Generativity and the Gift of Meaning

By John Kotre

> *Life must be handed on.*

There is a fairy tale from India that captures much of what I have learned in the past two decades about the concept of "generativity." *Generativity* is a word coined by the eminent psychoanalyst Erik Erikson in 1950 to describe a concern for future generations. In the course of writing several books on the subject, I have come to see generativity as a desire to be fertile in the broadest sense of the term, a desire to make one's life count. Because of the "age wave" that is now bearing down upon us, I also see generativity as an idea whose time has come. What meaning will increasing numbers of elderly people see in their later years? What is the purpose of this time of life?

"The Gift"—so I've renamed the fairy tale—is not a story for children, but rather for adults, especially those getting on in years. It begins with an old grasscutter named Wali Dad, who comes to the point where he must do something with the pot of pennies he's been accumulating all his life. A simple man, content with his tiny hut, he can think of nothing that he wants for himself, so he goes to a jeweler and buys a golden bracelet. Then he asks a friend who is a merchant, "Who is the most beautiful and virtuous woman in the world?"

"The Princess of the East," says the merchant.

"Then take this bracelet to her. But do not reveal who has sent it." Now, the land of the East is far away, but the merchant agrees to deliver the bracelet on his next trip there. When he arrives and gives the gift to the princess, she is intrigued. Who is her secret admirer, and what sort of man is he? She decides to send a gift in return—some beautiful and expensive rolls of silk. The merchant brings them back to Wali Dad.

"And what am I to do with these?" the old grasscutter asks, for he has no need of them. He thinks about the matter for awhile, and then he says, "Who is the most handsome and virtuous man in the world?"

"That would be the Prince of the West."

"Then take these silks to him."

So the merchant sets off in the opposite direction, travels a great distance, and eventually comes to the land of the West. Naturally, the prince is surprised by the gift and curious about its sender. So he reciprocates with something finer.

"A dozen stallions?" asks Wali Dad when the merchant returns. "What am I to do with a dozen stallions? Take them to the Princess of the East!"

When the horses come prancing into her palace, the princess is at a loss for a response. The king suggests that she end the affair by sending back a gift so magnificent that it will put her secret admirer to shame. They send off twenty mules loaded with silver.

But Wali Dad has no desire for wealth. "Take some of the mules for your trouble," he tells his merchant friend, "and deliver the rest to the Prince of the West!"

And the prince refuses to be outdone. Soon a caravan of camels and elephants weighed down with precious gifts is headed back to Wali Dad's hut. No sooner does it arrive than Wali Dad sends it on to the Princess of the East.

At this point, the king and queen can come to only one conclusion: The mysterious admirer wants to marry their daughter. So they set out with the merchant to find him. As they draw near to Wali Dad's village, the merchant grows troubled. What will this procession of royalty think when they are led at last to a little hut and a withered old man within? He rides ahead and warns Wali Dad of what is imminent. Fearing humiliation, unable to accept what may be required of him, Wali Dad heads that night for a cliff, but cannot even bring himself to jump. He collapses on the ground, enveloped in darkness and despair.

Suddenly, there is a great halo of light that grows brighter and brighter. Two angelic beings appear. One touches Wali Dad's clothes, and they turn into elegant robes. The other touches his hut, and it turns into a palace. The next morning Wali Dad receives the king and queen, the princess, and their entire entourage. In the middle of a sumptuous feast, the king gives his enthusiastic consent to his daughter's marriage.

"Alas," says Wali Dad. "As you can see, I am too old to marry. But I know someone who would make a perfect husband for your daughter." He summons the Prince of the West, and soon the prince and princess fall in love. They marry in Wali Dad's palace, and the families celebrate for days and days. When it's time for everyone to return home, the king and queen, the prince and the princess, and thousands of their flag bearers salute Wali Dad, who salutes them back with a handful of grass he has cut that very morning. It is the sweetest and freshest grass he has ever smelled.

WALI DAD'S GENERATIVITY

If you look at this simple and even humorous tale through the lens of generativity, you will see it open up with meaning. A man does his bit in the grand scheme of things, and in no time at all his tiny gesture multiplies in significance. It happens the way a butterfly's wings change the weather, or the way the Gospel's mustard seed grows: "It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air can come and shelter in its branches." Wali Dad's golden bracelet, the fruit of his life, grows like that mustard seed. Sown in just the right place, it becomes rolls of silk, then a dozen horses, then twenty mules loaded with silver, then a caravan of camels and elephants bearing precious gifts. It leads to the union of a princess and a prince, of the far ends of the earth. Wali Dad's story says that our meager efforts can produce results rich in significance.

What has led, in his case, to such an outcome? Consider the royal procession in the story—king and queen, prince and princess, thousands and thousands of attendants—and think of it as symbolic of the grand procession of life in which we all momentarily take part. Wali Dad is near the end of his individual life, and he reflects: What have all my pennies and all my years added up to? What difference have they made? Now he distills the essence of who he has been. All that cannot be refined into gold is forgotten—all the guilt, all the regret, all the waste, all the anger and bitterness, all the lingering pain. And the resulting bracelet is invested wisely, at that point in life where it will bear the most fruit. It is given to the prince and princess, who stand for the power of life yet to be. But they cannot activate that power on their own. It takes someone who has gone before to provide a spark, and the spark that Wali Dad provides is nothing more or less than the substance of his life.

Wali Dad's wisdom about where to invest stems from his acceptance of his own place in the life cycle, an acceptance Erikson called "ego-integrity." Wali Dad is content with his life's work and with the house he has lived in. He

does not wish to be young again. When he despairs, it is because he fears that he will have to step out of his place in the procession of life, lose the simplicity of his station, and be something he is not—a husband to a young princess. When the angels touch and transform him, they do not give him a new nature but rather reveal his true nature. His virtue is indeed royal, his home a castle, and now that is clear to everyone, Wali Dad included. At the end of the story, Wali Dad is what he has always been, a humble grasscutter, but that identity seems sweeter and fresher than ever. His acceptance of his place in life is the source of his wisdom and generativity; and life, which is about to leave him, pays him tribute for it.

Wali Dad's acceptance is also the source of a clear ethic, the details of which are easily drawn from his story. To be generative, "The Gift" tells us, we have to think and act in certain ways. We have to answer a call. We have to give away our pot of pennies. We have to unite the ends of the earth. We have to step aside. And through it all we must have faith in the great procession of life.

Let us look at each of these in turn.

Answer the Call

The story of Wali Dad is set in motion when he takes his life savings and buys a golden bracelet. It begins with an initiative of his. But the critical point occurs when the initiative is with someone else. King, queen, and princess come with their entourage to his doorstep. They call, and he must respond.

If one wishes, as I do, to promote a generative ethic, it is important to validate the scene at Wali Dad's door. In this century, psychoanalysis and psychology have combined to undermine the authenticity of demands "from the outside," psychoanalysis with its reduction of the ethical imperative to the voice of a tyrannical superego, psychology with its idealization of self-actualization and self-fulfillment and with research in which the dependent variable (and so the ethical good) is "subjective well-being." Recent research on generativity, however, is leading psychology to reconsider the validity of life's claims *upon us*. If we are to be generative, this research is hinting, we must acknowledge that life has every right to come knocking at our door, every right to summon us, whether or not the summons brings self-esteem, self-actualization, or self-fulfillment.

When I say, "Answer the call," I am not speaking of being "on call," a phrase that describes the state of bottom-line responsibility that is left behind as one moves beyond middle age. Nor am I speaking of calls as great as those received by a Moses or a Mohammed. "Answering a call" refers to what a 60-year-old woman, just retired, said of the volunteer work she was beginning to do at a hospice: "There are so many needs, you see? I could very well join a bridge club, but I feel that this is what God wants me to do." It refers to what an 82-year-old woodworker meant when he said there were "things to do in this world that are necessary." To him, creating beauty—the kind only *he* could create—was necessary. In these cases, there is identity in generativity, which one does not experience when merely being "on call."

When Wali Dad received his call, he was terrified, and there is a message here as well. Like him, we may feel inadequate to our summons. But what happened to Wali Dad on the edge of a dark precipice can happen to us too. Our "higher" nature, symbolized by the angels in Wali Dad's story, can take over. We can rise to the occasion, discovering within ourselves resources we never knew we possessed, bringing about what we could not have dreamed of had we simply been mere seekers of self-fulfillment. A call can get us up in the morning when self-fulfillment lets us sleep as late as we like.

Give Away the Pennies

A second moral may be drawn from the story of Wali Dad by looking into the nature of the wealth he gives away. In most tales of this type, the hero finds a treasure ready-made or receives it from a mysterious stranger. But Wali Dad comes by his wealth "the old-fashioned way," as the television commercial says. He earns it, each and every penny. What does this kind of treasure represent?

Let us begin literally, interpreting the money as, well, money. This interpretation is especially relevant today, when many in the forefront of the age wave are doing so well financially, and when children, in general, are not. Wali Dad

may have been saving his money for a rainy day, but that day never came, and now there is nothing he wants to buy. He does not believe he is "entitled" to what he has earned, nor does he feel guilty about having it when others do not. The point is that he does not cling to it. He invests it in people and in life. Most of us would dispose of such resources in a will, but Wali Dad gives his gift well before a will would take effect. Doing so enables him to see the outcome of his actions and to reap the inner benefits of the giving.

Wali Dad is selective, very selective, about where to invest his small fortune. He seeks out two people among all the earth's inhabitants who possess special qualities. They are *virtuous*, and if this story provides guidelines for our giving, it tells us to be very judicious about it. It tells us to not be taken in by appearances in the young but rather to see through their deceptions. The people Wali Dad chooses are also *virginal*, a prince and princess, not a king and queen. So if our giving is to be generative, and not merely altruistic, it will bypass what is well established for what is coming into being. The prince and princess are likewise *vigorous*. They have energy as well as potential. They possess the power to multiply Wali Dad's investment. Not all of our giving, financial or otherwise, will follow this model, but that which is generative would do well to consider it.

But Wali Dad has accumulated more than material wealth, and so we must look deeper into his pot of pennies. In one sense, the pennies represent his hard-earned experiences, and in the story every one of them bears fruit. Wali Dad's treasure was collected in his hut, it reveals his history, it reflects his identity. So all of *him* becomes gold. This is the ideal that inspires generativity, especially near the end of life, though we know that the generative process entails far more waste than this fairy tale acknowledges.

In another sense, and at its deepest level, Wali Dad's action contains a moral for people of every age. "Give away the treasure" is not an ethical command but rather a formula for the regulation of the life we feel within us. If we try to cap that life, the story tells us, we will get no more. "You've got to give it away to keep it," says a motto from Alcoholics Anonymous. "The more you give, the more you've got to give." Even though Wali Dad earned every one of his pennies, he treated them as if he had received them from a stranger. By emptying himself, he created the space to receive more.

Unite the Ends of the Earth

Wali Dad's generativity is clearly "grand." He has come to the point in life where he no longer wants bottom-line responsibility, so he puts it in the hands of someone else, a younger man who travels from East to West and handles the increasingly complex process of gift giving. In this regard, Wali Dad acts more like a grandparent than a parent.

But Wali Dad's generativity is "grand" in another and more important sense. It is global in scope, uniting the far ends of the earth. The Princess of the East and the Prince of the West could not have been more different, coming from such distances as they did. They must have been of different "races," but they were essentially alike, both virtuous. It is interesting that we hear nothing of Wali Dad's own children in the story. Was he married? Did he have any children? The questions are irrelevant because he has overridden his "selfish" genes, overcome the "pseudospeciation" that Erikson warned against and identified with humanity as a whole. It is a realistic identification: In the midst of controversies about genetic differences, it is well to remember that over 99 percent of human DNA is identical. Not similar, but identical—exact copies carried by you and me and anyone on earth we can think of.

Early in the twenty-first century, when the human genome is completely mapped, we will know in finer detail just how identical we all are. We may realize that we are all descended from a few common ancestors. Scientists will be working on similar maps of other species, both plants and animals. When we lay the maps side by side, we will see a new story emerge about the interconnectedness of all life forms. We will be able to compare the genetic record, the one we carry in our bodies, with the fossil record, the one the earth carries. Then we shall see more clearly and "remember" more accurately the history of life on our planet.

As the world gets smaller, its economies more interdependent, its communication faster and farther-reaching, the far ends of the earth are coming to our doorstep, as they did to Wali Dad's. Generativity cannot ignore their arrival. When you choose your generative acts, "The Gift" says, keep the global dimension in mind. Be highly selective, but make at least one of your efforts grand.

Step Aside

Did you notice what Wali Dad did on the story's final morning? When the wedding and celebration were over, when everything was said and done, he went back to work. He cut some grass, plying his trade to the very end. No "retirement" for him.

But that detail is incidental to the story as a whole. In "The Gift," Wali Dad's crisis comes when he thinks he will have to marry the princess and become a king, for he is clearly too old to do either. His crisis is resolved when he gains the resources to rise to one great generative moment. Once that moment has passed, however, Wali Dad's natural instincts take over. He steps aside, saying goodbye to the royal procession of life.

One of the unexplored but increasingly important characteristics of generativity is this willingness to step aside. How does one make way for the next generation in an era of unprecedented longevity? These days, stepping aside might mean leaving positions of command in the world of work. This action was not difficult for Wali Dad—he feared, in fact, that he would have to return to the mainstream—but it may be for us. We fear being overthrown by the next generation, being put aside in a corporate "downsizing," say, before we are ready. We fear not being cared for in our waning years. Greed, too, is involved, not only the financial greed that makes us overstay our years in a high-paying job or resist a reconsideration of government entitlements, but also the greed for life, for the extra year or two that extraordinary medicine might bestow. (The cost of those extra years may very well compromise medical care for the young: nearly a third of U.S. Medicare spending in 1998 was for patients in their last year of life [Califano, 1998].) A recent survey found that 89 percent of Americans supported the idea of a living will that would preclude such treatment; it also found that only 9 percent actually had such a will (Peterson, 1996). Drafting one can be generative in the most profound sense of all. As Erikson wrote long ago, "Healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death" (Erikson, 1963).

This article is not the place to discuss the complex ethical issues involved in making way for the next generation, whether at the time of leaving a job or the time of dying, but it is the place to suggest that Wali Dad's is the spirit in which any decision about stepping aside should be made. The point of his story is that clinging to life will keep us from life. This is true all throughout adulthood, but especially at its end, when one must finally yield to the inevitable succession of generations.

Have Faith in the Procession of Life

All of these difficult requirements of generativity—answering the call, giving away our treasure, uniting the ends of the earth, stepping aside—make no sense unless one trusts in the procession of life that is symbolized in "The Gift" by the royal entourage. For a few decisive moments, Wali Dad takes part in this procession, and then it leaves him behind. But his faith in it never wavers. How else could he give his gift with anonymity? How else could he be so peaceful at story's end? When Erikson (1963) speculated on reasons for adult failures in generativity, he included "the lack of some faith, [of] some 'belief in the species,' which would make a child appear to be a welcome trust of the community." While it takes great faith to bring a child into the world, Wali Dad's faith is greater, for he puts his resources into someone else's children and through them into something as broad and communal as life itself.

The faith that underwrites generativity is faith in Life, and not in any individual life. It's Life with a capital *L*, because it transcends particular life forms. To one person that Life may be God, to another it may be nature, to a third it may be the enduring value of science, to a fourth it may be something else again. But unless our object of faith is transcendent, unless it came before us and survives our death, it cannot sup-

port generativity. Without such an object of faith, you cannot commit years of your life to an uncertain project or even complete the small piece of it that must be done each day. Nor can you release it into a threatening world or trust in its unseen fate.

Is this faith a "requirement" for generativity? Even though I have been speaking of it as such, it is more a description of the kind of thoughts that generative people have quite naturally. It is the conscious side of their unconscious life. It is what happens in their heads when life flows in and out of their hearts. Is the faith illusory? If it is, I have but one reply: Put it in the drinking water. That faith is what enables people to make the transition from Me to Beyond Me.

Will the growing number of people in the second half of life—will any sizable number of us—be able to make this transition? Will we be able to see our moral status as more than that of bearers of entitlements? I have no way of anticipating what will happen in the future; but if "The Gift" has a message, it is this: Wali Dad's pot of pennies was never his in the first place. Nor was our pot of pennies ever our own. We received those resources from Life; and, one way or another, we must return them to Life. That is the meaning of Wali Dad's story, and that is the meaning of generativity—an idea whose time has come. ☙

John Kotre, Ph.D., is professor, Department of Behavioral Sciences-Psychology, University of Michigan, Dearborn.

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Note

1. "The Gift" is a condensation and adaptation of "Story of Wali Dad The Simple-Hearted," in A. Lang, ed., *The Brown Fairy Book* (London: Longmans, Green, 1904). It was called to my attention by Allan Chinen in *In the Ever After* (Wilmette, Ill.: Chiron, 1989). Chinen called his version "The Simple Grasscutter."

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Suggestions for Further Reading

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