

Essay XVII: Moving from Generativity Two to Generativity Three: Returning to Major Life Issues

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Random events become strange attractors. They call to us and require our attention. They form an alliance with our inner voices. Suddenly other events begin to organize around this attractor and form a constellation or psychic “pothole” of activities, interests and dreams. This essay concerns these events and how they lead us to new challenges—and perhaps a second moratorium where we once again address major life issues.

Choosing Once Again Between Generativity and Stagnation

Samuel, the accountant, plays at the Rock, Roll and Remembrance party and has a great time. He talks with the four other “aging rockers” in this make-shift group. They decide to play together every Wednesday night “just for fun” and in a manner that honors the long history of rock-and-roll (Generativity Three).

Dr. Jane joins the “old girls” basketball league, enjoys herself, and soon finds that she also enjoys playing “old girls” soccer; this motivates her to organize a new soccer league (Generativity Four). She begins to teach her granddaughter how to play soccer (Generativity One) and becomes a coach for her granddaughter’s soccer team (Generativity Two). Chef Ricardo begins cooking more often, loves it, and becomes a voracious reader of cookbooks. He hosts a cooking class, and then volunteers to teach a special class for old guys who want to help their wives (Generativity Two and Four). All three of these mid-centurions feel alive and vital. Erik Erikson would suggest that they have become “generative” and have forged new identities in their lives. They have become the women and men of Autumn.

Alternatively, these three folks and other mature men and women could have chosen to ignore or discount these voices from other rooms. Samuel, the accountant, could have politely turned down

the offer to play at the Rock and Roll party. He could even have neglected to tell his colleague that he played drums as a teenager. Jane could continue to work hard as a medical professional and ignored the need to find time for exercise or her granddaughter's soccer team. The would-be chef, Ricardo, could curse the bad fortune that pushed him into the role of homemaker for his excessively ambitious wife. He could have been envious of his wife, and might have decided to get even by cooking a horrible meal or inadvertently forgetting to pick-up food at the local supermarket. In short, each of these mid-centurions could have chosen a life of *stagnation rather than generativity*. This is the choice that all men and women must make during the potentially Autumnal decades of life.

If mature women and men chose stagnation by not attending to these voices, the voices can become quite destructive—even demonic. These voices are part of us. We know from many years of psychological investigation that when little or no attention is given to specific aspects of our psyche, these aspects of self tend to express themselves indirectly. They make themselves known through physical and mental illness, profound depression, or self-destructive activities (such as substance abuse, self-defeating behavior, or even suicide).

Psychologists use the term “denial” in describing the defensive process of inattention. The extensive use of this primitive defense leads directly to many of the psychological maladies of our time, particularly among mature men and women. The denied voices will eventually gain our attention or be heard by the world around us. We must determine if these voices will be addressed in a constructive and generative manner or in a destructive way later in life. It is in choosing deep care rather than self-centered concern that we find sound physical and mental health. It is through the engagement of all four roles of generativity that we find our sense of purpose and reason to live a long and prosperous life as Autumnal men and women.

Being In-Sync or Out-of-Sync with Society

This choice between generativity and stagnation is not as easy as it may appear on the surface. We often chose stagnation and risk the wrath of an unacknowledged voice. If we take actions based on the voices from other rooms, then we may be likely to be condemned by our family and friends—and even condemned by our own psyche. An insightful developmental psychologist, Bernice Neugarten, suggests that we often experience a developmental crisis in life when the

actions we take and the decisions we make are bold and generative. These actions and decisions are often out of sync with expectations of the society in which we live because crises in development occur when we do something at a time in our life that does not square with societal rules.

Gerald is an Autumnal man whom one of us coaches. He co-owns and has served as president for nine years of an educational institution that primarily serves mature men and women preparing for a second career. Gerald's timing was off in acquiring this institution for a half million dollars. He wasn't really at an appropriate age for taking on this high-risk, entrepreneurial venture. He would have been better suited for this risky venture when he was 35 or 40. Gerald was 48 years old when he and his wife bought the school and assumed a major five-year debt. His wife was also in her late 40's. A younger couple should have bought this educational enterprise. A younger man or woman would be expected by society to be sufficiently energetic and visionary to make a venture like this succeed. A husband and wife who are about to enter their mid-century years are much too old for such a venture.

Gerald often confronted himself with many disturbing questions and statements during our coaching sessions:

What in the world was I doing taking on the task of leading an educational institution? My work at the institute is always exciting but also terrifying. Is something wrong with me? Was I foolish in taking this on? Was I too old? Was I kidding myself regarding my interest in and ability to take on this venture?

The mature men and women that Gerald serves in his educational institution have no doubt often asked themselves the same kind of questions. Like the president of their training institute, these middle-aged men and women are inevitably in crisis because they have chosen to return for a degree at a much later point in life than is usually the case. They are not your typical young men and women, fresh out of high school or college. They are experienced persons who want to enrich and renew their understanding of the world, while also getting an advanced academic degree. This interest is understandable and commendable. Yet their families, friends and colleagues often do not understand why they went for further training and education: "Hasn't he

already had enough education?” “Why doesn’t she just settle down and take things a bit easier? What is she doing starting a second career this late in life?”

There are certain times in our lives that society deems it appropriate for us to explore alternative careers and personal identities. Erik Erikson describes these periods as “psycho-social moratoria.” Most of us are given a moratorium during our late teens and early twenties. Young men, in particular, are given the opportunity to explore new realities through the military. Among young women, only those from the middle and upper classes have been granted a moratorium. They become college students. Women from less secure financial backgrounds have typically never experienced a moratorium. Traditionally, they usually move directly from their family of origin to marriage. These young working-class women immediately establish their own families and assume major homemaking responsibilities, as well as often working at least part time to help with the family’s precarious finances.

Many other people in our society are also denied a moratorium because they may have been assigned their identity early in life. Perhaps their father and grandfather were doctors, so this young man or woman will also be a doctor. Alternatively, the young person may have spent their entire life fighting for survival as the child of an unemployed or homeless parent. This person will never experience a moratorium but, instead, probably will spend most of his life as an unemployed adult living in one of America’s slums. The exploration of alternative identities has been foreclosed for both the predestined physician and the child of poverty.

There is often a dramatic intrusion of alternative identities later in life among middle class and upper middle-class mid-century Americans whose identity was foreclosed early in life and among those who never experienced a moratorium during their adolescent years. These men and women often rebel as mature adults. Their inner voices assert themselves in strong and compelling ways. We see this played out in Jack Nicholson’s film portrayal of an identity-foreclosed man in *Five Easy Pieces*. Nicholson’s character rebels, having grown up in a musical family, without viable career options. He marries a woman without “culture” and takes a temporary job on an oil rig. Nicholson plays a man who faces a midlife crisis because he knows of no identity other than that of classical musician. His only option is to assume what Erikson calls the “negative identity.” The Nicholson character will randomly assume any identity as long as it is unrelated to serious

music. He can be a day laborer, a logger, or even a piano player in a local dive. It only matters that he reacts against the identity assigned to him by his family and society.

In less dramatic form, we hear many stories of physicians or ministers who grew-up with a father or mother who was also a doctor or minister. During his mid-centurion years, the foreclosed physician or minister takes up a hobby or avocation that speaks to a suppressed identity. She joins a physician's bridge club or spends every free moment sailing a boat. Like Jane, the foreclosed professional might participate in a sport, or like Samuel, join a rock-and-roll band. By contrast, a man or woman who has grown up in poverty will rebel by leaving his job (if he has one). "Take this job and shove it" is a recurring anthem for the foreclosed mid-centurion from the lower middle class. Or the beleaguered male at mid-life will leave his family, drink heavily and take up with a younger woman. If nothing else, he will allow himself to go a little mad as a sports fan and live vicariously off the alternative identities and successes of athletes on his favorite teams. And what about the beleaguered female? What is her option: stay with the family, raise the kids herself, and live a life of quiet despair?

Alternatively, does the mid-centurion who is faced with socio-economic challenges somehow find a way to succeed and become generative? We have yet to mention that both Ricardo and his wife came from a family background of poverty and ethnic discrimination, yet have been able to work hard and establish a comfortable life for themselves. Their remarkable success has led to the decision of Ricardo's wife to work beyond the usual retirement age. The move out of poverty has also enabled Ricardo to discover expanding roles of generativity through his renewed interest in cooking, collecting old cookbooks (Generativity Three), and hosting cooking classes (Generativity Two and Four).

The Transitional Phase: A Second Moratorium

The issue doesn't stop here. Most mature adults find themselves in mid-life standing between two worlds: the world of active, income-earning work and the world of retirement and avocations. In some respects, our society has given us a second moratorium—a second adolescence during which we can explore alternative identities. As mid-centurions living in the United States or most other prosperous Western countries, we are allowed to explore alternative identities at the point we retire, provided we are not living in poverty or are not in ill health.

Traditionally, women living in Western civilizations did not have it so good. They were expected to remain occupied as homemakers even after their husbands retire. Their work might even increase, given that they must now “look after” their husband who is suddenly “underfoot.” Their retired husband was often quite fortunate if he came from the middle or upper-middle class. He could move in many new directions: take up hobbies, spend time at home reading or playing games, or engaging in recreational activities such as golf, tennis or bowling.

The world of retirement has grown a bit more complicated in recent years, and the transition between work and retirement has become more confusing for many men and women; there are several reasons. First, mid-centurions do not necessarily retire at 65. Second, some mid-centurions want to make the transition in life and career earlier than age 65. In either case, the question is: what we do about the second moratorium and how does this potential identity exploration relate to the engagement of Generativity Three and Four roles?

Assume for a moment that we want to make a change prior to age 65 or 70. We are not ready for formal retirement, yet we want to make a change. At the other end of the decision-making spectrum we find men and women who don't want to or can't retire by age 70. Even though our inner voices suggest that we shift our priorities and attend to other matters, we still have to work, perhaps even into our late Seventies. If we are in our 50's or early 60's, our society expects us to continue being active “breadwinners.” If we are in our late 60's or early 70's, we don't have enough money saved for retirement. In either case, we face quite a dilemma. Do we have time for generative activities during our 50s, 60s or 70s? Or do we still have to be “working stiff” who have no time for deep caring outside our immediate family?

We have at least five options, whether we are in our 50s and early 60s or our late 60s and early 70s. Some of us choose the most obvious of these options. We retire after planning carefully for what we will do when we are no longer working for pay. As part of the planning, we will often consider volunteer work that satisfies Generativity Three or Generativity Four motives. There is a second option. We negotiate a compromise by giving some of our voices immediate attention; other voices are deferred until some point later in our life, when society says it is appropriate for us to try something new. A third option is also available to those who have been financially

successful in life or are particularly courageous. These fortunate or brave men and women alter their life style so that they are doing what they really want to do.

The traditional distinction drawn between work and retirement begins to break down for the men and women who choose the third option. Their work often becomes their avocation and their hobby becomes that for which they are paid. At a conference on work and play that the two of us hosted almost thirty years ago, we invented the word “plork” to describe the full integration of work and play. Several of the men and women we coach have taken this path. They have left behind their administrative duties and settled into a life of “plork.” They begin the transition to Generativity Three and Four.

Unfortunately, for some who have chosen this third option while still in their 50’s and 60’s, there are societal pressures to move back to a “real job.” Many of our younger “third-option” colleagues indicate during coaching sessions that they feel guilty about not going to work each day while moving toward Generativity Three or Four projects. They provide volunteer services in their community that isn't "really work." One of our coaching clients, Brad, spends much of his time serving as a docent and board member at a local museum. He has been wrestling with several fundamental doubts during our coaching sessions. He recently commented:

I always seem to be the only man at the museum who is still able to work. All the other docents and board members are much older than I am and most are women. Why am I hanging around the museum instead of being a responsible breadwinner? I know that this is irrational. I still work very hard, but it is now about things that I care about at the museum. And I really enjoy my work for the first time in many years. I have more control over my time. I can work at home, doing museum-related research on my computer. I may become involved in a wide variety of other interesting civic projects. However, something is wrong. I seem to be out of sync with the people around me. It’s the wrong time or the wrong place.

Brad’s life decisions don’t match societal expectations, and this is very disconcerting for him. So what should we as potential men and women of Autumn do about these voices? Which option should the man or women in their 50’s or 60’s chose? If they respond right away, then these mid-centurions must confront a mismatch with societal expectations. If they defer their response until

the appropriate age to retire (65 or 70), then these voices might become impatient. Similarly, the men and women who are already 65 or 70 years old and wish to keep working find a mismatch. Either of these challenged mid-centurions might end-up being destructive to themselves and the people they love. If they compromise and respond to only some of their voices, they may pick the wrong ones and incur the disapproval of society and the vengeance of other unacknowledged voices. What should these men and women do? It is no wonder that we often hope these silly or threatening voices will go away.

We have a fourth option as mid-centurion men and women. We can fill our living rooms with activity again and hope that this activity will drown-out the voices. As men and women in our 50's and early 60's we can go back to work, get a "real job" once again, and forget about our mid-life "identity crisis." As mid-centurions in our late 60's and early 70's, we can "act our age" and settle into traditional retirement. Sadly, the activities in which we engage at either juncture in our life never seem to be very gratifying. Going back to a "real job" leaves us feeling compromised and trapped. Going on to retirement, when we really want to keep working, leaves us feeling worthless and bored. The result is that societal expectations lead us down a path of stagnation.

Many of us choose this fourth option, at least on a temporary basis. We opt for denial. We discount the meaning inherent in the seemingly random events that arouse the voices from other rooms. It would be a bit odd to say that the offer Samuel received to play in a rock and roll band, or Jane's opportunity to play in a basketball league, comes from some source of inner guidance. The request by Ricardo's wife that he do more cooking wasn't somehow "meant to be." It sounds a bit spooky for most of us who are not true believers. To suggest that an event has inherent meaning and is somehow intended as a message to tell us something or guide us back to our earlier interests and dreams seems to be too much like the mumbo-jumbo of "new age" spirituality.

That is why we are drawn to the phenomenon called "strange attraction." This concept, coming from chaos scientists, is neither pop psychology nor new age spirituality. Rather it is forwarded by serious researchers who try to make sense of our physical world. In so doing they have discovered that there are "strange attractors" everywhere. There is good reason to believe that

this same process operates in the lives of mid-century men and women who are on the edge of Generativity Three and Four. Events have meaning in their life not so much because of some greater power in life, though this could be the case. Rather, events have meaning and power because certain small events tend at a particular place and time to link with and trigger other events. They trigger memories, interests, dreams and eventually actions.

These “strange attractor” events form a pattern that is compelling and can serve as a guide for our continuing generativity and the re-invention of our life as a woman or man of Autumn. A rabbi we know talks about the “assemblage” of small, meaningful events and decisions in our lives. Taken together these events and decisions comprise a person’s “spiritual life.” He suggests that spirituality is not some big, powerful, isolated event. Rather it is constituted from a whole cluster of small events. What happens when we ignore these “strange attractor”? What happens when we choose massive denial and make the wrong decision? We face stagnation—a loss of spirit and an absence of soul. We withdraw and become “mean spirited,” turning our spirit into a negative force.

The stagnant mid-century resents others of his or her age when they remain engaged in the world. The mid-century resorts to sarcasm and resistance, having abandoned hope and ambition. He or she often resents the young men and women who are newly engaged in the world. Like Scrooge, the stagnant person focuses on one thing at the expense of all other aspects of life. For Scrooge that one thing was money. The stagnant obsession for Scrooge-like mid-century in real life may concern power, position, traditional family values, or an old political cause. They strive toward goals such as the acquisition of wealth or power that no longer really have meaning for them.

How do we know that we have chosen or fallen into stagnation? When we are stagnant, we act out of habit. We reach a point in our life when activities take on their own meaning and impetus that were previously means to other ends (such as the approval of our father, the attraction of women or men, the achievement of security). The original purpose is lost, and we invest no new purpose in the activity. Psychologists describe this condition as “secondary autonomy.” It is also the foundation for psychic stagnation. We chose or fall into stagnation when we desperately try to blunt our pain. We act out of an obsessive need to somehow heal the wound and eliminate the

anxiety associated with midlife depression. We live in a society that no longer can find any meaning in the experience of pain. This is largely because there is now the possibility of avoiding or eliminating pain through medical advancement and, in particular, “pain-killers”. Alternatively, we discover and embrace our own pain-killing cocktail—be it alcohol, dope, or high-risk sports.

We try to escape from that which is painful rather than finding meaning in this pain. We race away from our inner voices from other rooms and from the generative voices because we hope to avoid pain. Unfortunately, we live in a society that not only approves of this avoidance, but also offers many antidotes to pain, both legal and illegal. We live in a society that is filled with middle-aged men and women who would rather escape pain than find any meaning or purpose in the pain or, for that matter, find meaning in any other aspects of life. Just as pain and generativity are companions, so too are stagnation and the avoidance of pain.

Discerning the True Voices

There is a fifth option. We can attend to our voices from other rooms and seek out new forms of generativity. But this requires discipline. In attending to these voices, we have to make important decisions about what we do with the messages that we receive. In attending to these voices, we do not necessarily have to do what the voices suggest. We have to listen, but don't have to take the advice. During the Middle Ages, mystics attended carefully to the voices they received through contemplation and various mystical experiences. However, they realized that some of these messages might come from somewhere other than a divine source. The voices may come from their own personal ego, from other people, or even from the devil. As a result, these mystics devised methods for contemplation, transcendent experience, and determining which messages come from God and which come from elsewhere. They called this process “discernment.”

As mid-centurions, we have to discern the good from the bad voices. We must sort out the truth about our psyche from all of the false claims that swirl around us. We can always choose instead to ignore the voices. This is our first choice, which we described in some detail in a previous essay. Our second choice is to listen to the wrong voices. We are lured away by power, money, security, prestige, status, pride—all of the temptations with which we are all acquainted. Our

third choice is to listen to the right voices. To be successful in making this third choice, we have to determine which of the voices seem to be responsive to our changing needs, values and life purposes. We must determine which voices seem to keep us stagnant and stuck where we are right now, which distract us from new-found pathways, and which turn us toward pathways that are destructive to ourselves and the people we love.

These distinctions are not easily drawn. As mid-centurions, we usually know very little about the process of discernment. We are accustomed to living in the external world, making decisions based on data that exist out there in reality: “How much money do we need to pay our bills this month?” “Which of these technical training programs is likely to prepare our daughter best for her future life?” “Where do we want to plant that new tree?” The process of discernment requires that we attend to internal data and make decisions based not on rational argument and analysis but on deep searching for inner truths related to our hopes and fears.

We must ask difficult questions about our inner life and about possible roles of generativity: “Which emotions are elicited when I think about enacting this long-deferred dream?” “Of what am I most afraid when considering a positive response to this invitation from my inner voices?” “What is old, safe and stagnant in my current life?” “What is new, risky and generative in my emerging life?” Every man and woman must find their own way to discern what is right and wrong for them. The first and most important step is to listen to the voices. Without this first step, there is no need to discern anything, for we have chosen to remain deaf and blind to our inner world. *We have chosen stagnation over generativity.* We have lost the extraordinary opportunity for Generativity Three and Four—the roles to which we turn in the next series of essays. It is in these following essays that we listen to the words of Sage leaders who offered their own insights. We also learn from the life narratives of our four *Featured Players* as they engage the challenging process of discernment and moving to the new roles of Generativity Three and Four.