

It's Midlife: Who Is Your Charioteer?

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So what do Lester Burnham, the lead character in the film *American Beauty* and the song “You Are The New Day” have in common? They are dissonant, but they share the challenge of adulthood: generativity versus stagnation. What do I mean, generativity versus stagnation? According to the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, there are eight stages of psychological crisis in life. Many of them happen when we’re actually quite young. Each stage presents a dilemma. The seventh stage, the one we are focusing on today, is generativity versus stagnation, and this is the challenge of adulthood. This stage spans 40 years or more, from the late 30’s through the 70’s. It is by far the longest stage in his theory.

And I do say theory, because some of you, I can see scowling immediately. I’m proposing a theory. What if it’s not fact? What I might suggest to you is that you apply this theory loosely, and take what you will, whatever might be useful, and just discard the rest; it is, after all, only a theory. You just might be smarter.

According to Joan Erikson, the wife of Erik Erikson

The stage of generativity vs. stagnation claims the longest stretch of time on the chart, thirty years or more, during which one establishes a working commitment and perhaps begins a new family, devoting time and energy to furthering its health and productive life. During this period, work and family relationships confront one with the duties of care taking, and a wide range of obligations and responsibilities, interests and celebrations. When this is satisfactorily cohesive, all can go well and prosper. It’s a wonderful time to be alive, to care for, and be caring, surrounded by those nearest and dearest. It is challenging, exciting at best, though burdensome, if rigid and demanding.

There are many benefits, according to Erikson, of generativity. The main one he lists is procreativity: that is, having children. He also mentions other benefits such as productivity and creativity. According to Erikson, the new virtue acquired from the challenge of generativity versus stagnation is care. That is, caring for people and for ideas, and to him, it’s necessary to develop this care in order to continue to develop as a healthy and fulfilled human being.

There is, however, of course, the challenge of stagnation. We don’t just have seamless and easy adult lives that burst into care all around us. There is the challenge on the other hand, of stagnation. Generativity is not immediate, it is not always granted either, or given, or even when we work for it, achieved.

According to Erikson, if care does not develop, "rejectivity" does instead. Rejectivity is the idea that we must, or should, reject people and groups. He also states that the ritualism of this stage is authoritarianism. He calls this "the ungenerous and ungenerative use of sheer power." What I find interesting is that this combination of rejectivity (rejecting people and groups) and then authority on the other hand (and also you think of people in this stage of life being in positions of authority, being our president, being our judges, being our world leaders, our diplomats, our generals), that this combination of rejectivity and authoritarianism, the two of them together can be deadening. So, this struggle of generativity versus stagnation becomes important not just for our personal lives, but of course, for the sustenance of the world we live in.

I like Erikson's theories, but I do have my own additions and corrections, so I encourage you to also make your own. One thing I think is that as a psychoanalyst, Erikson is overly invested in procreancy as the highest form of generativity, and I find this an irritating trend among the psychoanalysts. They're always interested in sex and sexuality, and that's well and good, but I certainly don't think that having children is necessarily the culmination of an individual life or sexual fulfillment. Procreation is not for everyone; it's not always possible. It is not the only way to regenerate, or even the best way to regenerate. There are many ways to be creative, caring people.

I think it also leads us into the lie of parenthood, which I want to spend a minute upon. I often hear people say that children are the greatest love of all, and I think perhaps what people meant to say, but were too embarrassed to say, is that children are the greatest sacrifice of all, the greatest sacrificial love of all. Let's be honest: children are wonderful. And they will make you young right after they make you very, very old.

I recently received a note from a member on my son's birthday. It said, "Happy Birthday to Adam, and congratulations to Sharon and Peter for making it: surviving, enduring, and enjoying two full years of childhood." I thought that this was a very

honest and realistic letter, and a clear embrace of all that parenthood has to offer. I also couldn't help but bring a book to share with you, a book my brother-in-law got for me. My brother-in-law has no children, but you know all those baby books, such as "Baby's First Year"? He bought me a memory book for modern parents, "Baby's First Tattoo," because the first time I saw it while with him, I laughed so hard I cried. This book includes realistic places for you to fill things out, like, "first time baby refused to eat;" "first time baby sassed back;" "baby's first time out;" "baby's first attack of limp legs;" "baby's first hitting other children;" "baby's first breath-holding;" you get the picture. It's not that parenthood is miserable, it's just that it is a challenge, and it starts as a certain challenge when children are small, and then it increases as they get older. Then there are new obstacles in our paths.

So parenthood and adulthood have challenges. There are some realities of adulthood, as Joan Ericson explains: during this period, work and family relationships confront one another, and there are a widening range of obligations and responsibilities, interests and celebrations. It is challenging, exciting at best, though burdensome if rigid, and demanding. I think it's important to be realistic, not pessimistic but realistic, about adulthood. What about relationships that falter and fail? What about careers that flounder, financial woes, burnout, the dual burdens of caring for aging parents and sometimes challenging children, or health problems. Adulthood is not all doom and gloom but over 40 years, it's just that a few things are going to fall apart.

Offering pastoral care to families and individuals for the last nine years, as well as entering this age range in life myself, I have learned that generativity is elusive, and stagnation is seductive, that resolving the dilemma between generativity and stagnation is perhaps best viewed as a long-distance event. It's a marathon run. I would add that if you are, like so many members of this congregation, in a caring profession – a teacher, a doctor, a therapist, a day care worker, even a police officer – the burdens of professionally caring for others while caring for families can be a challenge. How can we restore ourselves if

we are continually burdened by caring for others? Which does bring us to Lester, and you know how I love Lester. He's such a difficult character, with so much to teach us:

My name is Lester Burnham; this is my neighborhood. This is my street; this is my life. In less than a year I'll be dead, and in a way I'm dead already . . . That's my wife; I get exhausted just watching her. She wasn't always like this; she used to be happy. We used to be happy . . . I feel like I've lost something. I'm not exactly sure what it is, but I know I didn't always feel this . . . sedated. But, you know what? It's never too late to get it back.

Generativity versus stagnation. Now, I'm not recommending that you follow Lester's lead. Lester blackmails his downsizing boss, sexually fantasizes about his daughter's teenage friend, and returns to drug usage. Lester is not, shall we say, a role model. But he has a powerful and real story to share: more real than many of us would be willing to admit. And any one of us, (and at some point all of us), will be overwhelmed by the challenges of adulthood: the expectations, the choices, the needs, the demands. It's 40 years here. It's not all going to go well for 40 years. There's going to be at least one bump: not necessarily as drastic as Lester's, but consumed and overwhelmed all the same.

There's a scene when Lester has this conversation with his wife Carolyn. (And you know, I didn't even remember it from the movie, it didn't come forward to me the first time I read through the screenplay; it was only in preparing for this sermon, and looking at the screenplay again, that this scene really came forward to me.) Lester says to his wife Carolyn, "What happened to that girl who used to fake seizures at frat parties when she got bored? And who used to run up to the roof of our first apartment building to flash the traffic helicopters? Have you totally forgotten about her? Because I haven't." So what happened to that girl or boy, that wild thing? It is a question we will all ask ourselves at some point. Erikson presents an uplift-

ing vision of adulthood, and overall I do think that adulthood can be uplifting. But I just find his interpretation falls short of some realism.

On New Year's Day this past week, I was at a party with some friends, all of us discussing how torn we felt about geography and career, family and community. We didn't think it would be like this when we were younger, that we would be torn by these things. In our 20's we so blithely led exciting lives. We traveled. We got important and difficult degrees. And now here we are: torn, divided. It is so easy to disappear into the challenges of adulthood, to feel sedated, or lost or stunned by the loss. I mean, how many people do you know, who live in well-appointed houses? They did exactly what they were supposed to do: the career, the car, the house, the kids, the spouse. Envied by neighbors, yet inside there is that feeling of sedation. Or how many people do you know who are single parents, just struggling to finish a day? These challenges are not unusual, nor are they without merit, perhaps even nobility.

I mean, I got to thinking about it, and some of the most intriguing and compassionate characters in film and literature face this dilemma: obviously Lester and Carolyn in *American Beauty*. Think of *Out Of Africa* with Meryl Streep as Karen Von Blixen. You know, she's going to go to Africa. She marries this man, he's unfaithful; she's going to catch a sexually transmitted disease from him that makes her unable to have children. But things are going to look up for her because she's going to meet Robert Redford, but even that's not an answer. Because there's going to be some losses there, too: this challenge of adulthood. Think of the film *Thelma and Louise*.

If you like novels, think of the novel "Persuasion" by Jane Austen (you know I love Jane Austen). Think of poor Anne, who's going to come into her own. Think even of this character, the bane of our high school existence, "Ethan Frome." My goodness, why do we read *Ethan Frome*? You English teachers, enlighten me later. It is truly Edith Wharton's least enjoy-

able novel, I think, but oh, poor Ethan! Why is he so sad? As you read the story, you learn why.

I do find Ethan Frome interesting, and actually, many of Wharton's novels; even *The Age of Innocence* has this similar theme of generativity versus stagnation. And Edith Wharton herself is such an interesting story: a woman born in the early 1860's into the upper crust of old New York society. According to the outside she had it all, money and power. She married well. She married that just-right man. She had her children. She also had a nervous breakdown because she was not happy. The Edith Wharton we know, we only know because she had this breakdown. We only know her because she left her husband. We only know her because she published her first book just before turning 40 years old. I think this was her way to regenerate in a society that was crushing to her. And again, there were some fabulous successes: she was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for literature. And yet, there were also some losses.

I think the difficulty is, that as we move into adulthood and then perch here for several more decades, society and our family's reward us for responsible behavior (again, Edith Wharton, marrying the right man). We get rewarded for getting a job that earns money, right? Buying a house; getting married; having kids? But if we are not painfully honest with ourselves, it is so easy to disappear into these expectations. These expectations don't always make room for our hobbies, for personal time, freedom, irresponsible habits like faking seizures, just plain fun, career changes, anything that defies expectation.

I have a friend who left her job as a lawyer and now owns a small pottery company. Her parents and most of her friends were horrified when she first started to talk about making this change. How was she going to pay off her law school loans, which were staggering at over \$60,000? What was she going to do when she lost the status of lawyer and became a potter? Yet, I always wanted her to go for it. She looked absolutely miserable, stuffed into her navy suit and heels everyday. She was like a stuffed chinchilla going out into the workforce; she

was so sad. So she exchanged seven-day workweeks for seven-day workweeks, because she works hard as the owner of a small pottery company, and she has struggled to stay financially sound. But here's the one payout she didn't have as a lawyer: now she's happy. Are we supposed to live out the expectations of our lives without happiness, or can there be some compromise?

Sigmund Freud has this theory (again, take what you will, leave the rest) of total personality. His theory is that the total personality consists of three systems: the id, the ego, and the superego. You're probably somewhat familiar with this. The id is instinctual; it is the source of all human energy, according to Freud, its goal is to increase pleasure and remove pain and tension. The ego is like the CEO of the personality, or should I say, a healthy ego is the CEO: it thinks; it governs the id and superego. It is judicious, it is realistic. The superego is the moral branch: it aims for perfection over reality or pleasure. The superego rewards and punishes, and the superego retains the values of society, which is good, because we don't want to be anti-social. There are times and places not to be wild things.

But as I mentioned earlier, the superego is rewarded by society, family, and friends in adulthood. On the surface, it is easy to believe that the id is all-bad and the superego is all-good. According to Freud, neither is true. A strong ego actually is the healthy goal, the healthier reality. And Freud was not alone. Two thousand years ago the philosopher Plato discerned a similar framework for the soul, and I now quote from *Phaedrus*

Let us compare the soul to a winged charioteer and his team acting together. Now all the horses and the charioteers of the gods are good and come of good stock. But in other beings [that's us] there is a mixture of good and bad. First of all, we must make it plain that the ruling power in us men drives a pair of horses, and next, that one of these horses is fine and good and of noble stock, and the other, the opposite in every way.

So in our case, the task of the charioteer is necessarily a difficult and unpleasant business.

Let me just say, clearly the charioteer is the ego, the superego is the good and noble horse, the id is that other horse. Of course, the best charioteer knows the strengths and weaknesses of both horses. He or she lets both participate; yet lets neither lead over the other. The charioteer always leads. This is necessarily a difficult and unpleasant business. As Plato continues in *Phaedrus*

The teams of the gods which are all well matched and tractable go easily, but the rest [that's us again] with difficulty, for the horse with the vicious nature, if he has not been well-broken in, drags his driver down by throwing his weight in the direction of the earth. Supreme then is the agony of the struggle, which awaits the soul.

Now, of course, I don't agree with the Platonic dualism we're already seeing where the earth is always bad, but I think the mythic metaphor of these horses driven by a charioteer, these horses that are so different, this mythic metaphor is useful. The bad horse, of course, is the id run amuck, dragging the charioteer down. And think of all the things that derail us in adulthood, think of all the addictions of adulthood: the drugs, the alcohol, gambling, sex, shopping. (It's an addiction, folks, or it can be.) And why do we have them? Why is this our outlet? Think of other struggles: think of infidelity, or the inability to keep a job or a relationship. We all know people who couldn't get it together; it was like they just never grew up. The excesses of childhood are now the excesses of adulthood. And that does happen. But this is a real struggle, not just for people who "couldn't grow up." All of us can so easily struggle with something, not just if the horse is well broken in but also if it is not integrated, or if life is hard, or if we get lost. Any of us can flounder, in addiction, infidelity, embezzlement, depression, divorce. We cannot ignore the necessity of the wild horse: it is our life force. Don't lose your wild things! Remember, id

houses all the energy of the human personality; we ignore it at our peril.

So what has happened to Carolyn is that the harmless wildness of her early marriage is channeled more dangerously now, into an affair...and her almost maniacally cruel self-control. And each day in the film, she draws farther away from her family and from herself.

Society will not reward us for even responsibly exercising our id. If you change from a lawyer to a potter you will not be commended, which I do consider a wise ego decision in this person's case. Most of our adult life, we will be rewarded for our superego, for taking that extra carpool, having our front lawn professionally manicured, working overtime. But the cost to the overall person is high, and the id will rebel. So if you must work overtime, if you must have a perfect front lawn, if you must take that extra carpool, you must do something else to honor your personal energy.

I have to tell you this story about this legend in my family. It's about my uncle – we'll call him Paul – who went to a poker party down the street and he got drunk. So drunk, he couldn't drive home. So drunk, he walked home and fell in the front doorway. He passed out in the hallway. His kids had to crawl over him the next day on their way to school. "Why is daddy face down?" His wife was so mad; that's why we still hear the story. For 30 years, we all know what Uncle Paul did that one night when he played poker. And I hear this story about how bad Uncle Paul was, and I think: he went drinking one night. He drank too much. But you know what? He didn't get in his car and drive. He walked home. And I also think to myself, if Uncle Paul maybe had a few more nights out with the boys every year he might not have to go to excess the one night he went out, because by and large, Uncle Paul worked very hard, and was a very caring man who did the best he could.

So every once in a while, I just encourage us, forget your manicured lawn; have some fun, some legal, no one-gets-hurt

fun. Go fishing. Play hooky. Play poker. Be yourself: not perfect, but real. So that when you turn around at 70 or 75, you still recognize yourself, you still know whom you are, and others can still know you.

The charioteer is great only when he or she drives the chariot. So don't exclude your parts; integrate them. Take up, or try an old or new hobby. Try something new. Do something spontaneous. Take a vacation. Let your ego take the id and superego for a spin. Not a splurge; not a bender, not an addictive, destructive binge, but a spin. A tune-up, a time-out, to just be you, in your own way, with all the parts of yourself together. This is the new day.

In *American Beauty*. Lester goes from the depressed superego person to the id out of control. He's a little scary on both ends, actually. But in the end of the film, after several mistakes, he does find his ego. When he is killed in the final minutes of the film, he's actually looking at a picture of his family. And he is something he hasn't been for the entire film. He's happy. As Lester dies, we hear him speak:

Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst, and then I remember...to relax, and stop trying to hold onto it. And then it flows through me like rain, and I can't feel anything but gratitude, for every single moment of my stupid life. You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure, but don't worry; you will someday.

We owe it to ourselves to live the life we were born into. To take the risk to regenerate, until the day we die, to place the ego as our charioteer, to work towards happiness. It just might be wonderful. It just might be fantastic. Happy New Year.

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Our sanctuary brims with history, inviting us to reflection and service.

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Religious Education information is available by calling RE Director Carly Smith at 281-2150.
You may also call the church office at 281-1564.

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