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Growth in Parenting

Why be good and loving parents?¹ Evolutionary psychology gives us one answer. We have been naturally selected to evolve into becoming selfishly unselfish toward our kin. We are biologically driven to selectively care for our children because we blindly want to perpetuate our genetic heritage into the future. Thus, we hear talk of the “selfish gene.” Variations in our genetic makeup coupled with environmental triggers, or their relative absence, can account for the difference in the degree with which parents care for their children. All things being “normal,” parents are instinctively ready to respond to the needs of their children for nourishment, nurturance, safety, security, survival, and, ultimately, self-sufficiency, which will enable them to carry on the generational continuity. Early faulty responsiveness to these needs will undermine their later potential for generative parenting.

Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development provides us with an answer that is compatible with that of evolutionary psychology.² According to his theory, human beings have two interrelated universal, biologically based needs: the need to be needed and the need to be generative—to create something and to care for one’s creation which may serve the purpose of outliving the self. Even very young children thrive when they feel needed within a family. They feel both connected to other family members and individually competent when their input and contributions are welcomed and valued in the planning and execution of family decisions, activities, and projects. For Erikson, one of the avenues through which the need to be needed is optimally met is through generative parenting. The word “generativity” has special multiple meanings to Erikson. We generate (procreate) not only children, the coming generation, but also ideas, products, and even relational selves. To be truly generative, we need to care for that which we generate. Children need to be taken care of before they can become generative and take care of themselves and others, before they become productive and creative in the cultural world to which they belong and in which they feel needed.

From an Eriksonian viewpoint, preparation for generative parenting begins in infancy and continues on to young adulthood. During this period of preparation, developing persons, who are always embedded within a helpful and humanizing or harmful and dehumanizing historical and cultural context, are faced with the endless task of coming to terms with the polar dimensions of their psychoso-

cial existence. Prepared parents, who themselves have been readied for parenting and nonparenting tasks of life through the caring mediation of their own parents and multiple other figures, real and even fictional, help their children resolve the inevitable tensions experienced by them between unfolding oppositional or contrasting individual needs and societal demands. Generative parents, directly through teaching, coaching, and guiding or indirectly through modeling, creating a supportive space, and providing access to resources and opportunities, assist their children in finding points of integrative balance between the following oppositional or contrasting needs, regardless of their time of surfacing or resurfacing: the need to trust versus the need to mistrust; the need to be autonomous versus the need to be dependent; the need for initiative taking versus the need for passive receptivity; the need for competence versus the need for knowledge of limitations; the need for selfing (“identi-fication”) versus the need for unselfing (“disidenti-fication”); the need for intimate merger with an Other versus the need for self-awareness; the need for generativity versus the need for ungenerative moratorium (the need for a time-out from the call of generativity). When viewed from the perspective of the socializing agents of any given (sub)culture, these needs can be described as demands, challenges, or expectations.

Children need to securely attach themselves to trusted and consistent caregivers they can dependably rely on to meet their physical, safety, security, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization needs.³ Parents, guided by an image of perfect parenting, which is both ethically universal and culturally local, want to build a loving attachment to their children and expect their children, in order to protect and prepare them for the contingencies of life, to learn to know whom to trust and mistrust. Parents, however, do not want their children to be excessively trusting or mistrusting of others. Parents teach their children, directly or indirectly, that there is a graduated range between trust and mistrust and that where one places oneself in this range co-relates to the level of familiarity and the quality of attachment one has with the object of one’s trust or mistrust. Depending on the quality of their early attachments to primary caregivers, children’s trusting or mistrusting orientations can develop into character strengths or weaknesses. Children who trust too much are likely to be naïve, vulnerable, and easily manipulated by others who are not well-meaning. Children who are excessively mistrusting are likely to experience interpersonal difficulties that can lead to alienation, isolation, and possibly hostility and violence toward others.

As they grow and mature, children want to become more and more independent and to take care of themselves. At the same time, they experience the tension produced by the opposite wish to be taken care of by their caregivers. They want to hold on to their privileged dependencies on their parents. Letting go of the wish to be taken care of is never easy. Self-sufficiency brings with it increasing burdensome responsibilities. To prepare children for their future roles as responsible adult citizens, parents and other agents of the (sub)culture encourage children to become progressively more autonomous and self-sustaining. (Sub)cultures

differ in the degree of their emphasis on the attainment of early autonomy and the degree to which they tolerate and even encourage the prolongation of dependency in children. There is an optimal ratio or point of balance between the encouragement of (early) independence and the nurturance of (inter)dependence to be striven for in any given caring context which needs to take into account not only the age, temperament, unique individuality, and maturity of children, but also the dominant values of the (sub)culture. Excessive needs for independence and the lurking opposite dependency needs are marks of character weaknesses. The acquired capacities for relative self-sufficiency and interdependency can become character strengths. The ability to flexibly move back and forth between roles that require independence and roles that require dependence is also a lifetime character strength.

Propelled by their emerging propensities toward imagination, playfulness, and story listening and telling, preschool children initiate and partake in imitative and creative dramas and games based on what they see and hear in their familial and (sub)cultural worlds. These imaginative activities are guided by the spirit of purposive nonpurposiveness. They serve the purpose of preparing children for the future by allowing them to project themselves into adult roles. They are simultaneously nonpurposive in that they can be nonsensical activities enacted for fun, laughter, humor, silliness, and their playful element. Parents respond to their children's imaginative initiatives with approval and praise. They may even become enthusiastic participants in their children's creative games and dramatic plays. Parents also mediate the natural cyclical oscillation of their children between active initiative taking and passive learning and following. In a creative and carefree familial space, children achieve balanced rhythmic cycles between these two modalities of being in the world. In the absence of proper caring contexts, such as authoritarian or permissive homes, children's initiatives can degenerate into either intrusive initiatives that violate the privacy or rights of others or into inhibited passivity that stifles children's sense of freedom, agency, creativity, and playfulness.

Children of the elementary school age are naturally inclined to learn and master the valued skills and technological tools of their culture. Parents, teachers, and other agents of culture are eager to teach them to become competent in understanding the logic and in making practical use of these tools and skills. Through direct instruction and modeling, children learn to figure and make things in a systematic, orderly, and methodical manner. Through participating in the pragmatic reciprocal roles of apprentice and mentor, children learn that complex skills are manageable and perfectible and that the learning of these skills has practical consequences and is instrumental for their future success. Children of this age need continuous positive feedback on their progress in mastering these valued methods and techniques. Children also learn to attempt to perfect the valued skills of their (sub)culture by competing and cooperating, playfully and seriously, with their peers, with or without adult supervision. Whether in playing games or doing school projects, children are naturally driven to both cooperate

and compete with their age-mates. By participating in multiple contexts in which the learning and perfecting of valued skills is occurring, children are discovering their strengths. This is central for their identity formation. In other words, children of this age tend to tie their emerging identity to their comparable concrete competence. Parents and other cultural agents such as teachers, coaches, and other instructors play a special part in helping children discover these interests and strengths. This involves being selectively attuned to children's aptitudes, interests, and potential competencies and finding the appropriate contexts for their actualization. Above and beyond learning to become competent in the mastery of certain valued skills and tools, children need and must learn to acquire the right attitude toward work. Qualities such as being conscientious, disciplined, industrious, persistent, persevering, task oriented, and productive must be encouraged. Parents themselves need to embody these attributes children are ready to absorb. Overly competitive and overly involved or unambitious and uninvolved parents create contexts that make it difficult for children to resolve the experienced tensions between their orientations toward their own competence and incompetence. A natural sense of competence can easily degenerate into a kind of compulsive competence, where children view work as an obsessive obligation and their only criterion of worthwhileness. They center their identity too one-sidedly on their pursuit of perfectionism and success in an area of competence. Perfectionistic, critical, or negligent parents engender in their children feelings of inferiority even in areas of potential or actual competence, let alone areas of limitations and incompetence. When children acquire a healthy sense of competence, they come to feel good about themselves. They experience a kind of humble pride in their accomplished area of competence. They have a feeling of tolerance toward those who display incompetence in areas in which they are competent. They also have a feeling of admiration toward those who demonstrate competence in domains in which they are not competent. They feel a humble acceptance of their limitations in those areas in which they are aware of their incompetence. These are requirements in the making of good persons.

Selfing, acquiring a sense of who one is, and unselfing, renouncing aspects of who one is, are complementary and lifelong processes in the making of identity. Although the construction of the self begins early in childhood and continues on through the life cycle, it becomes pivotal during adolescence and young adulthood. This is in part due to the dramatic changes that occur during this period which trigger in adolescents a self-consciousness and a graduated sense of reflexivity, the capacity to stand back and reflect upon the self. It is also in part due to increased familial and societal demands, expectations, and pressures that are directed toward adolescents and which aim at preparing them for the assumption of adult responsible roles. Paralleling these parental and cultural expectations, adolescents experience the intensification of earlier needs and the surfacing of new ones. Spurred by physical, intellectual, and emotional changes, adolescents experience a qualitatively different need for affiliation, fidelity, and belongingness than they have experienced before. Their felt sense of incompleteness propels them to

seek completion by way of seeking peers and, later, ideologies to attract their loyalties. The family has been the adolescents' primary source of affiliative fidelity and the center of their familial identity. But now, through the enactment of mutual loyalties with peers who are similarly needful, they acquire a peer identity. It will be some time, a process which will involve conscious and reflexive or unconscious unselfing, before they are able to coordinate these different identities as part of a larger interpersonal identity. Meanwhile, they will inevitably experience conflicting and contradictory ways of being with adults and peers. Parents who understand this transitional lack of sameness and continuity in the presentations of the adolescent self are likely to be more patient and tolerant. For a while adolescents are not aware that they may be different persons in different interpersonal settings. They lack the reflective distancing necessary for such awareness. They react differently in the presence of parents and peers because they envisage different expectations and anticipate competing and conflicting claims. That is why they may act awkwardly when they are in the presence of both parents and peers at the same time. Nevertheless, it is in the context of cultivating their adolescent friendships, which are more egalitarian than their relations to their parents, that they can refine and perfect the virtues of accuracy, authenticity, conviction, devotion, dutifulness, fairness, genuineness, loyalty, sincerity, and truthfulness. Their capacity for discerning the character of others is sharpened. They learn to modulate their antagonistic, impulsive, and competitive sentiments in the service of preserving and enhancing their affiliative fidelities. They become more attuned to the interests, feelings, and needs of their friends. They want to be liked, approved, and thought well of by them. They want to live up to their mutual obligations and expectations. The character weakness that may emerge here is that they may become excessively preoccupied with how they appear in the eyes of their friends to the point of sacrificing the integrity they have cultivated at home. Here, creative loyalty degenerates into destructive loyalty. Fidelity to friends defines what is right and good. They come to see themselves primarily through the eyes of selective others. Without the confirming eyes, ears, and mouths of these essential peers, they feel isolated, lonely, and groundless. Another related danger is that they can come to equate identity with appearance. "I am what I appear to be: the stylish clothes I wear, the car I drive, the house I live in, etc." This dangerous equation needs to be countered by parents, teachers, and other agents of culture through emphasizing values that go beyond appearances. At the same time, parents need to be tolerant and understanding of the self-conscious sensitivity of adolescents during this transitional phase to how they, and even loved ones, appear in the eyes of others. Yet another danger exists for adolescents who, having acquired a fragile sense of familial fidelity, are unable to establish and nurture mutual loyalties with peers. Thus they may tend to become either interpersonally alienated, withdrawn, and self-destructive or manipulative and destructive of others.

The felt sense of incompleteness of late adolescents and young adults drives them to search for ideologies in which to believe. The family has been the main

source of their ideological fidelity and the center around which their ideological identity has been constructed. With the expansion of their intellectual, social, and moral horizons, they experience a readiness for the revision of their ideological identity. Ideology refers to the ideas (beliefs and values) and ideals that individuals identify with and want to live by. An ideological outlook defines what is good and evil, right and wrong, true and untrue, and natural and unnatural. An ideological orientation offers some answers to life's basic and ultimate questions. Late adolescents and early adults are struggling to make up their ideological minds. It is not a coincidence that idealism has been ascribed to the youth. They are ready to renounce at least part of the ideologies that they absorbed in childhood and appropriate a new configuration of ideals to live by. They may also experience conflicts and contradictions between the ideologies of childhood and the new ideologies they are attempting to appropriate. Although their actions may not match their newly declared ideology, they are prejudicially attuned to the hypocritical ideological stances of their parents or other representatives of institutions of authority. They can be so mesmerized by their ideological outlook that they fail to take into account its realism. Their need for a higher and deeper ideological loyalty is matched by the societal need to impart its ideology to its youth. The adult roles and responsibilities that young adults are encouraged to adopt are laden with ideologies. When young adults commit themselves to a religious faith, a political viewpoint or system, a vocation, or a gender role, they are at least implicitly extending their loyalties to certain ideologies. Conflicting and contradictory ideologies confuse or trivialize the potential coherence and integrity of their ideological identity. Coherence and consistency across ideologically laden roles and responsibilities contribute to integration of their evolving identity. Late adolescents and young adults are typically eager and ready to assume roles and responsibilities that make them feel they are becoming a part of the adult world of responsible citizenship. Parents and other representatives of their (sub)culture provide the opportunities, the resources, and the support needed for their pursuit of meaningful and practical adult life projects. Although the latitude for experimentation varies, depending on the socioeconomic realities of any given family, adolescents and young adults are allowed relative leeway for reflecting on or trying out different ways of life and of (potentially) making a living. Institutions of higher education can serve as a caring context in which such ideological experimentation can take place. They can be instrumental in significantly satisfying college students' intense desire for ideals. They can awaken in these young persons their sense of social responsibility and prepare them to become a part of a larger societal whole. Uncaring or selectively caring contexts, which, overtly or covertly, are driven by prejudicial ideologies such as sexism, racism, or ethnocentrism, may disallow certain groups of young individuals of the resources, opportunities, and support needed for the exploration and pursuit of appropriate and meaningful value-laden adult roles and responsibilities. This amounts to the foreclosure of possibilities for a large section of the youth population. Parents need to be aware of

how their own prejudicial ideologies can close off the future possibilities potentially open to their own children. A patriarchal ideology, for example, can have a detrimental effect on what the future will hold for their adolescent daughters.

Lacking the acquired resilience necessary to tolerate the inevitable tension experienced in the selfing-unselfing-reselfing process, some adolescents prematurely foreclose their ideological identities by adopting, wholesale, without personal reflection and evaluation, their parental, ethnic, racial, political, or religious ideology. The potential for creative ideological fidelity as a character strength is forsaken. Instead, it degenerates into destructive ideological fidelity. This type of loyalty is typified by exclusivity, rigidity, inflexibility, and lack of tolerance toward that which is ideologically different. Such foreclosure in ideological identity, individually or collectively, can easily produce a predisposition toward antagonistic encounters with other individuals or groups perceived as threateningly different.

Whereas the predisposition toward ideological foreclosure and rigidity may have its origin in authoritarian child-rearing practices, the tendency toward ideological fluidity may have its roots in permissive or uninvolved parenting practices. Adolescents who are characterized by a fluid ideological outlook lack an inner valuational structure or foundation to creatively modify and build on. Their valuational stances are easily influenced by changing impulses, moods, and contextual circumstances. They are alienated from the innermost human need to discover trustworthy values to live by.

Whereas late adolescents and early adults are caught up in the struggle of finding an integrative point of balance between, on the one hand, not foreclosing their identities too soon and, on the other hand, not being lost in a fluid identity for too long, while engaged in the process of affirming and repudiating old and newly acquired interpersonal and ideological identifications, maturing adults must come to terms with the tensions aroused by the bipolar needs of other-care and self-care. Generative or selfless caring is the optimal form of other-care.⁴ Generativity encompasses whatever adults generate (procreate, create, re-create, produce, or help produce) and is motivated by the evolutionary-based human need to be needed. Caring is the expanding concern for that which is to be cared for. Although adults generate products and ideas, the generation of the next generation is of primary concern for the Eriksonian model. Generative adults are ever widening their concentric circles of care to include all future generations. They care not only for their own and related families but, ultimately, for the human family. They have come to have a deep and abiding concern for the welfare of future generations everywhere. This does not mean, however, that generative parents do not care more deeply for their own children than children personally unknown to them. Generativity allows for degrees of graduated care. It disallows exclusive "pseudospeciated" caring.⁵ Furthermore, in general, all adults have the potential, directly or indirectly, to become generative regardless of whether or not they are biological parents.

Paralleling the experienced tension between the need to care for the other and the need to care for the self, there exists a correlative tension between the need for a transcendent, universal, and inclusive identity and the need for a conventional and exclusive (pseudospecified) identity. Stated differently, inclusive generative care allows for the emergence of a transcendent identity that appropriates a universal ideology. A transcendent identity is one that resonates to the universal human values expressed in the teachings and the parables of historical figures, such as Socrates, Buddha, and Jesus. These and other historical figures, along with current fictional or real ideologically inspiring models, offer new generations ideal images and pictures of human perfectibility to live by and aspire to. Even Erikson himself can be viewed as a generative model. Observe his amendment of the Golden Rule: "Do unto others that which will strengthen them by developing their best potentialities." This universal value-laden rule embodies the principle of mutual activation, without which generative caring is not possible. As social human beings, we participate in a network of mutually influencing relations in the context of which we mutually recognize, affirm, regulate, actuate, and enliven each other. Of course, this principle has its negative counterpart in mutual negation. In other words, we can bring out the best and the worst in each other. In any human encounter, to a larger or lesser degree, we are destined or condemned to influence each other, for better or for worse. In an optimal human encounter, we are required to approach our interplayer with an active and giving attitude. We are to view our interplayer as inviolate and unique. We are to regard our interplayer, as a variation on our own humanity (another me), with a benevolent gaze. The primordial inner human voice of the other calls us, especially in strange and unfamiliar situations, thus: (1) *Don't harm or hurt me, for I am another you;* (2) *Be kind to me, for I am another you.*

Generative adults who, relatively speaking and in varying degrees, have achieved transcendent (inclusive) identities continue to struggle with containing and controlling their exclusive patriarchal, political, national, ethnic, religious, racial, and familial identifications. They remain in touch, more or less, with inner tensions that are a byproduct of their previously described polar needs. They are aware of but not overwhelmed by their contradictions. Their caring orientation allows them to juxtapose the best and worst in themselves (their higher selves and their lower selves), experience humility as a result, and derive renewed energy to better themselves. They are able to take care of themselves without becoming self-absorbed or self-obsessed. They can accept the care of others without becoming demanding or dependent. By overcoming their self-centeredness, they are enabled to contribute, in small or large ways, to the developmental realization of their family, community, society, and humanity. Their selfless caring is the source of their relative integration and integrity.

Generative adults are capable of mature loving.⁶ They are able to establish, maintain, and enhance intimate relations with an essential other that requires mutual devotion in spite of the frictions that they may experience as a result of

differences or divisions in role functions. They have the capacity to merge their identities without fear of losing their sense of independence and separateness. They can commit themselves to each other and abide by these commitments in spite of the limitations these commitments impose on their freedoms. They can be dependent on and yet independent from each other. It must be remembered, however, that the acquisition of the capacity for love is based on the attainment of the earlier strengths of interpersonal and ideological fidelity, instrumental competence, initiative, autonomy, and trust. For example, by competently doing things for each other, devoted partners can demonstrate their love for each other in concrete ways. By allowing each other the freedom to envision and pursue genuinely valued goals without making each other feel guilty and fearful, devoted partners will find purpose and meaning in what they do in life. Devoted partners attain a balance between freedom and limits: freedom within limits. They come to the realization that the love they gain is worth the limits they impose on themselves. In spite of moments of doubt and uncertainty, they have the feeling that their margin of choice-making power is, for the most part, strengthened and not compromised. They feel that they choose to restrain themselves freely. Loving and caring partners have trust in each other. They have faith that in the context of their relationship, their innermost hopes and wishes will be attained, in spite of the dark and unpredictable dimensions of their lives together. In short, the love they have for each other brings out the best and modulates the worst in each other. It makes the inevitable tensions between them tolerable. Love makes fairness possible and thus awakens and intensifies the lovers' ethical sensibility.

Generative adults are capable of some degree of insight and foresight. They are able to see into (in-sight) themselves and their situations simultaneously. They have some understanding of their tension-producing basic needs that direct their motivations and emotions. They also have a good intuitive understanding of the motives and emotions of others and their underlying needs. They are always careful not to neglect situational and other contextual factors in their apprehension of themselves and others. They maintain a vigilant attitude toward the correctness of their value-laden assumptions that guide their understanding of themselves and others. Generative adults, to a certain degree, see ahead (have foresight) in that they anticipate, with some accuracy, the potentialities and limitations of others and the impact of their actions on others, of which they are accepting. Such responsible insight and foresight, which are the hallmarks of continually emerging wisdom, deepen the generative adults' faith in life and fellowship and heighten their ethical sensibility.

If one of our basic human needs is the need to be needed and if another interrelated need is to be generative (to selflessly care for that which we generate), then it follows that when we are engaged in other-care, we are simultaneously engaged in self-care. By meeting the needs of (essential) others we are, paradoxically, meeting our own needs. We do not pursue the care of others in order to meet our own needs. Guided by our generative drive, our primary orientation is

toward the care of others. We also have a biologically based need to preserve, protect, and enhance our own needful selves. We have a natural need to take care of ourselves and what we consider our own kin and kind. The need for other-care and self-care are experienced at times as synchronous, complementary, and mutually inclusive, and at other times as conflictual, contradictory, and mutually exclusive. Optimal self-care strengthens our generative drive to care for others. Excessive and exclusive preoccupation with taking care of ourselves and what is ours can easily degenerate (de-generate) into pseudospeciation (“My kin and kind are better than and different from your kin and kind”), narcissism, distantiation, (a. being distant, separate, and isolated from others; b. keeping others at a distance from ourselves and what is ours), and stagnation. The degeneration of self-care into egoism, self-absorption, self-indulgence, mental, emotional, or physical deformation, cruel and destructive exclusivity, the avoidance of intimate contacts, the compulsive seeking of pseudointimacy with others, and a general sense of personal impoverishment is related to the failure of other-care.

As alluded to before, there are multiple pathways for the ever-widening circles of other-care. According to the Eriksonian model, our psychosocial development and growth, our relative attainment of integration and integrity is contingent on, given our strengths, limitations, resources, and opportunities, our onward and outward inclusive movement across the widening circles of care. Regardless of the pathways of care we choose, the ability to move through the expanding concentric circles of care is an essential prerequisite for moral development and personality integration. Therefore, even though generative parenting is the focus of this book, generative parents need to model for their children their ability to widen their domains of care.

Still, one primary way for being and becoming generative is through caring for children.⁷ Genuine caring is guided by the nature of that which is cared for. Caring parents are attuned to the age-appropriate basic needs of their children. They are sensitive to their individual temperament and evolving character. They anticipate their future needs and unfolding potentials. They constantly struggle not to burden them by passing on to them the immaturities that they have appropriated from their own parents. They aim at helping their children develop the balanced character strengths of trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, and interpersonal and ideological fidelity. Through mutual activation, parents and children bring out the best in each other. They mutually affirm, activate, confirm, re-cognize, regulate, enliven, inspire, and actuate each other. The developing strengths of the children synchronizes not only with the strengths of the parents, but also with the instrumental importance of an increasing number of essential others who arrange themselves around the children in informal and formal concentric circles of family, school, community, and society. Simply stated, caring parents in a caring community beget caring children.