

# Erik Erikson: Finding Identity Through Life's Quests

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Among the Oglala Lakota, it was the tradition for an adolescent boy to go off on his own, weaponless and wearing nothing but a loincloth and mocassins, on a dream quest. Hungry, thirsty, and bone-tired, the boy would expect to have a dream on the fourth day which would reveal to him his life's path. Returning home, he would relate his dream to the tribal elders, who would interpret it according to ancient practice. And his dream would tell him whether he was destined to be a good hunter, or a great warrior, or expert at the art of horse-stealing, or perhaps to become specialized in the making of weapons, or a spiritual leader, priest, or medicine man.

In some cases, the dream would lead him into the realm of controlled deviations among the Oglala. A dream involving the thunderbird might lead a boy to go through a period of time as a heyoka, which involved acting like a clown or a crazy man. Or a vision of the moon or a white buffalo could lead one to a life as a berdache, a man who dresses and behaves as if he were a woman.

In any case, the number of roles one could play in life was extremely limited for men, and even more so for women. Most people were generalists; very few could afford to be specialists. And you learned these roles by simply being around the other people in your family and community. You learned them by living.

By the time the Oglala Lakota were visited by Erik Erikson, things had changed quite a bit. They had been herded onto a large but barren reservation through a series of wars and unhappy treaties. The main source of food, clothing, shelter, and just about everything else -- the buffalo -- had long since been hunted into near-extinction. Worst of all, the patterns of their lives had been taken from them, not by white soldiers, but by the quiet efforts of government bureaucrats to turn the Lakota into Americans!

Children were made to stay at boarding schools much of the year, in the sincere belief that civilization and prosperity comes with education. At boarding schools they learned many things that contradicted what they learned at home: They were taught white standards of cleanliness and beauty, some of which contradicted Lakota standards of modesty. They were taught to compete, which contradicted Lakota traditions of egalitarianism. They were told to speak up, when their upbringing told them to be still. In other words, their white teachers found them quite impossible to work with, and their parents found them quite corrupted by an alien culture.

As time went by, their original culture disappeared, but the new culture didn't provide the necessary substitutions. There were no more dream quests, but then what roles were there left for adolescents to dream themselves into?

Erikson was moved by the difficulties faced by the Lakota children and adolescents he talked to and observed. But growing up and finding one's place in the world isn't easy for many other Americans, either. African-Americans struggle to piece together an identity out of forgotten African roots, the culture of powerlessness and poverty, and the culture of the surrounding white majority. Asian-

Americans are similarly stretched between Asian and American traditions. Rural Americans find that the cultures of childhood won't cut it in the larger society. And the great majority of European-Americans have, in fact, little left of their own cultural identities other than wearing green on St. Patrick's Day or a recipe for marinara sauce from grandma! American culture, because it is everybody's, is in some senses nobody's.

Like native Americans, other Americans have also lost many of the rituals that once guided us through life. At what point are you an adult? When you go through puberty? Have your confirmation or bar mitzvah? Your first sexual experience? Sweet sixteen party? Your learner's permit? Your driver's license? High school graduation? Voting in your first election? First job? Legal drinking age? College graduation? When exactly is it that everyone treats you like an adult?

Consider some of the contradictions: You may be old enough to be entrusted with a two-ton hunk of speeding metal, yet not be allowed to vote; You may be old enough to die for your country in war, yet not be permitted to order a beer; As a college student, you may be trusted with thousands of dollars of student loans, yet not be permitted to choose your own classes.

In traditional societies (even our own only 50 or 100 years ago), a young man or woman looked up to his or her parents, relations, neighbors, and teachers. They were decent, hard-working people (most of them) and we wanted to be just like them.

Unfortunately, most children today look to the mass media, especially T.V., for role models. It is easy to understand why: The people on T.V. are prettier, richer, smarter, wittier, healthier, and happier than anybody in our own neighborhoods! Unfortunately, they aren't real. I'm always astounded at how many new college students are quickly disappointed to discover that their chosen field actually requires a lot of work and study. It doesn't on T.V. Later, many people are equally surprised that the jobs they worked so hard to get aren't as creative and glorious and fulfilling as they expected. Again, that isn't how it is on T.V. It shouldn't surprise us that so many young people look to the short-cuts that crime seems to offer, or the fantasy life that drugs promise.

Some of you may see this as an exaggeration or a stereotype of modern adolescence. I certainly hope that your passage from childhood to adulthood was a smooth one. But a lot of people -- myself and Erikson included -- could have used a dream quest.

## **Biography**



## Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson was born in Frankfurt, Germany, on June 15, 1902. There is a little mystery about his heritage: His biological father was an unnamed Danish man who abandoned Erik's mother before he was born. His mother, Karla Abrahamsen, was a young Jewish woman who raised him alone for the first three years of his life. She then married Dr. Theodor Homberger, who was Erik's pediatrician, and moved to Karlsruhe in southern Germany.

We cannot pass over this little piece of biography without some comment: The development of identity seems to have been one of his greatest concerns in Erikson's own life as well as in his theory. During his childhood, and his early adulthood, he was Erik Homberger, and his parents kept the details of his birth a secret. So here he was, a tall, blond, blue-eyed boy who was also Jewish. At temple school, the kids teased him for being Nordic; at grammar school, they teased him for being Jewish.

After graduating high school, Erik focussed on becoming an artist. When not taking art classes, he wandered around Europe, visiting museums and sleeping under bridges. He was living the life of the carefree rebel, long before it became "the thing to do."

When he was 25, his friend Peter Blos -- a fellow artist and, later, psychoanalyst -- suggested he apply for a teaching position at an experimental school for American students run by Dorothy Burlingham, a friend of Anna Freud. Besides teaching art, he gathered a certificate in Montessori education and one from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. He was psychoanalyzed by Anna Freud herself.

While there, he also met Joan Serson, a Canadian dance teacher at the school. They went on to have three children, one of whom became a sociologist himself.

With the Nazis coming into power, they left Vienna, first for Copenhagen, then to Boston. Erikson was offered a position at the Harvard Medical School and practiced child psychoanalysis privately. During this time, he met psychologists like Henry Murray and Kurt Lewin, and anthropologists like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Gregory Bateson. I think it can be safely said that these anthropologists had nearly as great an effect on Erikson as Sigmund and Anna Freud!

He later taught at Yale, and later still at the University of California at Berkeley. It was during this period of time that he did his famous studies of modern life among the Lakota and the Yurok.

When he became an American citizen, he officially changed his name to Erik Erikson. Erikson's son, Kai Erikson, believes it was just a decision to define himself as a self-made man: Erik, son of Erik.

In 1950, he wrote *Childhood and Society*, which contained summaries of his studies among the native Americans, analyses of Maxim Gorkiy and Adolph Hitler, a discussion of the "American personality," and the basic outline of his version of Freudian theory. These themes -- the influence of culture on personality and the analysis of historical figures -- were repeated in other works, one of which, *Gandhi's Truth*, won him the Pulitzer Prize and the national Book Award.

In 1950, during Senator Joseph McCarthy's reign of terror, Erikson left Berkeley when professors there were asked to sign "loyalty oaths." He spent ten years working and teaching at a clinic in Massachusetts, and ten years more back at Harvard. Since retiring in 1970, he wrote and did research with his wife. He died in 1994.

## **Theory**

Erikson is a Freudian ego-psychologist. This means that he accepts Freud's ideas as basically correct, including the more debatable ideas such as the Oedipal complex, and accepts as well the ideas about the ego that were added by other Freudian loyalists such as Heinz Hartmann and, of course, Anna Freud. However, Erikson is much more society and culture-oriented than most Freudians, as you might expect from someone with his anthropological interests, and he often pushes the instincts and the unconscious practically out of the picture. Perhaps because of this, Erikson is popular among Freudians and non-Freudians alike!

## **The epigenetic principle**

He is most famous for his work in refining and expanding Freud's theory of stages. Development, he says, functions by the epigenetic principle. This principle says that we develop through a

predetermined unfolding of our personalities in eight stages. Our progress through each stage is in part determined by our success, or lack of success, in all the previous stages. A little like the unfolding of a rose bud, each petal opens up at a certain time, in a certain order, which nature, through its genetics, has determined. If we interfere in the natural order of development by pulling a petal forward prematurely or out of order, we ruin the development of the entire flower.

Each stage involves certain developmental tasks that are psychosocial in nature. Although he follows Freudian tradition by calling them crises, they are more drawn out and less specific than that term implies. The child in grammar school, for example, has to learn to be industrious during that period of his or her life, and that industriousness is learned through the complex social interactions of school and family.

The various tasks are referred to by two terms. The infant's task, for example, is called "trust-mistrust." At first, it might seem obvious that the infant must learn trust and not mistrust. But Erikson made it clear that there it is a balance we must learn: Certainly, we need to learn mostly trust; but we also need to learn a little mistrust, so as not to grow up to become gullible fools!

Each stage has a certain optimal time as well. It is no use trying to rush children into adulthood, as is so common among people who are obsessed with success. Neither is it possible to slow the pace or to try to protect our children from the demands of life. There is a time for each task.

If a stage is managed well, we carry away a certain virtue or psychosocial strength which will help us through the rest of the stages of our lives. On the other hand, if we don't do so well, we may develop maladaptations and malignancies, as well as endanger all our future development. A malignancy is the worse of the two, and involves too little of the positive and too much of the negative aspect of the task, such as a person who can't trust others. A maladaptation is not quite as bad and involves too much of the positive and too little of the negative, such as a person who trusts too much.

### **Children and adults**

Perhaps Erikson's greatest innovation was to postulate not five stages, as Freud had done, but eight. Erikson elaborated Freud's genital stage into adolescence plus three stages of adulthood. We certainly don't stop developing -- especially psychologically -- after our twelfth or thirteenth birthdays; It seems only right to extend any theory of stages to cover later development!

Erikson also had some things to say about the interaction of generations, which he called mutuality. Freud had made it abundantly clear that a child's parents influence his or her development dramatically. Erikson pointed out that children influence their parents' development as well. The arrival of children, for example, into a couple's life, changes that life considerably, and moves the new parents along their developmental paths. It is even appropriate to add a third (and

in some cases, a fourth) generation to the picture: Many of us have been influenced by our grandparents, and they by us.

A particularly clear example of mutuality can be seen in the problems of the teenage mother. Although the mother and her child may have a fine life together, often the mother is still involved in the tasks of adolescence, that is, in finding out who she is and how she fits into the larger society. The relationship she has or had with the child's father may have been immature on one or both sides, and if they don't marry, she will have to deal with the problems of finding and developing a relationship as well. The infant, on the other hand, has the simple, straight-forward needs that infants have, and the most important of these is a mother with the mature abilities and social support a mother should have. If the mother's parents step in to help, as one would expect, then they, too, are thrown off of their developmental tracks, back into a life-style they thought they had passed, and which they might find terribly demanding. And so on....

The ways in which our lives intermesh are terribly complex and very frustrating to the theorist. But ignoring them is to ignore something vitally important about our development and our personalities.

### **The first stage**

The first stage, infancy or the oral-sensory stage, is approximately the first year or year and a half of life. The task is to develop trust without completely eliminating the capacity for mistrust.

If mom and dad can give the newborn a degree of familiarity, consistency, and continuity, then the child will develop the feeling that the world -- especially the social world -- is a safe place to be, that people are reliable and loving. Through the parents' responses, the child also learns to trust his or her own body and the biological urges that go with it.

If the parents are unreliable and inadequate, if they reject the infant or harm it, if other interests cause both parents to turn away from the infant's needs to satisfy their own instead, then the infant will develop mistrust. He or she will be apprehensive and suspicious around people.

Please understand that this doesn't mean that the parents have to be perfect. In fact, parents who are overly protective of the child, are there the minute the first cry comes out, will lead that child into the maladaptive tendency Erikson calls sensory maladjustment: Overly trusting, even gullible, this person cannot believe anyone would mean them harm, and will use all the defenses at their command to retain their Pollyanna perspective.

Worse, of course, is the child whose balance is tipped way over on the mistrust side: They will develop the malignant tendency of withdrawal, characterized by depression, paranoia, and possibly psychosis.

If the proper balance is achieved, the child will develop the virtue hope, the strong belief that, even when things are not going well, they will work out well in the end. One of the signs that a child is doing well in the first stage is when the child isn't overly upset by the need to wait a moment for the satisfaction of his or her needs: Mom or dad don't have to be perfect; I trust them enough to believe that, if they can't be here immediately, they will be here soon; Things may be tough now, but they will work out. This is the same ability that, in later life, gets us through disappointments in love, our careers, and many other domains of life.

## Stage two

The second stage is the anal-muscular stage of early childhood, from about eighteen months to three or four years old. The task is to achieve a degree of autonomy while minimizing shame and doubt.

If mom and dad (and the other care-takers that often come into the picture at this point) permit the child, now a toddler, to explore and manipulate his or her environment, the child will develop a sense of autonomy or independence. The parents should not discourage the child, but neither should they push. A balance is required. People often advise new parents to be "firm but tolerant" at this stage, and the advice is good. This way, the child will develop both self-control and self-esteem.

On the other hand, it is rather easy for the child to develop instead a sense of shame and doubt. If the parents come down hard on any attempt to explore and be independent, the child will soon give up with the assumption that cannot and should not act on their own. We should keep in mind that even something as innocent as laughing at the toddler's efforts can lead the child to feel deeply ashamed, and to doubt his or her abilities.

And there are other ways to lead children to shame and doubt: If you give children unrestricted freedom and no sense of limits, or if you try to help children do what they should learn to do for themselves, you will also give them the impression that they are not good for much. If you aren't patient enough to wait for your child to tie his or her shoe-laces, your child will never learn to tie them, and will assume that this is too difficult to learn!

Nevertheless, a little "shame and doubt" is not only inevitable, but beneficial. Without it, you will develop the maladaptive tendency Erikson calls impulsiveness, a sort of shameless willfulness that leads you, in later childhood and even adulthood, to jump into things without proper consideration of your abilities.

Worse, of course, is too much shame and doubt, which leads to the malignancy Erikson calls compulsiveness. The compulsive person feels as if their entire being rides on everything they do, and so everything must be done perfectly. Following all the rules precisely keeps you from

mistakes, and mistakes must be avoided at all costs. Many of you know how it feels to always be ashamed and always doubt yourself. A little more patience and tolerance with your own children may help them avoid your path. And give yourself a little slack, too!

If you get the proper, positive balance of autonomy and shame and doubt, you will develop the virtue of willpower or determination. One of the most admirable -- and frustrating -- thing about two- and three-year-olds is their determination. "Can do" is their motto. If we can preserve that "can do" attitude (with appropriate modesty to balance it) we are much better off as adults.

### Stage three

Stage three is the genital-locomotor stage or play age. From three or four to five or six, the task confronting every child is to learn initiative without too much guilt.

Initiative means a positive response to the world's challenges, taking on responsibilities, learning new skills, feeling purposeful. Parents can encourage initiative by encouraging children to try out their ideas. We should accept and encourage fantasy and curiosity and imagination. This is a time for play, not for formal education. The child is now capable, as never before, of imagining a future situation, one that isn't a reality right now. Initiative is the attempt to make that non-reality a reality.

But if children can imagine the future, if they can plan, then they can be responsible as well, and guilty. If my two-year-old flushes my watch down the toilet, I can safely assume that there were no "evil intentions." It was just a matter of a shiny object going round and round and down. What fun! But if my five year old does the same thing... well, she should know what's going to happen to the watch, what's going to happen to daddy's temper, and what's going to happen to her! She can be guilty of the act, and she can begin to feel guilty as well. The capacity for moral judgement has arrived.

Erikson is, of course, a Freudian, and as such, he includes the Oedipal experience in this stage. From his perspective, the Oedipal crisis involves the reluctance a child feels in relinquishing his or her closeness to the opposite sex parent. A parent has the responsibility, socially, to encourage the child to "grow up -- you're not a baby anymore!" But if this process is done too harshly and too abruptly, the child learns to feel guilty about his or her feelings.

Too much initiative and too little guilt means a maladaptive tendency Erikson calls ruthlessness. The ruthless person takes the initiative alright; They have their plans, whether it's a matter of school or romance or politics or career. It's just that they don't care who they step on to achieve their goals. The goals are everything, and guilty feelings are for the weak. The extreme form of ruthlessness is sociopathy.

Ruthlessness is bad for others, but actually relatively easy on the ruthless person. Harder on the person is the malignancy of too much guilt, which Erikson calls inhibition. The inhibited person will

not try things because "nothing ventured, nothing lost" and, particularly, nothing to feel guilty about. On the sexual, Oedipal, side, the inhibited person may be impotent or frigid.

A good balance leads to the psychosocial strength of purpose. A sense of purpose is something many people crave in their lives, yet many do not realize that they themselves make their purposes, through imagination and initiative. I think an even better word for this virtue would have been courage, the capacity for action despite a clear understanding of your limitations and past failings.

### **Stage four**

Stage four is the latency stage, or the school-age child from about six to twelve. The task is to develop a capacity for industry while avoiding an excessive sense of inferiority. Children must "tame the imagination" and dedicate themselves to education and to learning the social skills their society requires of them.

There is a much broader social sphere at work now: The parents and other family members are joined by teachers and peers and other members of the community at large. They all contribute: Parents must encourage, teachers must care, peers must accept. Children must learn that there is pleasure not only in conceiving a plan, but in carrying it out. They must learn the feeling of success, whether it is in school or on the playground, academic or social.

A good way to tell the difference between a child in the third stage and one in the fourth stage is to look at the way they play games. Four-year-olds may love games, but they will have only a vague understanding of the rules, may change them several times during the course of the game, and be very unlikely to actually finish the game, unless it is by throwing the pieces at their opponents. A seven-year-old, on the other hand, is dedicated to the rules, considers them pretty much sacred, and is more likely to get upset if the game is not allowed to come to its required conclusion.

If the child is allowed too little success, because of harsh teachers or rejecting peers, for example, then he or she will develop instead a sense of inferiority or incompetence. An additional source of inferiority Erikson mentions is racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination: If a child believes that success is related to who you are rather than to how hard you try, then why try?

Too much industry leads to the maladaptive tendency called narrow virtuosity. We see this in children who aren't allowed to "be children," the ones that parents or teachers push into one area of competence, without allowing the development of broader interests. These are the kids without a life: child actors, child athletes, child musicians, child prodigies of all sorts. We all admire their industry, but if we look a little closer, it's all that stands in the way of an empty life.

Much more common is the malignancy called inertia. This includes all of us who suffer from the "inferiority complexes" Alfred Adler talked about. If at first you don't succeed, don't ever try again!

Many of us didn't do well in mathematics, for example, so we'd die before we took another math class. Others were humiliated instead in the gym class, so we never try out for a sport or play a game of raquetball. Others never developed social skills -- the most important skills of all -- and so we never go out in public. We become inert.

A happier thing is to develop the right balance of industry and inferiority -- that is, mostly industry with just a touch of inferiority to keep us sensibly humble. Then we have the virtue called competency.

### **Stage five**

Stage five is adolescence, beginning with puberty and ending around 18 or 20 years old. The task during adolescence is to achieve ego identity and avoid role confusion. It was adolescence that interested Erikson first and most, and the patterns he saw here were the bases for his thinking about all the other stages.

Ego identity means knowing who you are and how you fit in to the rest of society. It requires that you take all you've learned about life and yourself and mold it into a unified self-image, one that your community finds meaningful.

There are a number of things that make things easier: First, we should have a mainstream adult culture that is worthy of the adolescent's respect, one with good adult role models and open lines of communication.

Further, society should provide clear rites of passage, certain accomplishments and rituals that help to distinguish the adult from the child. In primitive and traditional societies, an adolescent boy may be asked to leave the village for a period of time to live on his own, hunt some symbolic animal, or seek an inspirational vision. Boys and girls may be required to go through certain tests of endurance, symbolic ceremonies, or educational events. In one way or another, the distinction between the powerless, but irresponsible, time of childhood and the powerful and responsible time of adulthood, is made clear.

Without these things, we are likely to see role confusion, meaning an uncertainty about one's place in society and the world. When an adolescent is confronted by role confusion, Erikson says he or she is suffering from an identity crisis. In fact, a common question adolescents in our society ask is a straight-forward question of identity: Who am I?

One of Erikson's suggestions for adolescence in our society is the psychosocial moratorium. He suggests you take a little "time out." If you have money, go to Europe. If you don't, bum around the U.S. Quit school and get a job. Quit your job and go to school. Take a break, smell the roses, get to know yourself. We tend to want to get to "success" as fast as possible, and yet few of us have ever taken the time to figure out what success means to us. A little like the young Oglala Lakota,

perhaps we need to dream a little.

There is such a thing as too much "ego identity," where a person is so involved in a particular role in a particular society or subculture that there is no room left for tolerance. Erikson calls this maladaptive tendency fanaticism. A fanatic believes that his way is the only way. Adolescents are, of course, known for their idealism, and for their tendency to see things in black-and-white. These people will gather others around them and promote their beliefs and life-styles without regard to others' rights to disagree.

The lack of identity is perhaps more difficult still, and Erikson refers to the malignant tendency here as repudiation. They repudiate their membership in the world of adults and, even more, they repudiate their need for an identity. Some adolescents allow themselves to "fuse" with a group, especially the kind of group that is particularly eager to provide the details of your identity: religious cults, militaristic organizations, groups founded on hatred, groups that have divorced themselves from the painful demands of mainstream society. They may become involved in destructive activities, drugs, or alcohol, or you may withdraw into their own psychotic fantasies. After all, being "bad" or being "nobody" is better than not knowing who you are!

If you successfully negotiate this stage, you will have the virtue Erikson called fidelity. Fidelity means loyalty, the ability to live by societies standards despite their imperfections and incompleteness and inconsistencies. We are not talking about blind loyalty, and we are not talking about accepting the imperfections. After all, if you love your community, you will want to see it become the best it can be. But fidelity means that you have found a place in that community, a place that will allow you to contribute.

## **Stage six**

If you have made it this far, you are in the stage of young adulthood, which lasts from about 18 to about 30. The ages in the adult stages are much fuzzier than in the childhood stages, and people may differ dramatically. The task is to achieve some degree of intimacy, as opposed to remaining in isolation.

Intimacy is the ability to be close to others, as a lover, a friend, and as a participant in society. Because you have a clear sense of who you are, you no longer need to fear "losing" yourself, as many adolescents do. The "fear of commitment" some people seem to exhibit is an example of immaturity in this stage. This fear isn't always so obvious. Many people today are always putting off the progress of their relationships: I'll get married (or have a family, or get involved in important social issues) as soon as I finish school, as soon as I have a job, as soon as I have a house, as soon as.... If you've been engaged for the last ten years, what's holding you back?

Neither should the young adult need to prove him- or herself anymore. A teenage relationship is

often a matter of trying to establish identity through "couple-hood." Who am I? I'm her boy-friend. The young adult relationship should be a matter of two independent egos wanting to create something larger than themselves. We intuitively recognize this when we frown on a relationship between a young adult and a teenager: We see the potential for manipulation of the younger member of the party by the older.

Our society hasn't done much for young adults, either. The emphasis on careers, the isolation of urban living, the splitting apart of relationships because of our need for mobility, and the general impersonal nature of modern life prevent people from naturally developing their intimate relationships. I am typical of many people in having moved dozens of times in my life. I haven't the faintest idea what has happened to the kids I grew up with, or even my college buddies. My oldest friend lives a thousand miles away. I live where I do out of career necessity and, until recently, have felt no real sense of community.

Before I get too depressing, let me mention that many of you may not have had these experiences. If you grew up and stayed in your community, and especially if your community is a rural one, you are much more likely to have deep, long-lasting friendships, to have married your high school sweetheart, and to feel a great love for your community. But this style of life is quickly becoming an anachronism.

Erikson calls the maladaptive form promiscuity, referring particularly to the tendency to become intimate too freely, too easily, and without any depth to your intimacy. This can be true of your relationships with friends and neighbors and your whole community as well as with lovers.

The malignancy he calls exclusion, which refers to the tendency to isolate oneself from love, friendship, and community, and to develop a certain hatefulness in compensation for one's loneliness.

If you successfully negotiate this stage, you will instead carry with you for the rest of your life the virtue or psychosocial strength Erikson calls love. Love, in the context of his theory, means being able to put aside differences and antagonisms through "mutuality of devotion." It includes not only the love we find in a good marriage, but the love between friends and the love of one's neighbor, co-worker, and compatriot as well.

### **Stage seven**

The seventh stage is that of middle adulthood. It is hard to pin a time to it, but it would include the period during which we are actively involved in raising children. For most people in our society, this would put it somewhere between the middle twenties and the late fifties. The task here is to cultivate the proper balance of generativity and stagnation.

Generativity is an extension of love into the future. It is a concern for the next generation and all

future generations. As such, it is considerably less "selfish" than the intimacy of the previous stage: Intimacy, the love between lovers or friends, is a love between equals, and it is necessarily reciprocal. Oh, of course we love each other unselfishly, but the reality is such that, if the love is not returned, we don't consider it a true love. With generativity, that implicit expectation of reciprocity isn't there, at least not as strongly. Few parents expect a "return on their investment" from their children; If they do, we don't think of them as very good parents!

Although the majority of people practice generativity by having and raising children, there are many other ways as well. Erikson considers teaching, writing, invention, the arts and sciences, social activism, and generally contributing to the welfare of future generations to be generativity as well -- anything, in fact, that satisfies that old "need to be needed."

Stagnation, on the other hand, is self-absorption, caring for no-one. The stagnant person ceases to be a productive member of society. It is perhaps hard to imagine that we should have any "stagnation" in our lives, but the maladaptive tendency Erikson calls overextension illustrates the problem: Some people try to be so generative that they no longer allow time for themselves, for rest and relaxation. The person who is overextended no longer contributes well. I'm sure we all know someone who belongs to so many clubs, or is devoted to so many causes, or tries to take so many classes or hold so many jobs that they no longer have time for any of them!

More obvious, of course, is the malignant tendency of rejectivity. Too little generativity and too much stagnation and you are no longer participating in or contributing to society. And much of what we call "the meaning of life" is a matter of how we participate and what we contribute.

This is the stage of the "midlife crisis." Sometimes men and women take a look at their lives and ask that big, bad question "what am I doing all this for? Notice the question carefully: Because their focus is on themselves, they ask what, rather than whom, they are doing it for. In their panic at getting older and not having experienced or accomplished what they imagined they would when they were younger, they try to recapture their youth. Men are often the most flamboyant examples: They leave their long-suffering wives, quit their humdrum jobs, buy some "hip" new clothes, and start hanging around singles bars. Of course, they seldom find what they are looking for, because they are looking for the wrong thing!

But if you are successful at this stage, you will have a capacity for caring that will serve you through the rest of your life.

### **Stage eight**

This last stage, referred to delicately as late adulthood or maturity, or less delicately as old age, begins sometime around retirement, after the kids have gone, say somewhere around 60. Some older folks will protest and say it only starts when you feel old and so on, but that's an effect of our

youth-worshipping culture, which has even old people avoiding any acknowledgement of age. In Erikson's theory, reaching this stage is a good thing, and not reaching it suggests that earlier problems retarded your development!

The task is to develop ego integrity with a minimal amount of despair. This stage, especially from the perspective of youth, seems like the most difficult of all. First comes a detachment from society, from a sense of usefulness, for most people in our culture. Some retire from jobs they've held for years; others find their duties as parents coming to a close; most find that their input is no longer requested or required.

Then there is a sense of biological uselessness, as the body no longer does everything it used to. Women go through a sometimes dramatic menopause; Men often find they can no longer "rise to the occasion." Then there are the illnesses of old age, such as arthritis, diabetes, heart problems, concerns about breast and ovarian and prostate cancers. There come fears about things that one was never afraid of before -- the flu, for example, or just falling down.

Along with the illnesses come concerns of death. Friends die. Relatives die. One's spouse dies. It is, of course, certain that you, too, will have your turn. Faced with all this, it might seem like everyone would feel despair.

In response to this despair, some older people become preoccupied with the past. After all, that's where things were better. Some become preoccupied with their failures, the bad decisions they made, and regret that (unlike some in the previous stage) they really don't have the time or energy to reverse them. We find some older people become depressed, spiteful, paranoid, hypochondriacal, or developing the patterns of senility with or without physical bases.

Ego integrity means coming to terms with your life, and thereby coming to terms with the end of life. If you are able to look back and accept the course of events, the choices made, your life as you lived it, as being necessary, then you needn't fear death. Although most of you are not at this point in life, perhaps you can still sympathize by considering your life up to now. We've all made mistakes, some of them pretty nasty ones; Yet, if you hadn't made these mistakes, you wouldn't be who you are. If you had been very fortunate, or if you had played it safe and made very few mistakes, your life would not have been as rich as is.

The maladaptive tendency in stage eight is called presumption. This is what happens when a person "presumes" ego integrity without actually facing the difficulties of old age. The malignant tendency is called disdain, by which Erikson means a contempt of life, one's own or anyone's.

Someone who approaches death without fear has the strength Erikson calls wisdom. He calls it a gift to children, because "healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death." He suggests that a person must be somewhat gifted to be truly wise, but I would like to

suggest that you understand "gifted" in as broad a fashion as possible: I have found that there are people of very modest gifts who have taught me a great deal, not by their wise words, but by their simple and gentle approach to life and death, by their "generosity of spirit."

## Discussion

I can't think of anyone, other than Jean Piaget, who has promoted the stage approach to development more than Erik Erikson. And yet stages are not at all a popular concept among personality theorists. Of the people reviewed in this text, only Sigmund and Anna Freud fully share his convictions. Most theorists prefer an incremental or gradual approach to development, and speak of "phases" or "transitions" rather than of clearly marked stages..

But there are certain segments of life that are fairly easy to identify, that do have the necessary quality of biologically determined timing. Adolescence is "preprogrammed" to occur when it occurs, as is birth and, very possibly, natural death. The first year of life has some special, fetus-like qualities, and the last year of life includes certain "catastrophic" qualities.

If we stretch the meaning of stages to include certain logical sequences, i.e. things that happen in a certain order, not because they are biologically so programmed, but because they don't make sense any other way, we can make an even better case: weaning and potty training have to precede the independence from mother required by schooling; one is normally sexually mature before finding a lover, normally finds a lover before having children, and necessarily has children before enjoying their leaving!

And if we stretch the meaning of stages even further to include social "programming" as well as biological, we can include periods of dependence and schooling and work and retirement as well. So stretched, it is no longer a difficult matter to come up with seven or eight stages; Only now, of course, you'd be hard pressed to call them stages, rather than "phases" or something equally vague.

It is, in fact, hard to defend Erikson's eight stages if we accept the demands of his understanding of what stages are. In different cultures, even within cultures, the timing can be quite different: In some countries, babies are weaned at six months and potty trained at nine months; in others, they still get the breast at five and potty training involves little more than taking it outside. At one time in our own culture, people were married at thirteen and had their first child by fifteen. Today, we tend to postpone marriage until thirty and rush to have our one and only child before forty. We look forward to many years of retirement; in other times and other places, retirement is unknown.

And yet Erikson's stages do seem to give us a framework. We can talk about our culture as compared with others', or today as compared with a few centuries ago, by looking at the ways in which we differ relative to the "standard" his theory provides. Erikson and other researchers have

found that the general pattern does in fact hold across cultures and times, and most of us find it quite familiar. In other words, his theory meets one of the most important standards of personality theory, a standard sometimes more important than "truth:" It is useful.

It also offers us insights we might not have noticed otherwise. For example, you may tend to think of his eight stages as a series of tasks that don't follow any particularly logical course. But if you divide the lifespan into two sequences of four stages, you can see a real pattern, with a child development half and an adult development half.

In stage I, the infant must learn that "it" (meaning the world, especially as represented by mom and dad and itself) is "okay." In stage II, the toddler learns "I can do," in the here-and-now. In stage III, the preschooler learns "I can plan," and project him or herself into the future. In stage IV, the school-age child learns "I can finish" these projections. In going through these four stages, the child develops a competent ego, ready for the larger world.

In the adult half of the scheme, we expand beyond the ego. Stage V, is concerned with establishing something very similar to "it is okay." The adolescent must learn that "I am okay," a conclusion predicated on successful negotiation of the preceding four stages. In stage VI, the young adult must learn to love, which is a sort of social "I can do," in the here-and-now. In stage VII, the adult must learn to extend that love into the future, as caring. And in stage VIII, the old person must learn to "finish" him- or herself as an ego, and establish a new and broader identity. We could borrow Jung's term, and say that the second half of life is devoted to realizing one's self.

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