

Embracing 'Generativity'

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It's no secret that this year has been turbulent, with several crises converging to upend how we live and even how we think. While we don't know what the new reality will be after COVID-19 is contained, most health care and other experts are telling us the world will not return to the expected "normal."

How will we respond? Will we rise to the occasion? Will we make the personal sacrifices and lifestyle changes needed to make a difference? Will leaders emerge who are concerned about all of us?

Now is the time for the wisdom of sages.

Sages have the benefit of time, talent and life experience to help understand the crises we all currently face and can be leaders in shaping positive change for future generations. This is the focus of "generativity," as proposed by the late Erik Erickson (1902-1994), who was a noted psychologist and a professor at both Harvard and Yale universities.

The theory of "generativity" revolves around the idea of making our mark, of contributing what we've learned to younger generations as well as back to the community. Erickson believed we grow stronger as we move through midlife and as we are faced with our own mortality. That strength enables elders to become activists for the benefit of generations to follow.

Everyone at this stage has had plenty of life experiences, of course. But when these experiences are translated into wisdom and shared with others, people truly become sages. As the late Irish poet and philosopher John Donohue said, "We ought to measure a wise life based upon the impact we have on those around us."

One organization made up of sages actively embracing generativity and helping to improve the world is the Elders. Founded in 2007 by Nelson Mandela, the Elders consists of independent global leaders working together for peace and human rights.

Two other organizations that provide excellent resources for being generative are:

Sage-ing International, which is committed to transforming the current paradigm of aging to sage-ing through learning, service and community.

Elders Action Network, which seeks to build a movement of elders to address the social and environmental crises of our time.

These organizations have shifted into high gear during the current pandemic. As the Sage-ing International website puts it: "Sages face COVID-19 with wisdom, compassion and courage."

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