Chapter 19
Generativity and the Meaning of Life

Ed de St. Aubin

Bill Nitchke[1] was a 20-year-old U.S. soldier in the Vietnam War in 1967 when a spinal cord injury incurred during combat rendered him a paraplegic for the remainder of his life. Now in late midlife, Bill was recently asked to describe both his "positive future" and his "negative future." These were presented as a potential realistic account of how his life might unfold if all goes as he desires and one that could happen but that he hopes will not happen. Here is what Bill had to say:

> Positive Future
> One of the things that I would like to see in my life is to help younger veterans. I know I've been a good, positive help to a lot of veterans just through my story and through me helping of them. What I'm saying is I'd like to continue on helping younger vets who might be going through some of the same stuff that I went through, negative stuff with alcohol or whatever, negative thoughts about our government or the American people. Other, ya know, emotional rough times. Just to help them come to terms with that. Maybe through directly talking with them or somehow giving them, ya know, some messages on tapes and CD's and other stuff.
>
> Negative Future
> I try not to dwell on negative things but I guess that would be my son Dylan. He has emotional issues. I wasn't able to have children but I did adopt and my son Dylan has emotional trauma from his birth mother and serious mental illness conditions. If I'm not able to help him enough, ya know, that would be a negative side. I wouldn't be able to help my son enough – helping him emotionally and spiritually and other ways. I guess that would be a real negative downside.

What Bill is telling us, without ever using the precise words, is that *generativity gives his life meaning*. Generativity is an investment of self into the well-being of

[1] Pseudonym for a participant in our study of generativity, trauma, resilience, and meaning. Identifying information has been edited.

E. de St. Aubin (✉)
Department of Psychology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA
e-mail: ed.destaubin@marquette.edu

J.A. Hicks and C. Routledge (eds.), *The Experience of Meaning in Life: Classical Perspectives, Emerging Themes, and Controversies*, DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6527-6_19,

younger and future generations. In Bill's optimistic future scenario, he is working to improve the lives of younger veterans. A potentially dark future is seen as his inability to help his son with his mental health problems. What is most important to Bill is not about regaining the use of his legs. Nor is it about reducing the very real hassles of living day-to-day as a paraplegic. It is about focusing on the well-being of younger generations.

The vicissitudes of Bill's life are unique and may be more dramatic than some, given the drastic nature of a spinal cord injury, yet I contend that a generative life mode affords contemporary adults a way of experiencing meaning in life. Generativity offers one possible answer to the existential questions regarding life and death. Generativity provides life with purpose and it offers symbolic immortality. It is not the only way to experience meaning. Yet once we can account for an individual's full range of generativity, we gain an understanding of one way that meaning exists in that life. After a section reviewing the concept of generativity, I will turn to a discussion of how meaning in life and symbolic immortality may be experienced via a generative path. I examine this dynamic through both empirical studies and a brief psychobiographic exploration. A final section of this chapter charts the course for future investigations of generativity and the experience of meaning.

Generativity

Psychosocial theorist Erik Erikson (1950) presented a life cycle model of human development wherein healthy midlife adults spend several decades in a mode of generativity. The first to use this term in a psychological sense, Erikson was suggesting that the long stretch of midlife, roughly from 30 to 65, is spent engaging in activities that will promote the well-being of future generations. The first five of Erikson's life cycle stages result, if successfully traversed, in the acquisition of psychosocial virtues that add to one's self-focused competencies and abilities (e.g., industry and fidelity to self). But in the sixth stage, *Intimacy vs. Isolation*, the emerging adult seeks to invest in the well-being of another – a romantic life partner whose needs and desires are perceived as significant as one's own. The gained psychological virtue here is *love*, an authentic ability to put another's needs on equal status with one's own. This developmental shift to other-orientedness allows for *care*, the psychosocial virtue associated with the successful resolution of the *Generativity vs. Stagnation* tension experienced in the lengthy years of midlife. The beneficiary, or target, of generative efforts is much wider than the single romantic other of the intimacy stage. Now, the adult seeks to benefit (though not always consciously) future humankind.

Generativity is manifested in a variety of behaviors. Sculpting a beautiful piece of art, attempting to instill certain values in one's children, donating money to a charitable fund, and minimizing one's carbon footprint are all generative behaviors

for each is an investment of self into the well-being of younger or yet born humans. Generativity is a blend of altruism, creativity, productivity, and future-orientedness. Both John Kotre (1984, 1999, 2004) and Dan McAdams (1984 and elsewhere) have made major theoretical advances to our understanding of generativity and each have evoked a gifting metaphor to demonstrate how generativity combines agency and communion. First, agency allows the adult to fashion some kind of gift (child, book, business, community program, personal project) that is self-promoting in that it represents one's values and proclivities (e.g., parenting style, leadership type, book content, artistic expression). And then the communal phase includes the giving of the gift to others – letting it go and liberating it from one's control (allowing for the separation-individuation of a child; letting others interpret and use one's products in unanticipated ways).

Erikson's final life cycle stage portrays the elder as having moved back again to a more self-based tension as one attempts to find a favorable balance of *ego integrity* (acceptance of one's lived life and of one's inevitable death) over *ego despair* (unfavorable review of one's life and inability to face death). As has been demonstrated, the successful resolution of this final psychosocial stage depends, in part, on one's earlier generativity (James and Zarrett 2006; Wink and Dillon 2007).

Although scholarship regarding generativity was sparse and sporadic for several decades after Erikson introduced it in 1950, there is currently a growing body of solid empirical work that documents the significance of this phenomenon. Momentum sped up in the early 1990s when Dan McAdams and I (1992) presented a seven-faceted model of generativity along with empirically sound measures for quantifying individual differences in some of those components. Without attempting to provide a comprehensive review of this research in this limited space, I'll highlight three core areas around which this scholarship might be clustered.

The Development of Generativity

According to Erikson's (1950) life cycle theory, the generative mode should be most pronounced during midlife, approximately from 30 years of age until 65. Cross-sectional and longitudinal examinations have found mixed but generally supportive results for this contention (Bellizzi 2004; Ferreira-Alves et al. 2006; McAdams et al. 1993; Sheldon and Kasser 2001; Westermeyer 2004). Longitudinal designs have demonstrated developmental precursors to generativity: identity achievement, education attainment, marriage, warm family environment, a mentor relationship, and favorable peer group relationships (James and Zarrett 2006; Westermeyer 2004). Likewise, generativity has been found to lead to higher levels of certain biopsychosocial phenomenon later in life: ego integrity (James and Zarrett 2006), physical health (Wink and Dillon 2007), investments in intergenerational relationships such as parent or child (but not nonintergenerational ones such as sister or friend) (Peterson 2002), and religiousness (Wink and Dillon 2008).

Michael Pratt and his colleagues have examined adolescent and emerging adult generativity. These are developmental epochs wherein Erikson suggested *Identity vs. Role Confusion* and *Intimacy vs. Isolation* are, respectively, the psychosocially most salient issues. Yet Pratt has established the significance of individual differences in generativity during these earlier years. This work has demonstrated that it is positively associated with levels of prosocial reasoning, volunteering behavior, moral identity, psychological adjustment, and being the object of authoritative parenting (Frensch et al. 2007; Lawford et al. 2005; Pratt et al. 2009). Others have found that generativity is a strong predictor of stress-related growth during this age span (Singer et al. 2002).

The Salience of Generativity Within Family Relationships

Several scholars have written forcefully and eloquently about the need to examine generativity within the context of family ecology (McAdams 2004; Marks and Greenfield 2009; Pratt et al. 2008a, b). Higher levels of generativity in those who are parents are associated with more satisfaction and commitment to parenting (Abrantes and Matos 2010) as well as more authoritative parenting (Peterson et al. 1997; Pratt et al. 2001). Further, generativity within parents has been associated with particular characteristics of offspring. Peterson (2006) found that parents' generativity was positively related to one's child's agreeableness, conscientiousness, religiosity, and interest in politics. Parental generativity has also been related to parent's forgiveness of perceived poor grandparent behaviors and maternal (not paternal) optimism about potentially problematic outcomes in children's lives (Pratt et al. 2008a, b). Finally, Roy and Lucas (2006) have explicated the salience of generativity for disadvantaged low-income fathers striving for second chances for themselves as fathers and for their families.

Beyond parent-offspring generativity, other family relationships have been the focus of empirical study. Milardo (2005) found the uncle-nephew relationship rife with generative content, such as mentoring and both supplemental and surrogate parenting. Generativity has also been associated positively with attachment to one's pet (Marks et al. 1994).

As parents age and move into their elder years, Erikson (Erikson et al. 1986) suggested that a "grand-generativity" emerges and replaces the direct responsibility and potential anxiety that characterizes midlife generativity. Grand-generativity is softer, more indirect, less day-to-day, and is connected to the evaluative life review that ensues during this elder phase of *ego integrity vs. despair*. Grand-generativity also includes grandparenting – a nurturing familial relationship that is typically more light-hearted and selective. Indeed, Hebblethwaite and Norris (2011) found that grandparents use leisure pathways to express the generative themes of mentoring and legacy building. Elsewhere, generativity was the strongest of several variables in predicting satisfaction with grandparenting (Thiele and Whelan 2008). Finally,

Cheng et al. (2008) found grandparents had a great desire to be generative with grandchildren but that the rapidity of social-technological change (in Hong Kong) frustrated such attempts.

The Association of Generativity with Quality of Life

Given that generativity is presented as the hallmark of the psychosocially healthy adult, we would expect to find individual differences in generativity to be correlated with various indices of well-being. In a sample of nearly 2,000 parents, An and Cooney (2006) reported that generativity was the strongest of several potential predictors of psychological well-being, particularly for women. Using that same 1995 MIDUS data, Rothrauff and Cooney (2008) again found a very strong association between generativity and psychosocial well-being for both parents and childless adults. Others have also documented the basic connection between generativity and well-being (Ackerman et al. 2000; Grossbaum and Bates 2002; McAdams et al. 1993; Sheldon and Kasser 2001).

Drawing on the reciprocal nature of the generative mode between generations, Cheng (2009) ran structural equation models that show "perceived respect for elders" completely mediated the association between generative behaviors and one's sense of well-being. In another mediation model (Ardelt et al. 2010), it was found that WWII veterans with high combat experience, but not those with no combat experience, have levels of generativity closely related to physical and psychological health and well-being. Finally, ego development moderated the relation between generativity and well-being (de St. Aubin and McAdams 1995). In that study, the participants with high ego development scores who scored low on generative concern were significantly less satisfied/happy in life than those who scored high on generative concern. This last finding makes perfect sense, given that ego development – as conceptualized and quantified by Jane Loevinger (1976, 1987; Hy and Loevinger 1996) – captures an adult's level of cognitive-emotional maturity. One with a high level of ego development would understand the societal and individual significance of generativity and so would be considerably less satisfied with one's life if one were not particularly generative.

Summary

This growing body of empirical work assures generativity a seat at the table of significant psychological phenomenon. It most squarely falls within the category of personality development – an attribute that emerges fully in the midlife years, is manifested within familial and other relationships, and is associated with psychosocial

well-being. And yet, it is about much more than mere personality. The generative output of individuals is what shapes society. Our generative efforts connect us to something much larger than ourselves. And that provides meaning.

Experiencing Life Meaning via Generativity: Quantitative Investigations

The research reviewed in the previous subsection on quality of life included studies that employ measures of well-being that capture the *hedonic* form of happiness. Hedonic well-being slants towards pleasure and delight, forms of ephemeral happiness. Related yet distinct is *eudaimonic* well-being, which is more about a life mode of engagement and flourishing. I would argue that it is this second form of well-being, eudaimonia, that shares the most conceptual space with the experience of meaning, which is what this chapter and book address. I am hesitant to completely commit to this distinction as I see both forms as related, even similar. Further, psychologists have not always designed measures with the distinction in mind, so we have a collection of tools that contain a bit of both or that slant towards one but include fragments of the other. That being said, let's first look at studies that, in my view, examine how generativity is related to eudaimonic forms of life engagement. These are studies that examine generativity as it is manifested in life domains that are common locations for meaning making.

Generativity and Common Paths of Meaning Making

For many contemporary adults, *faith* provides an arena for the creation or discovery of meaning in life (Newton and McIntosh Chap. 20). McAdams and Albaugh (2008) compare the generative life narratives of two highly Christian women, one an evangelical Protestant with conservative political views and the other a mainline Protestant who is politically liberal. The authors find that the generative story of the conservative positions faith as a force that "save(s) her from an unregulated and chaotic life driven by impulse and materialism" (p. 225). Faith is perceived as a dam that allows her to contain unruly desires that would keep her from being generative. For the liberal, her personal faith is portrayed as an energy that fills her life with a capacity for love. Without faith, she would be empty and unable to muster the strength needed to be generative.

Brelsford et al. (2009) report that generativity in their sample was positively related to spiritual disclosure. For advanced seminarians, generativity is significantly related to intrinsic religiosity (Sandage et al. 2011). Wink and Dillon (2008) found that generativity was one path through which religiousness led to well-being. And Dillion et al. (2003) found that both religiosity and spirituality were correlated positively to generativity but with a twist. As hypothesized, the agentic aspect of

generativity (self-expanding) was more aligned with spirituality (self-oriented) and the communal facet (other-oriented) was connected to religiousness (social; giving/protective of others).

Another obvious venue for meaning making today is within the realm of *work* (Dik et al. Chap. 27). Zacher et al. (2011) demonstrate that leader generativity in the workplace predicts three indicators of leadership success: follower perceptions of leader effectiveness, follower satisfaction with leader, and follower extra effort. Clark and Arnold (2008) report that generativity in work leads to greater job satisfaction and higher subjective career success. Similarly, Westermeyer (2004) empirically linked generativity with work achievements.

A third potential avenue to meaning is *community involvement*. Cox et al. (2010) show that generativity was a stronger predictor of positive societal engagement than were any of the big five traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness). Kleiber and Nimrod (2008) similarly found a strong connection between generativity and civic engagement. A study of Australian adults likewise makes the connection between generativity and productive community engagement (Warburton et al. 2006). Taylor (2006) asserts that a better understanding of generativity dynamics will help community agencies in recruiting volunteers to help run youth development programs. Research has revealed that generativity is associated with higher satisfaction with (Peterson and Duncan 2007) and success in (Westermeyer 2004) *marriage*, yet another possible location for meaning making.

A perennial question in philosophical and psychological existential scholarship, which examines the various ways in which humans strive for meaning, is how one can achieve meaning in life when human existence is rife with absurdity and *suffering*. One response is the empirical research that articulates how generativity may serve as the path from suffering to meaning for adults who feel as though they are fading away into oblivion and a life of non-efficacy and loneliness (de Medeiros 2009) as well as for adults who suffer from being the lifelong victims of racism (Black and Rubinstein 2009). Bellizzi (2004) documented how generativity was correlated with posttraumatic growth for adult cancer survivors. Finally, preliminary results in one of my research labs (de St. Aubin et al. 2011) suggest that generativity is more strongly associated with post-injury psychosocial functioning than is religiosity in a sample of spinal cord survivors. These are adults who suffered a life-threatening accident and continue to confront the ever-present challenges that face paraplegics and quadriplegics.

A second question posed by existentialism concerns the *meaning of death*. Existentialist Ernest Becker's 1973 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, The Denial of Death, argues that the idea of our own finitude is too terrifying to even acknowledge. As the title conveys, humans "deny" this inevitability and keep it from consciousness – which leads to anxiety. The ever-growing research literature on Terror Management Theory (see Greenberg and Kosloff 2008 for a review) is built on this premise – that humans must manage the terror that stems from a knowledge that we must all one day die. This terror, so goes the theory, may be managed either by explicit systems of shared belief, such as religion, that articulate the meaning of death and even sometimes reveal the location of posthumous existence such as

heaven or reincarnation. The terror may also be managed subconsciously by boosting self-esteem via alignment with a shared cultural worldview. Generativity is implicated in this existential crises in that it affords one symbolic immortality. Generativity provides a way of "Outliving the Self" – this is the title of a 1984 book by John Kotre that addresses the meaning of generativity. An adult does not die, at least symbolically, if that adult instilled her values in her son or in some other generative way left a mark on the world that existed beyond one's physical lifespan. Huta and Zuroff (2007) examined the three generativity motivations proposed in McAdams and de St. Aubin's model (need to be needed, felt societal expectation to contribute to future generations, symbolic immortality) and found that only symbolic immortality predicted one's well-being.

To summarize, the dynamics of generativity are heavily implicated in many of the meaning making paths adults traverse. It is one developmental force that shapes and is shaped by faith, work, love, community engagement, suffering, and death. Generativity involves creating a legacy of self by investing resources into the promotion of life quality for younger and future generations. This is an enterprise that is engaging, other-oriented, and legacy building. Once the generative content of a life is understood, we gain insight into an individual's meaning-making process. Midlife adults experience meaning via generativity.

Experiencing Life Meaning via Generativity: A Psychobiographic Example[2]

My own thinking about how humans experience meaning has been heavily influenced by the life and scholarship of Victor Frankl (1905–1997), both of which speak profoundly to the significance of generativity in the quest for meaning. Like many, I was deeply moved by Frankl's accounts (*Man's Search for Meaning* 1963; *Recollections: An Autobiography* 2000) of having survived four Nazi concentration camps and fascinated by his theory of how humans find meaning and how psychotherapist might facilitate that search with logotherapy. He first used the term logotherapy (translated from "existenzanalyse" or existential analysis) in a public address delivered in 1926, still a young man (21) and 16 years before his arrest and containment at Theresienstadt in Bohemia. It was presented as a system of treatment for many mental illnesses that was not based on an assumption that humans are driven by a will for pleasure (his interpretation of Freud) nor a will for power (his take on Adler) but instead on a will for *meaning.*

[2]I hesitate to refer to this as psychobiography as this brief foray fails to do justice to the complexity of that method. For classic psychobiographies, see Erikson (1958, 1969), and for a recent excellent example, see McAdams (2010). Schultz (2005) offers a smorgasbord of psychobiographic tastings in his edited volume. Finally, I (1998) examine Frank Lloyd Wright's generativity in a chapter-length psychobiography.

Logotherapy continues to be practiced and modified today, 85 years after its introduction (Wong 1998). Frankl's nascent thinking about this therapeutic approach and the postulates of human nature that undergird it – the various ways humans find (or do not find) meaning in life – were initially developed during a time when he was intellectually and clinically focused on suicide. This was his major topic of interest during his psychiatry/neurology training in medicine at the University of Vienna. Further, he was the Director of the suicide pavilion at the General Hospital in Vienna from 1933 until 1938, at which point the Nazis took over Austria and he was prohibited as a Jew from treating Aryan patients. This tension between understanding suicide and conceptualizing life meaning is not unique to Frankl. Albert Camus (1913–1960), another major contributor to the scholarship of existentialism and life meaning, begins his 1943 *The Myth of Sisyphus* with "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." The book goes on to detail how suicide is not an option as long as life has meaning. Both Camus (1955) and Frankl perceive meaning as the antidote to suicidal tendencies.

After being forced out of his Director's position by the Nazis, Frankl worked as a brain surgeon at Rothschild Hospital, the only one still admitting Jews. This is when he began to write *The Doctor and the Soul*, which was to be his full presentation of logotherapy. He was married in 1941 and then in 1942 was arrested and sent to the concentration camp, as were his wife, parents, and two siblings. Only he and his sister survived the ordeal. It was through his observations in the camps that he refined his understanding of how humans, despite despicable conditions and exposure to horrific behaviors, could find and maintain the experience of meaning – that which protected them from utter despair and thoughts of suicide.

He noted that the three clear paths to life meaning, though often intertwined, were attitude/faith, love, and the felt need to complete life projects. It is this last meaning avenue that shares much conceptual space with generativity. Frankl perceived life projects as stemming from creative longings and directed at the future: "A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward… an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the "why" for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any "how" (1963, p. 101)." Put more starkly, "In the Nazi concentration camps, one could have witnessed that those who knew that there was a task waiting for them to fulfill were most apt to survive" (1963, p. 126).

To reintroduce a prior metaphor, the creating of a generative gift ala *agency* leads to the giving of the gift, in a *communal* mode, to the future – to the ongoing enterprise that is the human species. Frankl (1963) tells us that humans "can only live by looking to the future (p. 115)" and that "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future – his future – was doomed" (p. 117). This insight ties into a critical moment in Frankl's life. Prior to his incarceration, he had begun to create a self-promoting and agentic gift in the form of a book manuscript (*The Doctor and the Soul*). This was to be his statement of the meaning making process and of his logotherapy technique. He managed to smuggle the manuscript with him and continue to work on it while confined. He had it sewed into his jacket but it was discovered while he was being transferred to Auschwitz and confiscated/destroyed. His need to complete that

project and to pass his insights on to future generations became a way of experiencing meaning. He reconstructed it on bits of stolen paper. He worked on it at every possible moment. It was, I would contend, his generative project: An investment of self into the well-being of future generations. It was this generativity that provided him with meaning even within the incredibly oppressive context of a concentration camp.

Frankl was released in 1945 and soon completed the book. He remarried, became a father, and directed the Vienna Neurological Policlinic for the next two and a half decades. He held many visiting and honorary university positions in several countries and published some 32 books that were translated into 26 languages. A major component of his legacy is the impact that his scholarship had on younger generations of thinkers, practitioners, and others looking for a meaningful life. This generativity, captured microcosmically in his desperate attempt to rewrite his manuscript under horrendous conditions, provided his life with meaning and has assured him of symbolic immortality. He has not died, for his wisdom exists in those who read his work, and it exists in the therapeutic sessions wherein logotherapists facilitate meaning making in clients. To reiterate, when we locate the generative content of a life, whether that life is Viktor Frankl's or that of a less well-known person, we have found one way he or she experiences meaning.

Further Explorations

There are many potentially fruitful ways to further study how generativity and the experience of meaning are comingled. I'll outline two. First, we need a better articulation of how variations in the *self* ← → *society* dynamic contours generative meaning making. This is most obviously accomplished by either examining the manifestation of generativity in other cultures or by exploring the generativity of North American adult minorities. Initial steps have been made in both directions. There are a few published attempts to address generativity in cultures other than the US and Canada (de St. Aubin 2004; Hofer et al. 2008; Marushima and Arimitau 2007; Urien and Kilbourne 2011) but none that authentically capture generative meaning making dynamics quantitatively with psychometrically sound and culturally appropriate measures.

There has been research on generativity within the African-American community (Hart et al. 2001) but much more work is needed here. We would also learn much by examining individual differences in generativity within groups of sexual minorities. What factors, for instance, predict how a lesbian might navigate the two-step (agency, communion) generative gifting process? Given that the current climate in the US is quite stigmatizing and oppressive of sexual minorities (Nadal 2013), this is a woman who likely receives daily micro-aggressive (Shelton and Delgado-Romero 2011) messages that she is somehow incomplete or deficient. Does that *self* ← → *society* dynamic of heterosexism impact her ability to create a self-promoting generative gift? Does it diminish her desire to give this gift up – to a society that belittles her – in a communal gesture for the benefit of younger generations?

Does it shape the qualitative nature of her generative efforts such that she is more likely than heterosexual women to fashion a particular type of generative gift? Again, there has been very little inquiry into the generativity of either ethnic or sexual minorities (see Hostetler 2009; Oswald and Masciadrelli 2008) yet either would shed much needed light on generative meaning making.

The second area of work likely to advance generative meaning making consists of deep examinations of the rehabilitation process. Maruna (2001) and Maruna et al. (2004) joins the strengths-based approach promoted in criminal rehabilitation and demonstrates convincingly that providing opportunities for ex-prisoners to be generative facilitates individual crime desistance. This is a way to reduce the typically high recidivism rates that occur as men and women transition from prison through community reintegration. We need more research and policy analysis in this area, but I am also referring to rehabilitation in the context of health psychology, particularly for those who have experienced potentially traumatizing life episodes. Here too, there is a shift to include the positive. The emphasis is moving away from exclusive examinations of the pathological sequelae of such events such as PTSD, depression, or anxiety. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) and Parks (2010) and others are beginning to chart out trajectories of posttraumatic growth, finding that some trauma survivors actually find benefits within these horrendous situations. As noted earlier, a study by Bellizzi (2004) linked posttraumatic growth to generativity scores. The process of rebuilding a life after a life-threatening event requires, in many instances, a generative mode. The self is repaired when it turns away from itself and seeks to improve the lives of others and, by doing so, create a legacy of self.

The chapter begins with a set of quotes from Bill Nitchke, a paraplegic who faced the very real possibility of death over 30 years ago and who has lived ever since with the extremely limiting reality of life in a wheelchair. How does such a man experience meaning? As the quotes convey, Bill finds meaning via generativity. Bill's complete life story interview is rife with generative imagery and recurrent themes of hardiness and posttraumatic growth. Having listened to his lengthy story, I was not surprised to find out that, relative to the sample of nearly 100 spinal cord injury survivors, he scored very low on quantitative measures of depression and anxiety but quite high on psychosocial well-being and generativity. It is his generativity that gives his life meaning. Further investigations are needed to decipher the generative movement of the self as one rehabilitates from major setbacks and/or experiences that threaten one's very existence.

A Final Word

In conclusion, generativity is certainly not the only mode by which contemporary adults experience meaning, but it is one very viable path to creating and discovering a purposeful life. Midlife adults are called upon to engage in activities that promote the well-being of younger and future generations. Answering that call leads to a meaningful life.

References

Abrantes D, Matos PM (2010) Parenting adolescents: relationship between generativity, parental satisfaction and attachment to parents. Psicologia Educacao Cultura 14(1):145–164

Ackerman S, Zuroff DC, Moskowitz DS (2000) Generativity in midlife and young adults: links to agency, communion, and subjective well-being. Int J Aging Hum Dev 50(1):17–41

An JS, Cooney TM (2006) Psychological well-being in mid to late life: the role of generativity development and parent–child relationships across the lifespan. Int J Behav Dev 30(5):410–421

Ardelt M, Landes SD, Vaillant GE (2010) The long-term effects of world of elderly African American men. J Gerontol Ser B Psychol Sci Soc Sci 64B(2):296–303

Becker E (1973) The denial of death. Free Press, New York

Bellizzi KM (2004) Expressions of generativity and posttraumatic growth in adult cancer survivors. Int J Aging Dev 58(4):267–287

Black HK, Rubinstein RL (2009) The effect of suffering on generativity: accounts of elderly African American men. J Gerontol Ser B Psychol Sci Soc Sci 64B(2):296–303

Brelsford GM, Marinelli S, Ciarrochi JW, Dy-Liacco GS (2009) Generativity and spiritual closure in close relationships. Psychol Relig Spiritual 1(3):150–161

Camus A (1955) The myth of Sisyphus (trans: O'Brien J) Alfred A. Knopf, New York. Originally published in 1942 in French, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*

Cheng S (2009) Generativity in later life: perceived respect from younger generations as a determinant of goal disengagement and psychological well-being. J Gerontol Ser B Psychol Sci Soc Sci 64B(1):45–54

Cheng S, Chan W, Chan ACM (2008) Older people's realization of generativity in a changing society: the case of Hong Kong. Ageing Soc 28(5):609–627

Clark M, Arnold J (2008) The nature, prevalence and correlated of generativity among men in middle career. J Vocat Behav 73(3):473–484

Cox KS, Wilt J, Olson B, McAdams DP (2010) Generativity, the big five, and psychosocial adaptation in midlife adults. J Pers 78(4):1185–1208

de Medeiros K (2009) Suffering and generativity: repairing threats to self in old age. J Aging Stud 23(2):97–102

de St. Aubin E (1998) Truth against the world: a psychobiographic exploration of generativity in the life of Frank Lloyd Wright. In: McAdams DP, de St. Aubin E (eds) Generativity and adult development: how and why we care for the next generation. American Psychological Association Press, Washington, DC, pp 391–427

de St. Aubin E (2004) The propagation of genes and memes: generativity through culture in Japan and the USA. In: de St. Aubin E, McAdams DP, Tae-Chang K (eds) The generative society: caring for future generations. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, pp 63–83

de St. Aubin E, McAdams DP (1995) The relations of generative concern and generative action to personality traits, satisfaction/happiness with life, and ego development. J Adult Dev 2(2):99–112

de St. Aubin E, Valvano A, Kalies M, Arenberg M, Landon S (2011) Religiosity and generativity in well-being of spinal cord injury survivors. Midwestern Psychological Association Annual Conference, Chicago

Dillion M, Wink P, Fay K (2003) Is spirituality detrimental to generativity? J Sci Stud Relig 42(3):427–442

Erikson EH (1950) Childhood and society. Norton, New York

Erikson EH (1958) Young Man Luther. A study in psychoanalysis and history. Norton, New York

Erikson EH (1969) Gandhi's Truth: on the origin of militant nonviolence. Norton, New York

Erikson EH, Erikson J, Kivinic H (1986) Vital involvement in old age. Norton, New York

Ferreira-Alves J, dos Santos PL, Alves CF, Alves A, Brito L, Cunha F (2006) Generativity in student teaching and other educational professionals. Psychologica 43:143–156

Frankl VE (1963) (trans: Lasch I) Man's search for meaning: an introduction to logotherapy. Washington Square Press, New York (Earlier title, 1959: from death-camp to existentialism. Originally published in 1946 as Ein Psycholog erlebt das Konzentrationslager)

Frankl V (2000) Victor Frankl recollections: an autobiography. Basic Books, Cambridge, MA. Originally published in German in 1995 under the title Was nicht in meinen Büchern steht, Psychologie Verlags Union, Weinheim, Germany. This English edition was translated by Joseph and Judith Fabry

Frensch KM, Pratt MW, Norris JE (2007) Foundations of generativity: personal and family correlates of emerging adults' generative life-story themes. J Res Pers 41(1):45–62

Greenberg J, Kosloff S (2008) Terror management theory: implications for understanding prejudice, stereotyping, intergroup conflict, and political attitudes. Soc Pers Psychol Compass 2(5):1881–1894

Grossbaum MF, Bates GW (2002) Correlates of psychological well-being at midlife: the role of generativity, agency and communion, and narrative themes. Int J Behav Dev 26(2):120–127

Hart HM, McAdams DP, Hirsch BJ, Bauer JJ (2001) Generativity and social involvement among African Americans and white adults. J Res Pers 35(2):208–230

Hebblethwaite S, Norris J (2011) Expressions of generativity through family leisure: experiences of grandparents and adult grandchildren. Fam Relat An Interdiscipl J ApplFam Stud 60(1):121–133

Hofer J, Busch H, Chasiotis A, Kartner J, Campos D (2008) Concern for generativity and its relation to implicit pro-social power motivation, generative goals, and satisfaction with life: a cross-cultural investigation. J Pers 76(1):1–30

Hostetler AJ (2009) Generativity and time in gay men's life stories. In: Hammack PL, Cohler BJ (eds) The story of sexual identity: narrative perspectives on the gay and lesbian life course. Oxford University Press, New York, pp 397–424

Huta V, Zuroff DC (2007) Examining mediators of the link between generativity and well-being. J Adult Dev 14(1–2):47–52

Hy LX, Loevinger J (1996) Measuring ego development, 2nd edn. Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah

James JB, Zarrett N (2006) Ego integrity in the lives of older women. J Adult Dev 13(2):61–75

Kleiber D, Nimrod G (2008) Expressions of generativity and civic engagement in a 'learning in retirement' group. J Adult Dev 15(2):76–86

Kotre J (1984) Outliving the self: how we live on in future generations. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore

Kotre J (1999) Make it count: how to generate a legacy that gives meaning to your life. Free Press, New York

Kotre J (2004) Generativity and culture: what meaning can do. In: de St. Aubin E, McAdams DP, Tae-Chang K (eds) The generative society: caring for future generations. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, pp 35–49

Lawford H, Pratt MW, Hunsberger B, Pancer MS (2005) Adolescent generativity: a longitudinal study of two possible contexts for learning concern for future generations. J Res Adolesc 15(3):261–273

Loevinger J (1976) Ego development. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

Loevinger J (1987) Paradigms of personality. W.H. Freeman, New York

Marks NF, Greenfield EA (2009) The influence of family relationships on adult psychological well-being and generativity. In: Smith CM, DeFrates-Densch N (eds) Handbook of research on adult learning and development. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, New York, pp 306–349

Marks SG, Koepke JE, Bradley CL (1994) Pet attachment and generativity among young adults. J Psychol Interdiscipl Appl 128(6):641–650

Maruna S (2001) Making good: how ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives. American Psychological Association Press, Washington, DC

Maruna S, Lebel TP, Lanier CS (2004) Generativity behind bars: some "redemptive truth" about prison society. In: de St. Aubin E, McAdams DP, Tae-Chang K (eds) The generative society: caring for future generations. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, pp 131–151

Marushima R, Arimitsu K (2007) Revised generative concern scale and generative behavior checklist (GCS-R, GBC-R): scale reconstruction, reliability, and validity. Jpn J Psychol 78(3):303–309

McAdams DP (1984) Power, intimacy, and the life story: personological inquiries into identity. Guilford, New York

McAdams DP (2004) Generativity and the narrative ecology of family life. In: Pratt MW, Fiese BH (eds) Family stories and the life course: across time and generations. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Mahwah, pp 235–257
McAdams DP (2010) George W. Bush and the redemptive dream: a psychological portrait. Oxford University Press, New York
McAdams DP, Albaugh M (2008) The redemptive self, generativity, and American Christians at midlife: explorations of the life stories of evangelical and mainline protestants. In: Belzen JA, Geels A (eds) Autobiography and the psychological study of religious lives. Editions Rodopi, Atlanta, pp 255–286
McAdams DP, de St. Aubin E (1992) A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioral acts, and narrative themes in autobiography. J Pers Soc Psychol 62:1003–1015
McAdams DP, de St. Aubin E, Logan RL (1993) Generativity among young, midlife, and older adults. Psychol Aging 8(2):221–230
Milardo RM (2005) Generative uncle and nephew relationships. J Marriage Fam 67(5):1226–1236
Nadal KL (2013) That's so gay! microaggressions and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC
Oswald RF, Masciadrelli BP (2008) Generative ritual among nonmetropolitan lesbians and gay men: promoting social inclusion. J Marriage Fam 70(4):1060–1073
Parks C (2010) Making sense of the meaning literature: an integrative review of meaning making and its effects on adjustment to stressful life event. Psychol Bull 136(2):257–301
Peterson BE (2002) Longitudinal analysis of midlife generativity, intergenerational roles, and caregiving. Psychol Aging 17(1):161–168
Peterson BE (2006) Generativity and successful parenting: an analysis of young adult outcomes. J Pers 74(3):847–869
Peterson BE, Duncan LE (2007) Midlife women's generativity and authoritarianism: marriage, motherhood, and 10 years of aging. Psychol Aging 22(3):411–419
Peterson BE, Smirles KA, Wentworth PA (1997) Generativity and authoritarianism: implications for personality, political involvement, and parenting. J Pers Soc Psychol 72(5):1202–1216
Pratt MW, Danso HA, Arnold ML, Norris JE, Filyer R (2001) Adult generativity and the socialization of adolescents: relations to mothers' and fathers' parenting beliefs, styles, and practices. J Pers 69(1):89–120
Pratt MW, Norris JE, Cressman K, Lawford H, Hebblethwaite S (2008a) Parents' stories of grandparenting concerns in the three-generational family: generativity, optimism, and forgiveness. J Pers 76(3):581–604
Pratt MW, Norris JE, Hebblethwaite S, Arnold ML (2008b) Intergenerational transmission of values: family generativity and adolescents' narratives of parent and grandparent value teaching. J Pers 76(2):171–198
Pratt MW, Arnold ML, Lawford H (2009) Growing toward care: a narrative approach to prosocial moral identity and generativity of personality in emerging adulthood. In: Narvaez D, Lapsley DK (eds) Personality, identity, and character: explorations in moral psychology. Cambridge University Press, New York, pp 295–315
Rothrauff T, Cooney TM (2008) The role of generativity in psychological well-being: does it differ for childless adults and parents? J Adult Dev 15(3–4):148–159
Roy KM, Lucas K (2006) Generativity as second chance: low-income fathers and transformation of the difficult past. Res Hum Dev 3(2–3):139–159
Sandage SJ, Hill PC, Vaubel DC (2011) Generativity, relational spirituality, gratitude, and mental health: relationships and pathways. Int J Psychol Relig 21(1):1–16
Schultz WT (2005) Handbook of psychobiography. Oxford University Press, New York, NY
Sheldon KM, Kasser T (2001) Getting older, getting better? Personal strivings and psychological maturity across the life span. Dev Psychol 37(4):491–501
Shelton K, Delgado-Romero EA (2011) Sexual orientation microaggressions: the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer clients in psychotherapy. J Couns Psychol 58(2):210–221

Singer JA, King LA, Green MC, Barr SC (2002) Personal identity and civic responsibility: "rising to the occasion" narratives and generativity in community action student interns. J Soc Issues 58(3):535–556

Taylor AS (2006) Generativity and adult development: implications for mobilizing volunteers in support of youth. In: Clary EG, Rhodes JE (eds) Mobilizing adults for positive youth development: strategies for closing the gap between beliefs and behaviors. Springer Science + Business Media, New York, pp 83–100

Tedeschi RG, Calhoun LG (1996) The posttraumatic growth inventory: measuring the positive legacy of trauma. J Trauma Stress 9(3):455–471

Thiele DM, Whelan TA (2008) The relationship between grandparent satisfaction, meaning, and generativity. Int J Aging Hum Dev 66(1):21–48

Urien B, Kilbourne W (2011) Generativity and self-enhancement values in eco-friendly behavioral intentions and environmentally responsible consumption behavior. Psychol Market 28(1):69–90

Warburton J, McLaughlin D, Pinsker D (2006) Generative acts: family and community involvement of older Australians. Int J Aging Hum Dev 63(2):115–137

Westermeyer JF (2004) Predictors and characteristics of Erickson's life cycle model among men: a 32-year longitudinal study. Int J Aging Hum Dev 58(1):29–48

Wink P, Dillon M (2007) Do generative adolescents become healthy older adults? In: Post SG (ed) Altruism and health: perspectives from empirical research. Oxford University Press, New York, pp 43–55

Wink P, Dillon M (2008) Religiousness, spirituality, and psychosocial functioning in late adulthood: findings from a longitudinal study. Psychol Relig Spir S(1):102–115

Wong P (1998) Meaning-centered counseling. In: Wong P, Fry P (eds) The human quest for meaning: a handbook of psychological research and clinical applications. Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, Mahwah, pp 395–435

Zacher H, Rosing K, Henning T, Frese M (2011) Establishing the generation at work: leader generativity as a moderator of the relationships between leader age, leader-member exchange, and leadership success. Psychol Aging 26(1):241–252