

# Essay XXI: Generativity Three: Consecrating, Gathering, Preserving Values, Story-Telling

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This essay and the previous one are filled to the brim with diverse acts of generativity, because we think the acts of Generativity Three are least likely to be identified, classified or fully appreciated. In this essay we identify four modes of Generativity Three:

- (1) *Consecrating* (setting aside a specific place where an important event occurred or setting aside a specific place that is related tangibly to a specific person or group).
- (2) *Gathering* (bringing together people on regular basis who have shared a profound experience).
- (3) *Preserving values* (providing clarity, representation, demonstration, monitoring or reinforcement of specific, cherished values).
- (4) *Story-telling* (sharing the history of specific people, events, traditions).

In this essay we explore each of these acts of Generativity Three, deploying our Four *Featured Players* and the interviews we conducted with our Sage leaders. We also look at other examples of these four forms of guardianship we have witnessed in our own lives, among our friends, and in various written accounts. We begin with consecrating.

## Consecrating

We borrow the term *consecration* from the memorable speech delivered by Abraham Lincoln at the Gettysburg battlefield near the end of the American Civil War. Consecration involves setting aside a specific place where an important event occurred, or a place that is related tangibly to an honored person or group.

The first type of consecrated settings that comes to mind are cemeteries and battlefields. In the United States, the National Cemetery in Arlington Virginia is perhaps most noteworthy. Located across the Potomac River from Washington D.C., this cemetery provides a sacred home to men and women who have died defending the United States in both domestic and foreign wars. Arlington was the first cemetery to be established after the Civil War (1868). Those who operate Arlington often describe their job as "keepers of the history." Over 400,000 men and women are

buried at Arlington, and this consecrating act of generativity is complimented each year by a generative ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

We find in some cases a quite challenging attempt to consecrate. The site of buried seamen at Pearl Harbor, who remained entombed forever in their sunken ships, has been consecrated for many years. There was an ongoing effort to find the wreckage of a B-24 airplane lost in the Pacific during World War II. Dedicated men and women came back every year to look for the wreckage. Scuba divers have recently found the men who died in this crash as well as the wreckage of their plane.

In most instances, consecration is about the designation of special places that are considered sacred. There is another form of consecration, however, that does not take place in a special place or even at a special time. This is the consecration of the mundane, the everyday. We live in a "sacred world" and have the generative opportunity to celebrate the values and blessings inherent in being alive for another day. In one of his illustrations of Generativity Three (*The Matchmaker/Hello Dolly* being the other), Thornton Wilder writes about this need to consecrate each day of our life in his play, *Our Town*. It is often only after death, Wilder suggests, that we truly appreciate the value of being alive and living with the everyday rituals of life.

Some of us set up regular, everyday rituals to reflect on this blessing. We sit out on our deck at sunset to celebrate the day that is passing. We join together at dinner time and share a quiet moment of prayer and thanksgiving for what our nurturing God has provided us. We "count our blessings" before going to bed or float off to sleep recounting the special moments of the day we have just lived. Martin Seligman, and other psychologists who focus on the positive, believe that these appreciate acts at the end of the day actually help to improve our physical and mental health. Perhaps Generativity Three (and maybe all forms of generativity) has a positive impact. In our generosity, we might be self-serving!

## **Gathering**

Generativity Three can be expressed in yet another manner. We bring people together on a regular basis who have shared a profound experience in their life. The most obvious and frequently occurring form is the family reunion and high school and college alumni reunions. We gather together with our families once or several times a year to celebrate birthdays. These

reunions often involve abundant food, story-telling, photo-sharing, and even honoring those who have passed away. Similarly, alumni reunions involve a substantial amount of story-telling on such topics as past life, life histories since graduating and parting company. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of reunion events is the motivations of the women and men who are responsible for organizing them. In the case of alumni reunions, there are often paid staff members to handle the logistics; yet, even these events require extensive volunteer efforts. Of course, family reunions are rarely handled by a paid staff. Reunions, like honoring and other form of Generativity Three, are based on social exchange, not market exchange.

Why do people put in the effort to make these gatherings take place? Is it their own need for companionship? Are these folks still living in the past and have never "grown up" or "left college"? In some instances, these are probably valid assumptions about why some people volunteer for this work. Yet, there seems to be more to it than being frozen in time, which is a kind of stagnation. Several of the motives we mentioned in previous essays seem relevant. Reunions are first and foremost about tangibility. We don't just "phone in" our reunion. We show up and participate. We meet other people in person. We share a meal. We gather together to listen to speeches, stories, or music. We might even join together in singing old fight songs or the favorite family tune. These are immediate, tangible engagements that often seem to be missing in our contemporary, digital world.

We might also be motivated by the desire to safeguard an old tradition. Family values are reinforced through the retelling of an old family story, such as the migration of our great grandparents from some foreign land. Alumni reunions often enable and encourage us to remember the values we embraced as young men and women. We are not just graduates of a specific college or university, nor are we just members of a specific family. We are guardians of the values associated with this educational institution and family. In many of the old European communities, each family had its own shield which displayed symbols or words declaring its values and aspirations. The shields were often hung in the church that families attended every Sunday. Family members would sit in a pew that was located near the shield. Thus, the Sunday service wasn't just about the values being preached from the pulpit. It was also a reassertion of the unique values associated with the family's history and heritage. Family reunions of the 21st Century may serve a similar function.

There are other kinds of gatherings that need little explanation or justification. They involve the reunion of soldiers and other guardians of the country's security during periods of great stress and challenge. One of our colleagues, Art Sandstrom, lived for many years in northern Alaska, where it is totally dark or totally light many months of the year. Members of his particular community served in the United States armed forces and were in charge of the Arctic line of defense and communication during the 1950s-1960s. The veterans of this challenging assignment (men called WAMCATS) still get together each year to share stories and reaffirm their values. The WAMCATS are bringing their children and grandchildren to keep the tradition going. The meetings are even more important now because some members of WAMCATS are dying each year. Like the survivors of Pearl Harbor, there is remembrance of difficult times—though the WAMCATS were not victims of actions taken by other people but were instead the initiators, the problem-solvers, the winners. Typically, men like Art Sandstrom who organize the WAMCATS each year are not brash or in need of massive ego-stroking. Rather, they are often quiet, dedicated, and thoughtful about the values and history that emerged from the frozen communication centers in Alaska. They don't want these values or this history to be lost or discounted. They are generative in their actions.

There are other men and women who shared experiences that might not be as traumatic or as important historically as the defense of their country, but these Generativity Three guardians reaffirm their history and values through annual gatherings. We find this spirit of generative gathering beautifully illustrated in the novel, play and movie, *Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*. Life commitments and aspirations are renewed in this story of deep female companionship. One of our friends, Lee Johnson, exemplifies this spirit in real life, as the co-founder of a fraternity during his college years. Lee and his co-founders still get together every year (35-40 years later) to honor their legacy and the values embedded in their original decision as college students to create their own unique community of aspirations and moral code. As is the case with many other Generativity Three gatherings, there is a whole lot of story-telling and values-affirmation. It is to these final two types of generativity three acts that we now turn.

## **Valuing**

Generativity Three can be enacted in a seventh way by providing clarity, representation, demonstration, monitoring or reinforcement of cherished values. Frequently, values are not

preserved because they are unknown or misunderstood, and as a result are not carefully monitored or reinforced. One of us worked many years ago with the Bank of America, which at the time was initiating an organization-wide values clarification process. The history of Bank of America is filled with memorable events that represented a strong commitment to community service. The story begins with Giannini's establishing the bank (then called The Bank of Italy) on two barrels and a board at the end of Market Street in San Francisco following the 1906 Earthquake. Existing banks were not lending money to Italian-American small businesses, so Giannini decided to help these business owners himself. Similar representations of community service values—though on a much larger scale— were seen in the bank's commitments to finance farming in the Central Valley of California after World War II.

The Bank of America seemed to have lost its way during the second half of the 20th Century. Leaders of the bank wanted to return to the earlier values and felt it was important to repeat this history through storytelling (the eighth act of Generativity) and clarifying and reinforcing the values embedded in this history. We see in this one example the way in which Generativity Three can be engaged by an entire organization, even if the generative motive was interwoven with less generous motives about reforming bank internal business practices. The Bank of America was responding at that time in large part to the threat of East Coast banks moving into the California market. While this values-oriented project never seemed to get much traction in the Bank of America, it does illustrate the way in which Generativity Three can be engaged through the clarification of values inherent in personal, organizational, and community history.

One of our four *Featured Players*, Dale, describes a similar act of Generativity Three when faced with the challenge of preserving organizational values. He offers a much more successful example than the Bank of America:

I am struck by one thing that happened to me late in my work career that made a significant difference for my company. I was asked to head an office of business conduct and ethics by the president and chairman of the company. That came about because some senior employees did some bad stuff, and the company was really in trouble in an area that was significant. This prompted the chairman to create the office, and he asked me to head it. I had no idea how to proceed. I looked across the country to determine whether

there were any models and found a few that were just starting. This was in 1990-91. I had conversations with some company executives to find out how to get started.

Dale speaks about moving beyond concern for value-misalignment to concrete generative actions:

I then met with a law professor. We struck up a friendship, and out of that I created a management program and system for my company on how to conduct ethics training. We put about 800 executives through a four day experiential workshop. I also created a safety net for myself and whistleblowers that resulted from some work that I did with professors at Harvard and Bentley College. Whistle blowers usually got fired, so the eight of us created national standards to protect them.

I considered the ethics office as my “last best job,” because what if I found that the chairman was cooking the books? Enron would later be a good example of that. The safety net I created said that I would be responsible for reporting the corporation’s state of ethics to the Audit Committee of the Board of Directors without the presence of the chairman. This became part of the responsibilities of the job, and the chairman endorsed the idea. I was responsible for giving a written and oral report to the Audit Committee. Then, the report was given to the full board and the chairman and president. As it relates to honoring and sustaining traditions, this example is something that I initiated. I believe the processes and standards lasted well after my retirement from the company.

In Dale’s narrative, we see not the historical orientation of the Bank of America initiative nor the intentional introduction of a values proposition but, rather, the confrontation of ongoing ethics violations that seemed to bring the fundamental values of Dale’s organization in clear relief. His generative actions and those of his colleagues apparently led to some sustained changes that brought his organization more in alignment with its best traditions. It is this type of immediate response to a critical moment in the life of an organization or community that might best illustrate the power of effective Generativity Three leadership.

There is yet another way in which Generativity Three is enacted through the preservation of values. We see it in the commitment of individuals and organizations to ensure the quality of work being done in specific occupations and professions. In some instances, the preservation

takes place through the monitoring of people entering a given field. Men and women in a specific trade or profession devote considerable time and energy to serving on licensing boards and helping to prepare tests, review applications, or interview prospective members of the guild or profession.

In other instances, we witness the stewardship of a specific discipline or field among those people who help to establish or maintain a specific guild or professional association. Both of us were involved many years ago in helping to establish a new field in American higher education called "faculty development." We were involved in successfully preparing grant proposals to fund early pilot projects in this field, as well as helping to establish a professional association and journal that focused on faculty development. While both of us were young professionals at the time, and thus were focusing primarily on Generativity One motivations (raising a family and finding gratification in successfully starting new projects), there was already in the back of the stage this enactment of Generativity Three. In particular, our actions were directed toward the preservation of values associated with the nascent field of faculty development. More recently, one of us has been given the opportunity to play a similar role in the formation and maturation of another field of human service, professional coaching. As the two of us enter the later years of our lives, Generativity Three and Generativity Four are much more likely to be enacted center stage.

Finally, we find that values preservation often takes place through the setting of informal and formal boundaries. Space and time are set aside for the gathering of people who share common values. Robert Bellah and his colleagues wrote about American culture and identified *life-style enclaves* as a distinctive and prominent feature of the societal landscape during the late 20th Century. (Bellah, and others, 1985) Bellah observed that many specialized communities were being formed in the United States based on shared values and interests. These enclaves might involve geographic isolation, such as the creation of retirement communities and urban centers for the 20-something cohort. They might also involve the temporary creation of settings, what we described above as the enactment of Generativity Three gatherings. A life-style enclave is formed temporarily. A group of people come together every weekend to convoy their Corvettes or to compare their collection of Star Wars memorabilia. Devotees expend considerable time and money to meet with fellow "fanatics/fans" at horse shows or the local baseball stadium.

Members of these life-style enclaves are preserving a particular set of values by associating with others who share the same values, by recruiting others to their enclave, and by extolling the virtues of life in their enclave when meeting with "outsiders." While these enclaves can be sources of exclusion and polarization, they can also be homes of critical preservation about important traditions. They seek to preserve hard-earned virtues in a society that often seems to have lost its roots and its way in a complex, turbulent and unpredictable world.

### **Story-Telling**

Ultimately, all of Generativity Three may have something to do with sharing a narrative. This can be done with words, with ceremony, or with acts of gratitude. There are many ways that this eighth act of generativity can be engaged. Certainly, the verbal act of story-telling is one of the oldest and most widely-engaged forms of Generativity Three. Through story-telling we share the history of specific people and events. Through the telling of stories we justify traditions and reinforce values. We inspire, build relationships, and set the stage for other forms of generativity through the stories we tell. We even seem to build our sense of self through our stories. While our body is continually changing and our life events are often in flux, the stories we tell about ourselves provide continuity-the ongoing sense of self. To paraphrase the words of Gary Lopez (1990): the stories that people tell other people (and themselves) have a way of taking care of them. At an even broader level, one might conclude that the stories we tell in our organizations, communities, and societies provide the fabric of continuity. It seems that organizations, at a fundamental level, are nothing more or less than a series of stories (Bergquist, 1993).

We would like to illustrate this important component of Generativity Three by sharing a couple of our own stories. First, one of us was involved in a verbal history project in the State of Montana. This project concerned the history of homesteading in Montana and other prairie states. Pioneering men and women were provided by the American and Canadian governments with a plot of land in an undeveloped and often inhospitable region of Western Northern America. The land was given to them at no charge, but they had to live on it and derive a livelihood or at least sustainable nutrition from the land for a specific period of time. Most of the homesteaders were now growing old or had died, without the stories of their remarkable courage and ingenuity being shared and recorded.



The project team went to retirement communities to talk with the homesteaders. As a way of encouraging the recall process and reassuring the story-tellers that their life histories were of value, we presented them with a heart-felt and poignant film about homesteading, called *Heartland*. After showing the movie, we sat with these elderly homesteaders to listen to and record their stories of growing up on the prairie. Their stories revealed much about the ways in which pioneers coped with harsh conditions of the prairie and how they found creative solutions to such problems as insect infestation, droughts, fires and tornados, and a profound sense of isolation. Core values were revealed in these stories, and the pioneering folk felt honored to be asked about their lives. Those of us who witnessed these stories felt equally honored.

Another Generativity Three story involved one of us being indirectly involved in a project in Chicago. This project focused on once-vibrant, but now threatened, ethnic communities. As in the case of the Montana homesteading project, the elderly residents of these communities shared their life stories with members of the project team. In addition to their oral histories, the team collected pictures, 8 mm home movies, posters, newspaper articles and other documents representing the history, values, and aspirations of these communities. A multi-media display was prepared for each ethnic community, including the voice recordings of the story-tellers. The displays were presented in many venues, including storefronts, banks, and other commercial establishments located in the ethnically-based Chicago communities. Men, women, stories, visual images and other documents were thus shared in a very generative manner with those who still lived in these communities. Residents were able to recognize and celebrate their unique heritage and reaffirm their own community values, despite the disruptive social-economic challenges being faced in their community.

The displays were also brought together at the Field Museum in Chicago. The designers of museum displays constructed an accompanying visual commentary about the decay and fragmentation of the ethnic communities. Arching over the top of the displays were large cardboard photos of the freeways that ran through the heart of these communities. The freeway structures served as bridges above and across the communities for commuters wishing to return to their suburban homes with minimal distractions and as quickly as possible. Sadly, these freeways were of little benefit to the people still living in homes located below the freeways. Furthermore, the freeways often disrupted the flow of people and commerce in the ethnic

communities, accelerating their social and economic decline. We see in this Chicago project a commentary on societal values, as well as a blending of story-telling, preservation, and display. As was the case with the Montana project, participants in all of the various roles in the Chicago project experienced the spirit of generativity, be they story-tellers, document providers, listeners, or document collectors.

One of our four *Featured Players*, Lisa, sums-up the essential role played by story-telling during her Sage project interview. She comments on her own interest in becoming a story-teller, particularly in organizations of which she is a member:

When asked what my purpose is in wanting to become a skilled story-teller, I say that I have seen *Out of Africa*, and that I can get Robert Redford! I really want to be a good story-teller; it is simply fascinating, and listening to good stories just warms the heart. I want to bring this skill to my work with the nonprofits here in our community in order to help them tell their stories well. It's about engagement, in telling their story so well that the story-teller gets a strong reaction and connection between people and their organization. When this happens, they really "get it" and want to learn more about the organization and become part of it.

We observe that story-telling might be particularly challenging for men and women who do not come from or live in a verbally-oriented society. So many contemporary societies are print oriented. We spend little time sitting around a campfire or fireplace recalling our family or organization's stories. At best, we save the stories for reunions, birthdays, or special holidays. Unfortunately, we often need one of the other Generativity Three acts to find a reason and proper venue for the story-telling.

## **Conclusions**

We conclude this essay about Generativity Three by turning, briefly, to the opposite end of the generativity spectrum. We focus once again on the absence of generativity and the resulting condition of personal stagnation. While we are ending this essay on a negative note, these warnings are being offered in large part to remind us of the powerful motives that underlie our generative acts and the great benefit that Generativity Three brings to our personal and collective lives.

Stagnation as a reaction against Generativity Three is about a narrowness of space and time. We can't look beyond where we are right now. This means we either disregard the old or ignore the new. In disregarding the old, a person who is stagnant no longer cares about that which came before. The stagnant person considers the old to be "irrelevant," that which "time has passed by." This often includes personal history, their contributions in the past, their own legacy. We may be nostalgic about our past life, but we do nothing about it. We don't honor our own heritage. We don't honor the contributions of people who have impacted our lives. We move forward without bringing the past with us, which means that we probably don't really move forward at all. Rather, we spin around and around without a compass or road map. We keep making the same mistakes, learning little from the past.

### **Honoring the Old**

One of the most insightful and expansive thinkers of the 20th Century, Gregory Bateson (1979, p. 157) wrote about the un-use in biological systems. Bateson uses an example of the femur on a whale (the fin that extends from the top of the whale's back). This anatomical unit of the whale's body no longer is of much use; however, it was once very important as a stabilizer for the whale when the ocean currents were much stronger than they are today. Nature decided via evolution to reduce the size of the femur, but not to eliminate it since the ocean might once again become more turbulent. Why reinvent the femur when it can be saved for another time in the future? Similarly, we see that the "old-timers" in an organization or "outdated" political perspectives may no longer seem relevant to the challenges now being faced in our society. Yet, at another time in the future these perspectives and the underlying wisdom might once again be of great value. We can identify these un-used and now devalued entities as *remnants*: components that have been part of a system for many generations and seem now to be irrelevant or out of date. We need to honor the remnants, because it is much harder to reinvent than to restore. We are stagnant and lack Generativity Three insight when we ignore Bateson's insight and the wisdom of the remnant.

One of us saw the dynamic of the remnant play-out during a plane flight to North Carolina. We were traveling to a graduation ceremony being held at a conservative college during the early 1980s. The one-time Democratic candidate for the US presidency, George McGovern, was sitting next to us on this small plane. He was invited to the same graduation ceremony as the

featured speaker and recipient of an honorary doctoral degree. McGovern was understandably puzzled about this college's invitation, given its conservative stance.

Serving on the board of trustees at this college, we knew about the rationale behind this decision. Ronald Reagan had recently been elected President, and the United States was leaning toward the conservative end of the political spectrum. McGovern's liberal perspectives were now "out of date." In their remarkable wisdom and generative spirit, the college board members (who were universally committed to conservatism) declared that it is important for each of us to listen to all perspectives—especially those that are temporarily out of favor. This was at the heart of the college's educational philosophy. Board members wanted George McGovern to speak at graduation precisely because they thought it important for the graduating students to hear a voice that differed from the one to which they were accustomed. It was important for the college to honor all traditions and perspectives. This board of trustees was to be commended for its generative act. George McGovern delivered a remarkable graduation speech that was politically balanced and filled with generative appreciation for the invitation he received and the honorary doctorate bestowed on him.

### **Ignoring the Young**

Stagnation can also show up as a lack of respect for the young. It is ironic that when we ignore the past, we are also blocking the future. The past was owned by us when we were younger. We were filled with optimism, a belief that the world could be improved. This was a certain kind of naive wisdom. Now, when we are stagnant, there is a failure to appreciate (let alone savor) our younger selves. Yes, we were "young and foolish." But we were also full of energy and commitment. Can we recognize that this same passion exists among the young men and women in our society today? Can we allow the young to participate in the critical decisions to be made in our organizations and communities? Or do we isolate and ignore what they have to say?

One of our younger Sage leaders commented on this generative challenge for one organization in which he participates (Rotary). He framed this challenge as the opportunity for mutual respect across the ages:

Rotary is typically an organization for older people, and I have gotten comments about being young and having energy. I like to bring youthfulness to what we do and show

older people that there are young people who respect them and learn from what they have to say because we feel they are a wealth of knowledge.

We see in this brief but wise observation that generative appreciation goes in both directions. We honor those who are older than we are (availing ourselves of Generative Two guidance) and those traditions and values that predate us (availing ourselves of Generative Three continuity). In return, we are respected and listened to by those we have appreciated and honored. Reciprocity is a good thing, a dynamic interplay across generations that becomes particularly important as we turn in the next series of essays to the challenges of civic engagement.

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