

Deep Caring XXXIII: The Origins of Generativity in the Soul

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While Generativity of the Spirit is primarily concerned with accomplishment and agency, Generativity of the Soul concerns connection and communion. It concerns discovery of that about which we *truly and deeply care*. If Kotre is correct in suggesting that the primary motive behind the generative impulse is a desire to live beyond ourselves, then is the search for soul essentially a quest for some form of immortality? Living in a secular world, is generativity and deep caring the way in which we continue, in some way, to live beyond our death? Generativity resides "on stage" throughout our adult life, but it becomes more powerful and more often at center stage as we grow older. The allure of generativity might increase as we grow older precisely because we come to realize that most of our life lies behind us rather than ahead. We are facing what Rudolph Otto (1923) calls the "numinous": a great chasm that is devoid of all meaning and that resides at the end of life. We have a strong desire to live somehow beyond our current self and to fill this chasm with generative accomplishments and a lingering memory of good will among those who outlive us.

Generativity of the Soul

In *Its a Wonderful World*, George needed to attend first to his crisis of the spirit. He needed to address his concern about not being a success in life and about facing the challenge of financial insolvency. Then at the end of the movie, he could attend to his soul, which was so powerfully represented in the Capra myth of hearth, home and the fabled Christmases of bygone years. George didn't just want to be remembered after his death as a good and decent man; he wanted to live at the moment, while still very much alive, in a state of generative rebirth. O'Donohue (2004) states this truth in a similar manner:

The primal energy of our soul holds a wonderful warmth and welcome for us. One of the reasons we were sent onto the earth was to make this connection with ourselves, this inner friendship. The demons will haunt us if we remain afraid. All the classical mythical adventures externalize the demons. In battle with them, the hero always grows, ascending to new levels of creative and poise. Each inner demon holds a precious blessing that will heal and free you.

In his masterful analysis of generativity, McAdams might be inclined to identify George Bailey's story as a narrative of redemption. It seems that generativity is, at the very least, an effort to somehow redeem our own life as we come toward the end of it. In his own assessment of late life developmental challenges (as illustrated in the movie, *Wild Strawberries*), Erik Erikson (Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick, 1986) writes about the need for each of us to forgive ourselves for the mistakes we have inevitably made in our life. McAdams similarly writes about forgiveness (redemption) and aligns this forgiveness and redemption with the psychological and spiritual pull toward generativity (McAdams and Logan, 2004, p. 25):

What is the connection between redemption and generativity? First, some adults see their own generativity efforts as explicit attempts to redeem their own lives. . . . Second, generativity itself entails an implicit understanding of human redemption. The hard work that the highly generative adult displays in his or her efforts to promote the well-being of future generations may entail a good deal of pain, suffering, and sacrifice. But the hardships of today may pay off in the future. Sense of sacrifice and hard work, therefore, may lead to scenes of blessing and reward -- a redemption sequence of sorts. (McAdams and Logan, 2004, p. 26)

A similar perspective is offered by Yamada:

I suggest that generativity concerns not only future generations for which we cannot care directly. It seems to me that generativity should be interpreted as an intergenerational life cycle or in an even broader sense as a spiritual life cycle implying continuity of life that stretches both forward and backward. I do not mean that we should accept the existence of the soul, the spirit, reincarnation, or an afterlife. Rather, I think that we should acknowledge the question of afterlife may be a universal dilemma for all of humankind. . . . A redefined generativity responds to humankind's deepest need for the succession of life by acknowledging the continuity of life, death and rebirth. (Yamada, 2004, p. 109)

Soulful Reflection and Reevaluation

Several years ago, an article in a local paper appeared regarding a man who formerly was a major league baseball manager. He was now living in Maine. The ex-manager talked about going fishing each day and babysitting his granddaughter. He was not sure whether he would like another tour in leading a major league team. In our ego deflation of later mid-life, we are forced to deal with the soul, the

feminine, and the loss of status and pride. We learn to find gratification in the mundane and every-day. The wife of a colleague of ours, who went through his own traumatic ego-deflation, having been deposed as president of a major nonprofit organization, speaks about how wonderful it is to see her husband tend his garden every morning before listening to his phone messages. He similarly acknowledges the important lessons he is learning about himself through his gardening.

One of our Sage leaders had the following to say about his own transformation into soul-full Generativity:

After my own fall from grace [as the leader of an educational institution], I tended my ailing mother, cooked meals when I was alone as well as with my wife, did yard work and composting, and took time to write lyrics and poems. I let my hours of sleep be dictated by the sun rather than a watch. I spent considerable time at my cottage, which is a very feminine and soulful place. I also spent special time with women who have served as my guides. All of this relates directly to my own personal soul work.

A wounded adult is often someone who has fallen from grace or has never attained the heights of which she dreamed. If she remains wounded, she will go on to wound her sons and daughters as well as society, especially if she remains in a position of leadership. King Lear is a man gone mad as a result of confrontation with fearsome male forces and a turning to the soul. He soars to the height of his power. He flaunts his power, inflates his own ego, then falls and goes mad. Jane Smiley (2003) rewrites the Lear story from a female perspective in *A Thousand Acres*. The father in Smiley's novel is playing games of power, while his children are dying.

How many stories concerning the fall from grace do we find among political figures in Washington, DC? How many sad stories of ego inflation and deflation come from inside the Washington Beltway? Other people around these powerful men and women helped elevate them and inflated their egos. These assistants and loyalists also protected these powerful figures from the real world. Ironically, these aides have often helped bring their bosses back down to earth. They have exposed them, shifted loyalties, and misinterpreted their aspirations and plans to their subordinates or the media. These powerful women and men inside the Washington Beltway must confront their own reality and madness in order to begin the journey inward toward the soul.