



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

I am what survives me

Clay Nelson © 10 November 2019

I once had a rabbi friend who summarised life for me: “We spend the first half of our life accumulating stuff and the second half getting rid of it.” Well, one of the benefits of immigrating to a new country in my mid-fifties was getting rid of a lot of stuff well ahead of schedule. However, there were a few things I couldn’t let go of yet. One was a blown glass frog that is a work of art and the other is a large Wedgewood serving plate. While they are both beautiful and valuable, that is not why they now reside in New Zealand. They belonged to sisters. The plate was treasured by my maternal grandmother Flora Mae (AKA Granny) and the frog by my great aunt Velma Amanda (AKA Auntie).

No two sisters could have been more different, in spite of growing up together on a farm in southern Illinois with five older brothers and their father, a Southern Baptist preacher. Granny fancied herself to be a lady who would scream at the sight of a mouse. She would put on a girdle and wear white gloves to walk two blocks to the bakery for a loaf of bread. It was only after those rare occasions when she had a second martini that her prim pretensions were blown by our enticing her to sing bawdy songs learned in her youth working as a waitress in Chicago. Her joys in life were keeping her home immaculate, baking, and throwing dinner parties for family and friends. She was a marvellous cook.

Auntie had no illusions of being a lady. If she could cook I couldn’t testify to it. Breakfast with her consisted of store-bought oatmeal and raisin cookies dunked in coffee. She was 100% tomboy and very independent. She looked at life with considerable amusement. She started a business in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco. That’s where the hippies congregated in the 60s. She sold second hand children’s clothing on consignment. It wasn’t a particularly safe part of town because of drug use. When someone came into the store to rob her at gun point, she took out a tiny two shot derringer and told him to get out, telling him that she had not been selling children’s clothing and toys for twenty years not to know a toy gun when she saw one. He wisely left. One other thing ... she kept a pet rat in her apartment, I think mostly to annoy her sister.

While I only saw them during our twice-a-year visits to San Francisco, they both left indelible marks on me. I adored them both. The frog and plate have not yet been passed on to my children because the frog and plate are tangible evidence of what survives them in who I am. They are also talismans to remind me to consider in quiet moments of self-reflection how I might be remembered by those who survive me. What will be my legacy? I confess being more troubled by the idea of being forgotten than by death. I live in the hope that my life will be a positive influence on the future.

I don’t think I’m alone in those feelings, which brings me to the crux of today’s sermon. Before going to seminary, I got a masters degree that prepared me for a career in higher education. It focused on human and community development. It was at that time I first encountered the ideas of psychologist Erik Erikson, a student of Anna Freud and author of an influential theory of the Life Cycle, which posits that we go through a series of eight stages from infancy to old age. According to Erikson, at each stage of life, everyone will face a crisis which they must successfully resolve in order to develop the psychological quality central to that stage and necessary to move with authority to the next stage of life.

Here is a quick summary of those stages:

Trust vs Mistrust

From birth to 12 months of age, infants must learn that adults can be trusted. This occurs when adults meet a child's basic needs for survival. Infants are dependent upon their caregivers, so caregivers who are responsive and sensitive to their infant's needs help their baby to develop a sense of trust; their baby will see the world as a safe, predictable place. Unresponsive caregivers who do not meet their baby's needs can engender feelings of anxiety, fear, and mistrust.

Autonomy vs Doubt and Shame

As toddlers (ages 1–3 years) begin to explore their world, they learn that they can control their actions and act on their environment to get results. They begin to show clear preferences for certain elements of the environment, such as food, toys, and clothing. A toddler's main task is to resolve the issue of autonomy vs shame and doubt by working to establish independence. This is the "me do it" stage. If denied the opportunity to act on her environment, she may begin to doubt her abilities, which could lead to low self-esteem and feelings of shame.

Initiative vs Guilt

Once children reach the preschool stage (ages 3–6 years), they are capable of initiating activities and asserting control over their world through social interactions and play. Preschool children must resolve the task of initiative vs guilt. By learning to plan and achieve goals while interacting with others, preschool children can master this task. Initiative occurs when parents allow a child to explore and support the child's choice. These children will develop self-confidence and feel a sense of purpose. Those who are unsuccessful at this stage — with their initiative misfiring or being stifled by over-controlling parents — may develop feelings of guilt.

Industry vs Inferiority

During the primary school stage (ages 6–12), children face the task of industry vs inferiority. Children begin to compare themselves with their peers to see how they measure up. They either develop a sense of pride and accomplishment in their schoolwork, sports, social activities, and family life, or they feel inferior and inadequate because they feel that they don't measure up. If children do not learn to get along with others or have negative experiences at home or with peers, an inferiority complex might develop into adolescence and adulthood.

Identity vs Role Confusion

In adolescence (ages 12–18), children face the task of identity vs role confusion. An adolescent's main task is developing a sense of self. Adolescents struggle with questions such as "Who am I?" and "What do I want to do with my life?" Along the way, most adolescents try on many different selves to see which ones fit; they explore various roles and ideas, set goals, and attempt to discover their "adult" selves. Adolescents who are successful at this stage have a strong sense of identity and are able to remain true to their beliefs and values in the face of problems and other people's perspectives. When adolescents are apathetic or are pressured to conform to their parents' ideas for the future, they may develop a weak sense of self and experience role confusion. They will be unsure of their identity and confused about the future.

Intimacy vs Isolation

People in early adulthood (20s through early 40s) are concerned with intimacy vs isolation. After we have developed a sense of self in adolescence, we are ready to share our life with others. However, if other stages have not been successfully resolved, young adults may have trouble developing and maintaining successful relationships with others. We must have a strong sense of self before we can develop successful intimate relationships. Adults who do not develop a positive self-concept in adolescence may experience feelings of loneliness and emotional isolation.

Generativity vs Stagnation

When people reach their 40s, they enter the time known as middle adulthood, which extends to the mid-60s. The social task of middle adulthood is generativity vs stagnation. Generativity involves finding your life's work and contributing to the development of others through activities such as

volunteering, mentoring, and raising children. During this stage, middle-aged adults begin contributing to the next generation, often through childbirth and caring for others; they also engage in meaningful and productive work which contributes positively to society. Those who do not master this task may experience stagnation and feel as though they are not leaving a mark on the world in a meaningful way; they may have little connection with others and little interest in productivity and self-improvement.

Integrity vs Despair

From the mid-60s to the end of life, we are in the period of development known as late adulthood. My task according to Erikson is called integrity vs despair. He said that people in late adulthood reflect on their lives and feel either a sense of satisfaction or a sense of failure. People who feel proud of their accomplishments feel a sense of integrity, and they can look back on their lives with few regrets. However, people who are not successful at this stage may feel as if their life has been wasted. They focus on what “would have,” “should have,” and “could have” been. They face the end of their lives with feelings of bitterness, depression, and despair.

I confess, I am a little uncomfortable with some of the elements of Erikson’s paradigm. I find it a little too orderly and perhaps overly simplistic (look, some days I may be full of care, and others I may be full of self-absorption; some days I waver between the two by the hour!) And the implication is that people have comparable life spans and circumstances — the theory, in general, does not account for socioeconomic factors or even health factors that require some people to, for lack of a better term, grow up too soon.

But still, since I first encountered this theory — when I was back in the early years of stage six — I have returned to it again and again as a fine reference point for what we deal with as we become ourselves. And I have been most intrigued by and drawn to the seventh stage of the life cycle, in which the individual must face down the tension between succumbing to a life of stagnation or committing to a life of generativity and, if successfully generative, acquiring the essential corresponding virtue, care, itself both a noun and a verb.

I love the word “generativity”! It’s a word that encapsulates the complexity of our responsibility to be spawned from a previous generation, connected to a contemporary generation, while working for a future generation. Like the related words, generate, generation and generosity, generativity conjures notions of proliferation, progeny, magnanimity, creation.

Of all the stages of adulthood, this one requires us to ask ourselves “what will we do, what can we generate, ultimately how will we be generous toward today’s children and for future generations?” And how we respond to those questions is an answer to what Erikson poses as the unsettling central existential question of this stage, “Can I make my life count?” It’s a challenge. . . a rally cry, really! Exciting, energising, hopeful!

But, full disclosure, I have also felt the pull of stagnation, the weariness and weight of life. It isn’t easy, especially if we see people treating other human beings with disdain and oppression and indifference, a world in which we ourselves may be treated with disdain and oppression and indifference. It’s easy in such a world to feel that nothing we do matters, to feel defeated or mean or hopeless, to turn inward rather than outward.

Really, though, we don’t need a psychologist to tell us that one of the lessons of adulthood is the realisation that what we do (or don’t do!) matters to more than just ourselves. Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing knew it nearly 200 years ago: “Others are affected by what I am, and say, and do. So that a single act of mine may spread and spread in widening circles, through a nation or humanity. Through my vice I intensify the taint of vice throughout the universe. Through my misery I make multitudes sad. On the other hand, every development of my virtue makes me an ampler blessing to my race. Every new truth that I gain makes me a brighter light to humanity.”

So what grace and honour and responsibility comes with this realisation? To become a “brighter light to humanity,” requires what Erikson calls a “a belief in the species,” a sense that “human beings are potentially good, and human life can be good”. Such determination allows us to “forge ahead, regardless of the sadness and suffering that is bound to occur”.

In other words, as symbolised by a frog and a plate, I have learned that we have the power and love and the innate obligation to make goodness prevail, long after we’re gone. I am what survives me.

So, while stagnation results in decay, futility, immobility, detachment; in generativity we find and create both power and love for others; what we generate becomes a legacy of self, and we care for that legacy selflessly. I am what survives me.

At times, though, we might feel like we are in a rut, might even determine that our generative plans have gone off the rails. Just ask George Bailey.

Watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*, is a Christmas-time must for me, for good reason. Our hero, George Bailey, is suffering through the crisis of stagnation versus generativity. He had always dreamed big dreams — traveling to exotic lands, building “skyscrapers a hundred stories high” and “bridges a mile long.” Indeed, his intention was for those things to be his legacy. But we know how the story goes — George never does shake “the dust of this crummy little town off his feet”; and in his despair, he fails to see the love or even the power he has generated, right there in Bedford Falls. But then Clarence the Angel (Second Class) helps George understand that he has been generative all along. You know the famous quote (maybe the 2nd most famous quote) of the movie: “Strange, isn’t it? Each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?”

As this story shows, we learn to be generative from those before us, unaware, to varying degrees, that what they did mattered in such resounding and essential ways.

I suspect a lot of people in this sanctuary are similarly naive to the powerful ways they’ve mattered. The most generative people are those who not only imagine a healthy, loving world for their children, but for all children, because these children are bound to be generative adults, if we care to show them how.

So, the question today is this: What might you do to reflect your life’s purpose and values, what might assure and ensure coming generations of a better, stronger, lovelier world? What will survive you? Let’s leave the best of us behind in word, in deed, and when we can, in things that spring forth from our care, for what survives us offers future generations the best lesson of all: the humble and loving and joyful acknowledgment that we are all connected through space and time.

Remember the words of Greek statesman and orator, Pericles: “What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.”