” which I thought was very sweet and perceptive of him. I was happy to see that he thought I could fulfill that role successfully.

For Lisa, the necessitated Generativity One required a change in her anticipated style and role of grand parenting, but this change also led to some gratifying moments. As in all moments of Generativity, we discover that deep caring produces a sense of meaning and a sense that we can make a difference in the lives of people about whom we care, and for whom we have been assigned or have embraced a care-giving responsibility.

Unfortunately, not every grandparent has had the Generativity One opportunity that we have witnessed with Dan and Lisa. In many cases, given our highly mobile society, the children and grandchildren have moved elsewhere. The grand parenting occasions are often infrequent and even awkward, given the lack of sufficient time for grandparents and grandchildren to establish a trusting and easy relationship. Sally, the third *Featured Player*, is one of two main characters in our generativity play who faces this struggle as a grandparent living at a distance from her grandchildren. For Sally, the role of grandmother has changed over the years as a result of her own retirement and more free time, and as a result of the shifting residence of her now grown grandkids:

Regarding our role as a grandparents, my husband and I have not had the kind of close, intimate relationship that many of our friends have. Our son’s two daughters lived in Seattle. We worked full time in San Diego and missed the young grand parenting stage with them. For a variety of reasons, early grand parenting simply never happened. At this point in our lives, my husband and I are now in more of a grand parenting role. I have a lovely relationship with my granddaughter, who lives in San Francisco. Our other granddaughter is attending Boston University. In both cases, we converse by texting and phone and see them during holidays.

Our second center stage actor, Dale, speaks about this Generativity One absence in his role as a grandfather replicating, unfortunately, the earlier absence of Generativity One parenting after his divorce. However, in Dale's case, and in the case of many other *absentee grandparents*, there have been a few moments when he and his current wife of 25 years have been able to play an important and generative grand parenting role:

Because my son's family lives in North Carolina and my daughter's family lives in Illinois, I have not had a regular or particularly intimate parenting role with my grandchildren. An important exception was the three weeks that my wife and I stayed with our nine year old grandson in Philadelphia while my son and daughter-in-law began new jobs in North Carolina. That three weeks really enabled us to bond with him, and this continues. (We are planning to have him join us for a summer vacation this year.) I must confess, however, that I am disappointed that my repeated requests to have a Skype hook-up so I can regularly talk with my grandson have been ignored.

My wife and I have also played a parenting role in supporting our St. Louis granddaughter during a difficult three-year period after her high school boy friend committed suicide. She went off to college last fall, and I am pleased that I was able to help her weigh her college choice.

Because he is now in a second marriage, Dale has had the opportunity to be a grandparent to his second wife's grandchildren who live close by. While second marriages come with many challenges, they often open the door to what we might call *step-generativity* – as we see in Dale's following narrative:

I am very close with my granddaughter and grandson on my wife's side and saw them often because they lived in the SF Bay Area. I taught my grandson how to fly fish, and we continue to talk about that bond to this day. My granddaughter is now a college sophomore, and we regularly correspond through e-mail. I continue to be close to my grandson, who is in a very selective and expensive master's degree program in theatre at Columbia University. We e-mail on occasion, talk on the phone, and visit with him and his sister when they are home on vacation.

Death of Child or End of Project: The Abrupt End of Generativity One

Before moving on to Generativity Two, we must briefly bring up the very difficult issue of loss. In most societies, it is assumed that the parent dies before the child dies. But what happens when the child dies first? The death is profound even when our child is a mature adult and we have been blessed with many years watching him or her mature. We grieve the lost years that were

anticipated as the child would grow older and perhaps have children of their own. A colleague of ours studied the processes of grieving for parents who lived through the death of their child when she was eight year old. The grieving is long-lasting. As one of the men who our colleague interviewed put it: "We bury our spouses in the ground, but bury our children in our heart."

One of the leaders in our Sage Leadership Project had to confront the loss of her own child:

The most important peak experience was losing my first child, because I learned something about myself that I hadn't previously known. In the end, going through a incredibly painful and dark 32-hour labor to deliver my dead child, was the most powerful, meaningful experience of my life – to feel this child that had been living inside of me leave my body and to look at her and hold her. I was able to go so deeply into healing and grew so much through this experience, and I learned how resilient we are... and how much capacity we have that we don't always know we possess.

In many instances, of course, the grieving parent can turn to her other children who may still remain in her life. Even with the continuing presence of other children, however, there is the abrupt end of one domain in the role of Generativity One for this parent. As we can all observe in the lives of grieving parents we know, and in the poignant portrayal of grieving parents and grieving siblings in movies such as *Ordinary People* and *Terms of Endearment*, the loss is always present and impacts the lives of all family members and others closely associated with the family.

Conclusions

Even though the death of a child is of much greater significance than the death of a project, the experience of loss in either case can be shattering to a person's sense of self and personal worth in the world. In the case of either the death of a child or the ending of a project, the Generativity One process is disrupted. One of the actors has had to leave the stage and those playing the roles of Generativity Two, Three and Four will forever miss this Generativity One actor. All of the other roles are impacted by this loss, and no one on stage will ever quite be the same. This, we believe, is one of the primary reasons for devoting time and attention to Generativity One. Without this first role, the other three roles lose some of their meaning and dynamics.

Consequently, we will be referring back to Generativity One throughout our analysis of the other three roles.