

Deep Caring XXXII: The Origins of Generativity in Spirit

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In bringing this series of essays to a close, we focused initially on agency and communion, as well as appreciation. Residing at an even deeper and more personal level are the processes of spirit and soul. We propose in these final essays that Generativity is ultimately about more than child-rearing, organizational leadership, mentoring, preservation of traditions, and civic engagement. It is about something even deeper and more personally transformational. At the heart of the matter are two forms of Generativity that women and men often experience during the middle years of their life: Generativity of Spirit and Generativity of Soul.

To better understand the direction in which we are taking this final analysis of generativity, we wish to distinguish between these two forms of generativity. Spirit is about achievement and about lifting upward. It is the form of generativity that was identified in the earlier essay as Agency. It is about the joy that comes with accomplishment and recognition. It concerns our discovery of higher order truths and our commitment to higher order values that motivate our collaborative work with other people in our family, in our organizations, and in our community. This generativity ensures that our presence is felt in the world, and it often serves as a bridge between Generativity One and Generativity Two.

Generativity of Soul is about coming home and discovering what is already there and what should be valued. It is the form of generativity that was identified in an earlier essay as Communion. Generativity of the soul is about tending not just to matters of the organization we lead; it is about tending to sick or dying parents. It is about protecting those people that we love and the projects we have begun under Generativity One.

Generativity of the Spirit

One of our Senior Sage leaders identified the essence of Spirited Generativity: “Two-thirds of my life is gone, and I don’t want to do anything now that doesn’t feed my spirit. I haven’t for a long time. Anytime I’ve tried to, it has never worked out.” Energized by the Generativity of Spirit we soar upward, like Icarus. We reach the highest point in our career, the highest point of status and influence in our

communities. We know that our generative initiatives have made a difference. We are in danger of the seduction of power and narcissistic concern for personal recognition. We may find ourselves framing out world in a dualistic frame (as we identified in one of our early essays). Everything gets framed as right and wrong, good and bad. Coming out of a position of power and influence, we may foolishly think that we have “discovered” truth, when in fact we simply have the status and power to define what truth is and how it will be judged in our family, organization or community. In the movie, *Network*, Paddy Chayefsky offers a penetrating analysis of contemporary corporate life and communications. He portrays a world in which those in power primarily define the truth. These powerful figures are predominantly white males.

Yet, Chayefsky also notes that the new power elite is increasingly likely to come from non-western nations (in particular, oil-rich countries). Icarus doesn't soar for long. Chayefsky observes how precarious one's position is at the top, particularly concerning a grasp of the truth. His protagonist, Howard Beale, struggles throughout the movie with what truth really is and how easily it is manufactured. Beale encourages all people to stand up against the manufactured truth, yet seems always to be swayed left and right to different versions of the reality that are presented to him by other powerful men and very masculine women—in particular the Faye Dunaway character.

In postmodern terms, the “grand narrative” has collapsed, and along with this collapse comes the challenge of lost or abandoned spirit. The widely accepted, abiding truths in our society are no longer viable and there is nothing to replace them. Like Howard Beale, we are all left in a vacuum and look in vain for a solid source of truth. As mature men and women we are particularly vulnerable to this collapse of the grand narrative. We have reached the highest point in our career only to discover, as did Howard Beale, that those truths which do seem to endure are ugly. They are based in ego and greed rather than in any sense of rationality or community welfare.

Freedom, Power and Spirit

Later mid-life men and women often discover in addition that they have exchanged their freedom for the achievement of high social status and power. George Orwell (2009) writes of this tradeoff in his short story, *Shooting an Elephant*. The esteemed and powerful white leader of an Indian village, during the years of the British Empire, must kill a rogue elephant that is threatening the villagers. He hates the idea

of killing this magnificent beast. Yet because he is at the top of the social order in this village, he finds himself walking down a path preparing to shoot the elephant. At this moment, the white male leader discovers that he has traded his freedom (to say “no” in this instance) for social status and power.

One of our Sage leaders offers insights about this shift in perspective that results not from serving as the leader in an Indian village, but from recognizing that he finds the greatest generative gratification in engaging activities of a much humbler and less "spirited" nature:

I have only been on one board here in Nevada County for which I eventually became president. That is Sierra Writers, and I have chaired the non-fiction critique group for about ten years. I also enjoy doing specific projects for a variety of non-profits here: ushering for Music in the Mountains, collecting tickets, writing newspaper articles, painting or preparing food for workers at Habitat, working at the church fair-booth, and assisting at the Food Bank on occasion. I am also quite involved in the Sage Leadership Project. I like working alongside people now more than heading up any organization, paid or not. I got tired of committee meetings and bureaucracy.

This may be one of the most important truths that mid-life men and women must learn as they engage in Generativity. We gain power in exchange for freedom. We find spirit but it is a constrained spirit. We seek out positions of formal influence, only to find that we aren't really making much of a difference in the world. Ironically, it seems that we must often defy (or at least step outside of) the system that got us to the top in the first place to confront and alter this truth. This is one of Chayefsky's most haunting images in *Network*. We witness Howard Beale, a man in later mid-life, go mad and become “madder than hell,” as a way of discovering his own freedom.

At other times, men and women find in later midlife that they have lost all truths as a result of social revolution or massive technological change. They are left without any foundation. One of us worked in and wrote about women and men living in Estonia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. (Bergquist and Weiss, 1994) Many of the men, and some of the women, seemed to be wandering around in a haze. They lost their ideology or their base of opposition to the dominant ideology. Now what do they do? Where do their abstract thinking and their spirit find a new home? Most of the Estonian women were able to adjust. They were accustomed to “making-do”, to adjusting, to living everyday life. The

revolution did not really change their routines. The revolution only changed the ideology. With the collapse of the “grand narrative” in Western culture, we may similarly find our colleagues, and perhaps ourselves, wandering about, unable to find a new source of spirit and guidance.

At the highest point in our career (maximum ego inflation and ego gratification) we are likely to fall from grace like Icarus, even if we don't go “mad” like Howard Beale and seek out freedom. We fall from grace precisely because our success breeds envy and power plays. Our age suggests vulnerability to other people. They assume that we are now on our way “out”—or soon will be—or we have already departed and like the Jack Nicholson character in *About Schmidt* find that our carefully prepared recommendations and succession plans have been thrown in the garbage by our successors. Our long tenure in the organization may breed impatience among those who are younger and waiting their turn to take over. We may even come to realize, painfully, that our own egos and our own internal demons (unattended voices) breed mistakes, miscalculations, and a failure to grasp reality. Like Icarus, we fall back to Earth. We are forced to grovel and return to the mundane.