

Deep Caring XXIX: Generativity Four— Generativity or Stagnation?

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We conclude our exploration of civic engagement and Generativity Four by turning once again to the fundamental choice that Erik Erikson first identified when describing the stages of adult development: *generativity or stagnation?* Virtually all our Senior Sages know persons in the community who possess sage leadership qualities but are far removed from being civically engaged. Senior Sages describe them as affable, generous, and knowledgeable persons but voice frustration in not being able to motivate them: “So why can’t I get them involved? Why don’t they readily recognize the personal benefits that can come from civic engagement? Why don’t they perk-up when I say that my soul is being fed by the volunteer work I am doing? I care about these people and know that civic engagement can offer a wonderful path to renewed physical, mental and even spiritual health.” Senior Sages wish they had answers to these questions and speculate about possible reasons for non-engagement.

Fear and Isolation

For some, it is about fear. Fear of putting themselves out there in a civic organization and getting stuck in a mess of complex, all-consuming challenges. Fear of being asked to do something they feel they can’t do, either because of time constraints or lack of direct experience. Perhaps they are tired and find relief in getting away from the politics in which they once worked and often served as leaders for many years. It is reasonable to ask, then, why anyone would want to get drawn back into this milieu when they can be with their friends or plant flowers in solitude: “If I get involved and my commitment grows too large, how do I get out of it and reclaim my personal life?” “It is much easier to find friendships in leisure time activities than build them through civic networks.” “If I am not making money, why would I do it? Why would I do the same thing again, but this time for free?” It is understandable that uninvolved seniors may judge civic work to involve sacrifice if they can’t see personal or community benefits. Unfortunately, they don’t or can’t yet understand that civic involvement is a different kind of work that has its own rewards.

Perhaps it is a lack of connections in the community. Many senior men and women moved to Grass Valley or Nevada City in recent years and don't yet know many people. They are on the outside of the core community looking in, and no one has asked them to participate in a volunteer activity. Or they may feel that what they must contribute to their new community won't be valued. In other instances, new arrivals have moved into gated communities where they get into a year-in-and-year-out routine of playing bridge all day and watching a bit of TV before falling asleep.

Their friendship network becomes limited to other residents in the gated community who share the same values and hold dear the same life priorities. So, their lives outside this community become limited to shopping, banking, and attending the occasional theatrical or musical performance. While these potential Sage leaders do have a "community" it is highly restricted, as we noted in Chapter Five, lacking in diversity or much soul-feeding attraction—at least from the perspective of the Senior Sage leaders whom we interviewed. It should not be surprising that this lifestyle can become numbing and lead to stagnation and despair as the aging process unfolds.

Life Experiences and Priorities

Another factor might be life experiences. Potential civic leaders may never have had the kind of challenges and support in their lives that motivate them to want to give back to others. They declare, "I don't do that," and set aside any possibility that they will taste the benefits of civic involvement during their senior years. In some instances, these seniors have "grown up" in corporate culture and don't want to start over in learning how to work and be influential in the culture of nonprofit organizations.

They had clear status in the corporate world, but this doesn't translate to the nonprofit world of volunteers unless it is earned. Often these seniors may not have had a history of public service in their own families of origin. That might make sense if it were not for the fact that many of the project's Senior Sage leaders also had no tradition of civic engagement in their early lives; their parents were farmers who lived a long way from town, or they grew-up in economically challenged families that had no discretionary time for anything but income-generating work. Somehow these Senior Sage leaders learned the value of civic engagement without having had

parental role models. It is interesting to muse about why and how these men and women discovered the benefits of voluntary service to their community.

Perhaps the lack of civic involvement on the part of some seniors is simply a matter of priorities. Other things going on in the lives of uninvolved seniors are deemed more important. This doesn't make them selfish human beings, but a lack of motivating experiences does make them less inclined to serve other people and therefore more difficult to interest in things civic. As one Senior Sage observes, "It may be essential to get involved in civic activities right after moving here, and this involvement should not be short-term or superficial." The lesson: If you are just pouring drinks at a Music in the Mountains event, this might not be enough to motivate significant community involvement—and not enough to yield the tangible benefits of civic engagement. On the other hand, small investments of time and energy may, in fact, eventually lead to something bigger. One never knows.

Conclusions

There are so many questions and so few answers about why senior men and women who possess Sage leadership qualities are not civically involved in Western Nevada County—and about the choice between generativity and stagnation. Answers will have to await future conversations with those who are not yet civically inclined. While we can't provide definitive answers regarding civic involvement, we don't want to sidestep the fundamental question: *generativity or stagnation?* We will conclude this series of essays by addressing this question—does the choice between generativity and stagnation relate in some way to the absence or avoidance of soul and spirit? Do we escape from civic involvement and possibly all other forms of generative engagement because, in some sense, we are afraid of our own soulful and spiritual awakening? These are the difficult and often elusive questions we address in the remaining essays. The answers to these questions perhaps tell us something about the wellspring of deep caring and generativity in all its enactments.

