

# **Deep Caring XXVII: Generativity Four—The Sacrifices**

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We conclude our exploration of Generativity Four by looking at the balance sheet of the sacrifices and benefits of civic engagement, as well as one likely result of non-involvement: *stagnation*. We already have addressed the issues of motivation and satisfaction in our previous essays. However, the tangible benefits which one receives from Generativity Four activities are not the same as motivations; they are closely linked but possess a different quality; motivation being more internal and benefits being more external. Furthermore, we believe that a key to understanding the choices between generativity and stagnation resides in the perceived presence or absence of benefits and sacrifice. Some people conclude that the benefits of civic engagement outweigh sacrifices, while others say that sacrifices outweigh benefits; still others see the lack of civic involvement as a potential sign of inertia. In this essay, we focus on the sacrifices. We rely once again primarily on the insights extracted from our interviews with 100 Sage leaders in Western Nevada County, California.

The subject of civic engagement begs the question of whether the involvements of Sage leaders come at high cost, and whether such sacrifices are off-set by the personal benefits they receive. It is in this domain that we anticipated the greatest differences between Emerging and Senior Sage leaders. Of the 50 Senior Sages who were interviewed, 49 say there is virtually no sacrifice involved, that their civic work is enriching their lives. While the older leaders in most cases are now retired, or at least have fewer family constraints, the 50 younger Emerging Sages are typically in the midst of career demands and family obligations. This suggests that two questions need to be asked: How do they not see civic engagement as yet another pull on their time, talent, and energy? How do they not see this voluntary work as a sacrifice?

## **Emerging Sage Leaders**

The Emerging Sage leaders are evenly divided between those who believe that civic engagement definitely involves personal sacrifice and those who believe it does not. And there are some who hold mixed views.

## **Sacrifice? Yes and No**

Emerging Sages who believe their civic engagement has been at great personal sacrifice offer three principal reasons: time away from family, impact on health, and harm to domestic bliss:

I feel I sacrifice the time I have with my two young children. A day does not go by when I don't feel guilty about the hours I spend at work and on civic activities. I involve my kids whenever there is an opportunity, and they are often the youngest participants at a community event. I also make great effort to be present when I am at home and to work after they go to bed.

One of our Emerging leaders even attributed separation from his wife in part to his civic engagements:

Honestly, because I am so passionate about my work, it is really easy to allow myself to become wholly consumed by it. This hasn't been good for my personal life. Recently, I separated from my partner of eighteen years, and my consuming passion for my work definitely was one of the factors. I did not have a healthy work-life balance, and that clearly impacted my personal relationship.

About an equal number of Emerging Sage leaders say their civic involvements *do not* require personal sacrifice, and they offer three reasons: personal fulfillment, family involvement, obligation:

I don't feel there is sacrifice because I choose to put my energy into things that I'm really passionate about. I don't get involved out of a sense of "should" because I realize that those things don't give me energy.

It certainly helps to have a spouse who is similarly oriented:

I'm fortunate to have a wife who is actively involved. We enjoy doing these things together. This is a life I have chosen and feel I have been called to. So I don't see my civic involvement as something outside of my life. It permeates everything I think about and do. There is no disconnect between it and my teaching, coaching, family, and the property we live on. It is all connected and is the best it can be.

And there are those Emerging Sages who feel *mixed* about the sacrifices they make in their civic involvements: “I sacrifice my time, but I would not do anything differently. Sometimes my involvement in the community leads to recurrent 12-hour days. It can be exhausting, but it is worth it!”

### **The Differentiators**

Several clear factors have led some Emerging Sage leaders to view their generative civic engagements as more of a sacrifice than is the case with others. Among those having children, there is a strong sense that civic engagement means sacrificing home time, while those who either have no children or no longer have children living at home, the answer is very similar to Senior Sage leaders: sacrifice is minimal. One Emerging Sage even says that she and her husband were not going to have a second child in order to sustain their civic engagement. Clearly, it is hard to nurture a child (Stage One Generativity) while also trying to nurture a community (Stage Four Generativity).

A second differentiator is age. While not many of the Emerging Sages are in their late 20s or early 30s, those who are face unique challenges. Some of the younger Emerging Sages talk about feeling alienated from their peer group, that while they have paid work and are also contributing to several nonprofit organizations, their friends are “enjoying life.” These Emerging Sages don’t have time to be self-indulgent; they find it difficult to meet others of their own age with the same kind of passionate commitment to some specific community issue. And they don’t easily find friends, so feelings of isolation and being under-appreciated abound. As we noted in an earlier essay, life can be very difficult for people who are out-of-sync with society’s expectations (Neugarten,1996) Our young Emerging Sage leaders have “grown-up” too fast and are assuming the burdens of mature adulthood without going through what Erik Erikson calls the “moratorium”—a stage for safe exploration of alternative identifies, values, and life-styles.

There is a third differentiator. For some of the Emerging Sages civic engagement is closely tied to their workplace. For others, civic engagement is essentially unrelated to the work they do for a living. It’s a bit easier for the first group, although virtually all of the Emerging Sages report the

need to set boundaries and avoid taking on too much—regardless of the alignment between their paid and unpaid work.

### **Managing Boundaries**

It should be noted that even though sacrifice is clearly present, Emerging Sages speculate about the generative rejuvenation that comes through their civic engagements. Even when volunteer work is closely related to work being done for pay, there is something about it that brings new energy to the paid work and provides a level of gratification that a formal “job” rarely does. That doesn’t mean the conflict over seeking balance among family, career, and civic engagement is absent or reduced. A considerable amount of tension and struggle is still present and expressed by many of the Emerging Sage leaders. Even when a good balance is struck for a brief period, something usually happens and everything goes off-kilter again. As one Emerging Sage leader observes, “It’s very easy to get all-consumed in volunteer work, given my passion for it and the outcomes it yields.” And this is a person who doesn’t have children and doesn’t have to balance volunteer work with family time! Another Emerging Sage, an elected official, says the sacrifice to his private life is an unresolved trade-off against the gratification he receives from his public service.

The loss of private life is particularly apparent in small “island” communities like Grass Valley and Nevada City. In large part, this tension centers on the management of boundaries: “How do I say ‘no’ when I’m overwhelmed, or when I clearly haven’t devoted enough time to my family, job, or even my private life?” “What about the boundaries that separate my paid from my voluntary work, and when does one bleed into the other?” “How do I find time to really connect with other people?” “How do I set boundaries when I am always available by email or cell phone?” “In the age of texting and twittering, how do I find time to be off the grid?” “How do I find quality time with my partner, my children, and my friends? We no longer leave work at 5 pm, and we no longer devote our evenings to family life.” “When is *my* down time?” The Emerging Sage leaders find that setting clear and consistent boundaries is very elusive—especially in the age of electronic technology. It is always a tenuous balance! Personal life, work life, and civic engagement all seem to flow into one another, and what was once seen as definitive boundaries blur and merge.

Boundary management is not about giving-up time or relationships. And it is not about money, lost opportunities, or better pay in the private sector. As one Emerging Sage notes, “Once you raise your hand in this community, you are going to get sucked into many activities. You are going to get pulled into things that you did not necessarily anticipate.” Many of the Emerging Sages are involved in civic engagements that focus on sustaining the natural environment. Ironically, they recognize they need to manage boundaries in their own lives if they are going to sustain boundaries that affect their civic commitments. So, in the end, sustainability becomes a goal at many levels.

### **From Success to Significance**

The challenge of managing boundaries seems to be based in part on a change in the priorities set by Emerging Sages as they move into the second half of their lives. Their commitment to family might remain strong when they reach mid-age, but there is also a shift in the concern they have about the nature and quality of work they are doing. We know from considerable research on adult development that many young adults are ambitious and tend to identify self-worth in terms of personal and professional success: being singled out for recognition, getting a pay raise or promotion, being elected to public office or appointed to a prestigious committee. As these men and women mature, a gradual but sometimes dramatic change occurs. They begin to focus not on their personal and professional success but on achieving something that is significant outside themselves. This is about leaving a legacy, about being “good for the world” rather than just being “good in the world.” It is about Generativity Four.

We also know something about what aides and what hinders this shift from personal and professional success to a higher level of significance. A key is the support of important others in one’s life: If the partner doesn’t understand or encourage this shift to significance, then potential Emerging Sages are likely to pull back and remain engaged in the pursuit of personal success. And in the process, they are likely to risk becoming stagnant rather than generative. If friends, co-workers, and neighbors don’t appreciate the new priorities of Emerging Sages, and tell them they are losing their competitive edge, they are likely to fall back into old patterns—begrudging the success of others. Our study of Sage leadership suggests that it truly does take a community

to help Sage leaders find new purpose and energy in their lives, and to help them transition from focusing on success and self-achievement to significance—probably the single factor that most leads to an enduring legacy.

Our findings from the Sage project suggests that the management of boundaries may be critical in moving from success to significance. If Emerging Sages don't devote time, attention, and energy to significant others in their lives, how can they expect their partners to support their shift to significance—and the often-accompanying de-emphasis on pay and promotion? If other members of the Emerging Sage's family don't really understand the importance of the leader's civic engagement, how can they be expected to willingly sacrifice their time with the leader or forgo their own priorities—like owning a home, having a second child, traveling, or saving for retirement? More than one Emerging Sage observes with regret that he gave up so much earlier in his adult life that he now feels he can't adequately provide for his family. If Emerging Sage leaders don't pay enough attention to sustaining their own physical and mental health, they won't be able to sustain a commitment to significance beyond personal ambition. In many ways, self-sacrifice is among the most selfish of lifestyles, for it can't be sustained and often results in personal regret and enduring resentment among those in the lives of Emerging Sages who are most important.

### **Senior Sage Leaders**

More than half of the 50 Senior Sage leaders say there is no personal sacrifice in their civic engagements: “quite the opposite. I don't feel that my wife or I are sacrificing anything. We are being enrichment by our community involvements.” Even if there is sacrifice, they tend to believe the benefits far out-weigh any personal costs:

Right now I don't feel like I sacrifice. Rather, my volunteer work feeds me. I went through a couple of marriages and had to choose between being who I am or being in the marriages. At this point in my life, my husband wholeheartedly supports what I do and is enthusiastic about it. My kids are all grown now, and they're proud of me, so it's fine.

A small number of Senior Sages feel mixed about whether their civic activities involve personal sacrifice:

Anyone who gives freely of their time for volunteer work feels there is some sacrifice, but they wouldn't do it if they didn't think it was worth it. Sure, instead of volunteering 40-50 hours a month, I could be doing other things like lying on a lounge or reading a book. But that's not the point, is it?

One of our Senior Sage leaders describes a sequence of decisions when talking about sacrifice:

After retiring, I informed my wife that my first year was going to be given to enjoying our beautiful natural environment here. Then I acted on my belief that there was more to life than fishing and playing tennis and golf. So I got involved. I guess the only sacrifice I made was that I over-committed myself by getting involved in too many organizations at the same time. This was draining and prevented my wife and me from doing some of the leisure activities we had looked forward to all of our lives. My terming off two nonprofit boards has helped to restore balance in my life.

Those Senior Sages admitting to personal sacrifice offer two reasons: time away from family and giving up personal things they love to do:

Yes, I am sacrificing, and I am not happy about it. I am not getting as much time as I would like to watch my grandson grow-up. And I am not spending as much time with my husband or my horses as I would like. At the same time, I am a problem-solver, and when I say I am going to do something I follow through and live-up to my commitments. That's part of my values, of who I am.

### **Free Time but Type A**

In most instances, Senior Sage leaders say their civic engagements don't require sacrifice. Their lives are so structured that they find time for leisure activities, grand kids, the arts and, yes, civic engagement. They might occasionally complain that they don't have time to do needle point or go fishing, or they may regret not spending more time with family members. Senior Sages may have sacrificed income when moving to Grass Valley or Nevada City, but most often the sacrifice is not tied to their volunteer activities. In some cases, they simply may have continued with the "Type A" behavior of their youth by joining too many boards or taking on too many volunteer assignments. But most soon adjust and find a way to secure more balance in their lives.

Even among those Senior Sages who are still working full or part-time, there is a thoughtful wedding of paid employment and civic engagement. As is the case with many of the Emerging Sage leaders, Senior Sages find time to gain both energy and direction through their volunteer work—and this easily transfers to the work they do for pay.

### **Letting Go**

If there is sacrifice, it is sometimes framed not as a loss of personal time but as an inability to exert influence over the nonprofit organization they are serving. Most Senior Sages realize at some point that they need to step back and let others assume formal leadership roles. They learn they have to “let go,” much as they had to do with their own children earlier in their lives. As grandparents, Senior Sage leaders can play with their grandchildren without having full responsibility for them. Similarly, they can often participate actively in an organization without having to take full responsibility for its welfare—at least not to the extent if they were employed there full-time. This may be an important element of Generativity Four.

Alternatively, Senior Sages sometimes find they can't let go because their favored organization is in crisis. Their inner standards won't allow them to abandon the organization and their commitment to its welfare; they feel they have to remain actively involved, and often in its troubling minutia as well. This can lead to a real sense of sacrifice in the loss of family time and an increase in personal stress.

### **Myth and Reality**

Often it is people who are not civically engaged who perceive such involvements as requiring great personal sacrifice. These men and women often remain disengaged precisely because they don't recognize that this type of work can be rewarding and a source of energy rather than a drain. If they do get involved in civic activities, it is sometimes out of a sense of duty or civic obligation, in which case there is often resentment—or their commitment is half-hearted and short-lived.

For most of the Senior Sage leaders we interviewed it is a matter of life-enhancement rather than sacrifice. The challenge is to get this point across to those who shy away from civic engagement



because they are still holding onto the myth of sacrifice. Put another way: how do you convince baby boomers who just left the workforce and are tired of fighting organizational battles that things can be different in the civic arena? They can do new things, learn new skills and, yes, fight new battles—but on behalf of much worthier causes. How do you convince these men and women to work for personal gratification and community improvement rather than a pay check? They must be convinced that they will get a “return on their investment,” but they often don’t know ahead of time that the return is physical, mental, and spiritual in nature.

Unless burdened with repressive poverty, illness, or major family responsibilities, many seniors can make important contributions to their community if they think it through and become motivated. For those at the bottom of the social-economic rung, the issue of sacrifice is often reflected in whether they actually can become civically involved in their community; the need to scramble to stay alive and provide shelter, food, and clothing for family members and themselves may simply make significant civic engagements impossible. One hopes this isn’t true—everyone has gifts they can share.