

Deep Caring XXXI: Social Class, Agency and the Generative Society

William Bergquist and Gary Quehl

In their assessment of generativity as related to social structure, Keyes and Ryff (1998, p. 253) observe that:

[S]ociety contours generativity. Midlife and often older adults, adults with more education, and women tend to exhibit greater levels of diverse aspects of generativity than young adults with fewer years of education, and men. . . . Perhaps relieved of primary obligations, midlife and older adults give emotional support and unpaid assistance to more people and feel less primary but more civic obligations.

In other words, civic engagement and other acts of generativity might be the privilege of social class, rather than being a sign of altruism or personal commitment. Perhaps, as some of our Sage leaders observed, stagnation and the absence of civic engagement might be at least partially attributed to the inability of many people to find time or energy to move beyond their own economic struggles (and to move beyond their own Generativity One role as a challenged provider to their family).

As Keyes and Ryff also noted, "generativity contours our quality of life." (1998, p. 254) We find our work in all four generative roles to be not just gratifying, but also a source of meaning and purpose in life. We are not just given the opportunity to outlive our self (as Kotre suggests), but also to find enrichment in the life we are still living. The generative society provides the abundant opportunity for this enrichment of life--provided a society enables those who are poor, oppressed and challenged in every aspect of their life to move beyond this state in order to afford themselves the privilege of generativity. This is where Kitchens' rocks and pebbles are found to be critical. The generative society provides a government and set of social service agencies that support and encourage civic engagement. It provides a variety of other generative institutions as well that are operating in an effective and efficient manner. These rocks and peddles are needed if quality of life is to be enhanced through generative acts within a community context.

Fostering the Generative Society: Agency and Communion

Many years ago, Sigmund Freud indicated that our capacity to both love deeply and engage in productive work defines our quality of life (and perhaps our level of sanity). The first architect of

generativity, Erik Erikson, similarly emphasized the integral connections between love and work. Both are needed to foster generativity. Erik Erikson spoke of this requirement on many occasions, perhaps most eloquently and succinctly in *Insight and Responsibility*: "As adult man needs to be needed [loved], so . . . he requires the challenge emanating from what he has generated [work] and from what now must be 'brought up,' guarded, preserved--and eventually transcended." (Erikson, 1964, p. 131) Like Erikson, we wish to emphasize the integral connections between love and work, as both are needed to foster generativity.

This integration is played out in the vital connection between *agency* and *communion* that McAdams and then Snyder and Clary emphasize in their portraits of generative society:

[A]t the heart of generativity is communion and altruism, on the one hand, and agency and narcissism, on the other. Accordingly, along with other-oriented concerns for future generations, generativity may have as the self-oriented aim "creating something in one's own image, a powerful act of self-expansion." (McAdams, 2001, p. 405) (Snyder and Clary, 2004, p. 232)

In our interviews with Sage leaders, the role played by agency and hard, persistent work is clearly evident. Furthermore, we see in our study of civic engagement that generative work is sustained in a community that appreciates and honors this agency (as we noted above regarding the creation of an appreciative society). We also discovered that generative agency shows up in many forms. This, in turn, means that there must be multiple ways in which agency is supported in any society that wishes to be generative. An insightful and more detailed account of this need for multiple support mechanisms was offered by Dollahite, Slife and Hawkins (1998, p. 475):

Generative agency is holistic (choice is embedded in a web of other choices, contexts, and constraints), temporal (choices and constraints change over time), spiritual (choice is enhanced and challenged by spiritual connections and convictions), capability-oriented (the exercise of choice brings greater capabilities), and moral (people are accountable for their choices).

As a sociologist, Kai Erikson focuses on the second half of the equation: communion. She points out that communion is a fundamental building block in all societies and in the formation of our own personal sense of identity and security:

Human beings, like all social animals, have an innate tendency to gather into collectivities containing individuals who regard themselves as being of like kind. That is, it is in our nature to seek communion with other human beings. But the ways in which we do so, the people to whom we find ourselves drawn, and the groupings that emerge from all this must be understood as products of social life. . . . Most people belong to a number of [social groupings.] . . . The most important question one can ask of these nested [social] identities is: which of them are crucial enough at any given time to provide a sense of communion, a sense of security, a sense of being at home among one's own kind. (Erikson, 2004, p. 56-57)

Building on our own four role model of generativity, we can readily rephrase Erik Erikson's statement about love and work to incorporate this generative interplay between agency and Communion. Here is our rephrase:

As an adult we need love and communion. We also require the challenge emanating from what we have generated through our work and agency. That which we have generated through love and work must be reared (Generativity One), guided (Generativity Two), guarded and preserved (Generativity Three) and eventually expanded and transcended (Generativity Four). While agency (and work) is needed to carry out the act of generativity and deep caring, communion (and love) is needed to formulate the desire to be caringly generativity.

Appreciation as the Vital Link

We believe that appreciation represents the vital link between agency and communication and that a generative society must be founded on a culture of appreciation. The term appreciation itself has several different meanings that tend to build on one another; however, as a foundation for creating the generative society, we can begin by noting that appreciation refers first to a clearer understanding of another person's perspective. We cannot be generative in working with another person -- be they a child, mentee, colleague or member of our community--unless we understand something about their interests, fears, and hopes. Empathy is critical. One cares deeply about the matter being studied and about those people one is assisting. Neutrality is inappropriate in such a setting, though compassion implies neither a loss of discipline nor a loss of boundaries between one's own problems and perspectives and those of the other person. Appreciation, in other words, is about fuller understanding, not merging, with another

person's problems or identity. At the level of society, we find priorities, policies and procedures that encourage us to take the time to understand and empathize with one another. Our generativity is successfully directed toward other people only as we understand who they are and actively engage them in the context of this direct, appreciative engagement.

Appreciation refers not just to understanding but also to valuing another person, event or project. Appreciation is about an increase in worth or value. A painting or stock portfolio appreciates in value. Van Gogh looked at a vase of sunflowers and in appreciating (painting) these flowers, he increased their value for everyone. Van Gogh similarly appreciated and brought new value to his friends through his friendship: "Van Gogh did not merely articulate admiration for his friend: He created new values and new ways of seeing the world through the very act of valuing." (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 123)

One of those seeking to define the nature of a generative society frames this second form of appreciation by turning to the Japanese culture:

Who decides whether our lives are "successful?" We could select . . . words such as *meaningful* or *tasteful* to represent our lives. Kanji characters of the Japanese word meaning involve Ajji, which translates as "taste, flavor, sense, impression, appreciation, enjoyment, and experience." (Yamada, 2004, p. 99)

Our appreciation becomes a matter of "taste." We are appreciative and create a generative society when we emphasize the acquisition of tasteful awareness of the extraordinary world around -- both the natural world and the exquisite production of people who are now alive or have lived in the past and provide us with objects and events of lasting beauty.

The person who engages in the third role of generativity by honoring and preserving the heritage associated with a particular person, society or event has raised the value of this person, society or event by seeing in a new way -- thus opening new vistas for the growth of generativity in a society. Similarly, as a Generative One parent, Generative Two mentor or Generative Four civic leader, we are pointing to and enhancing value. We are seeing the "big picture" and raising the level of aspiration and hope among those with whom we relate and work. In the upward appreciation of value comes the motivation to care deeply and fight hard for our child, mentee, monument or civic project.

From yet another perspective, the process of appreciation concerns our recognition of the contributions that have been made by another person: “I appreciate the efforts you have made in getting this project off the ground.” Sometimes this sense of appreciation is reflected in the special recognition we give people for a particularly successful project or in the bouquet of flowers or thank you note we leave with an assistant. This form of appreciation, however, when it is the only kind provided, typically leads just to praise inflation, praise addiction and the tendency to keep people who report to us permanently in a needy and, therefore (ironically), one-down position (Kanter, 1977).

Appreciation can instead be exhibited in a more constructive and generative manner through the daily interaction between a Generativity Two mentor and her mentees. It involves mutual respect and active engagement, accompanied by a natural flow of feedback, and an exchange of ideas. More specifically, appreciation is evident in attitudes about the nature and purpose of work. If the person engaged in the second role of generativity “sees work as the means whereby a person creates oneself (that is, one’s identity and personality) and creates community (that is, social relations), then the accountability structure becomes one of nurturing and mentoring.” (Cummings and Anton, 1990, p. 259) A generative society is one in which the acknowledgement of contribution is widely demonstrated and supported -- not a society in which bouquets of flowers are to be found everywhere, but rather a society in which knowledgeable and supportive feedback abounds.

The Dimensions of Appreciation

Stated in somewhat different terms, a generative society engenders *gratitude*. Not only are monuments erected to honor fallen heroes and pioneers (Generativity Three), but also simple words of gratitude are abundant as those who provide generative actions (in all four roles) are acknowledged. One of our Sage leaders clearly articulates the need for this appreciative acknowledgement in a society of generativity:

When working within volunteer organizations, where people are not paid to perform and meet goals, we all need to be grateful for any time or effort that is given freely. We need to gracefully enable people, use collaboration and an open mind. Everyone has unique gifts, and it is important to hear everyone’s ideas—holding in mind the organization’s objectives and mission. Most folks are doing the best they can. Projects take longer sometimes. Some people volunteer just because they want to be involved, but they may have few skills. However, they are there with their heart

open, and we need to find a place for them to contribute. I am learning to have more flexibility and grace when working with volunteers.

Appreciation is engaged in two additional ways that often are not acknowledged. Appreciation in a generative society also refers to recognition of the distinctive strengths and potentials of people working within the society. An appreciative culture is forged, and a generative society emerges, when an emphasis is placed on the realization of inherent potential and the uncovering of latent strengths rather than on the identification of weaknesses or deficits. People and societies “do not need to be fixed. They need constant reaffirmation.” (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 120) Even in a context of competition, appreciation transforms envy into learning, and personal achievement into a sense of overall purpose and value. The remarkable essayist Roger Rosenblatt (1997, p. 23) reveals just such a shifting and generative perspective in candidly describing the role that competition with other writers plays in his own life:

Part of the satisfaction in becoming an admirer of the competition is that it allows you to wonder how someone else did something well, so that you might imitate it—steal it, to be blunt. But the best part is that it shows you that there are things you will never learn to do, skills and tricks that are out of your range, an entire imagination that is out of your range. The news may be disappointing on a personal level, but in terms of the cosmos, it is strangely gratifying. One sits among the works of one’s contemporaries as in a planetarium, head all the way back, eyes gazing up at heavenly matter that is all the more beautiful for being unreachable. Am I growing up?

Paradoxically, at the point when someone or an entire society is fully appreciated and reaffirmed, they will tend to live up to their newly acclaimed talents and drive, just as they will live down to their depreciated sense of self if constantly criticized and undervalued.

Finally, and most importantly, appreciation is engaged, and an appreciative culture is forged, by establishing a positive image of the future within a society. We grow to appreciate and invest in our society and its inhabitants by imbuing it with optimism. We invest it with a sense of hope about its own future and the valuable role potentially it plays in our society. “[A]ffirmation of the positive future is the

single most important act that a system can engage in if its real aim is to bring to fruition a new and better future.” (Cooperrider, 1990, p. 119)

Effective, generative leaders, therefore, must be “not only concerned with what is but also with what might be.” (Frost and Egri, 1990, p. 305) As McAdams and his associates (McAdams, Hart and Maruna, 1998, p. 26) have noted: "To believe in the (human) species is to place hope and trust in the future of the human enterprise. Generativity requires a fundamental faith in humankind and hope for the future." We come to appreciate our own role and that of other people in the organization regarding the contributions we make jointly in helping the organization to realize these images, purposes and values. An appreciative perspective is always *leaning into the future*. While we appreciate that which has been successful in the past (Generativity Three), we don't dwell with nostalgia on the past, but instead continually trace the implications of acquired wisdom and past successes regarding our vision of the future (the bridge between Generativity Three and Four).

As we noted previously, a society without hope is a society in which children are ignored and personal survival replaces any concern for other people or community enrichment. We honor nothing, because there is no future to honor us. We do not seek to extend ourselves beyond our own lives, because there is nothing worth extending ourselves into when envisioning the future. It is only when we have a clear vision of the future that we care deeply about other people and our community. This is the central message of this set of essays-- appreciation as well as the spirited and soulful nature of deep caring are critical to generativity at all levels and in all ways of enactment..