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The Six Adult Life Tasks

By: James L. Holly, MD

In his excellent book, *Aging Well*, Harvard-Medical-School Professor, Dr. George Vaillant, addressed the “six adult life tasks” which must be successfully accomplished in order for a person to mature as an adult. Rather than “stages” of development, the concept of “tasks” is used to identify these responsibilities because “task” reflects more the conscious, active process which is involved in each. A “stage” sounds more like something a person inextricably passes through like a stage of biological growth.

However, successfully completing these “tasks” is not automatic. And, a person can be taught, counseled, or helped to purposefully work on any and/or all of these tasks. It is possible even for a person who recognizes that they have failed to address a task to work on that task years after they neglected it. In fact, the knowledge of these tasks and a conscious effort to complete them can serve as an effective “roadmap” toward a mature, happy, joyful and satisfying life.

These tasks are:

1. “The adolescent must evolve an Identity that allows her to become separate from her parents.
2. Then the young adult should develop Intimacy, which permits him to become reciprocally, and not narcissistically, involved with a partner.
3. Next comes Career Consolidation. Mastery of this task permits the adult to find a career that is both valuable to society and as valuable to her as she once found play.
4. After that comes the task of Generativity, a broader social circle through which one manifests care for the next generation. The virtue of this task is ‘care.’
5. The penultimate task is to become a Keeper of the Meaning, another task that I have added to Erikson’s eight. This task involves passing on the traditions of the past to the next generation. It leads to a social circle wider than that produced by Generativity. Becoming a Keeper of the Meaning allows one to link the past to the future. The virtue of the Keeper of the Meaning is justice.
6. Finally there is Integrity, the task of achieving some sense of peace and unity with respect both to one’s own life and to the whole world. The virtue of Integrity is wisdom.”

To understand these tasks, Dr. Vaillant explains each in more detail.

“Identity -- A sense of one’s own self, a sense that one’s values, politics, passions, and taste in music are one’s own and not one’s parents’. Identity requires mastering the last task of childhood: sustained separation from social, residential, economic and ideological dependence upon family of origin.

“Intimacy -- The task of living with another person in an interdependent, reciprocal, committed and contented fashion for a decade or more often seems neither desirable nor

possible to the young adult. Initially this task involves expanding one's sense of self to include another person. Superficially, mastery of intimacy may take very different guises in different cultures and epochs, but "mating-for-life" and "marriage-type love" is built into the wiring of many warm-blooded species.

"Career Consolidation -- Mastery of this task involves expanding one's personal identity to assume a social identity within the world of work. There are four crucial developmental criteria that transform a 'job' or hobby into a 'career': contentment, compensation, competence, and commitment. Obviously, such a career can be 'wife and mother,' or in more recent times, 'husband and father.'

"Generativity -- Involves the demonstration of a clear capacity to unselfishly guide the next generation. Generativity reflects the capacity to give the self – finally completed through mastery of the first three task of adult development – away. Just as Intimacy reflects the capacity for mutual interdependence; just so Generativity reflects a different sort of capacity – to be in relationships where one 'cares' for those younger than oneself and, simultaneously, respects the autonomy of others. Generativity (and leadership) means to be in a relationship in which one gives up much of the control that parents retain over young children and learns to hold loosely.

"Generativity means community building and can mean serving as a consultant, guide, mentor, or coach to young adults in the larger society. Mastery of Generativity tripled the chances that the decade of the 70s would be for those men and women a time of joy and not of despair. Its virtue is care for others.

"Keeper of the Meaning -- Is epitomized by the role of the wise judge. While Generativity is the caring for one person rather than another, the role of Keeper of the Meaning and its virtues of wisdom and justice are less selective. Justice unlike care means not taking sides. The focus of a Keeper of the Meaning is on conservation and preservation of the collective products of mankind – the culture in which one lives and its institutions – rather than on the development of its children.

"There are dialectic tensions to every development task:

- Identify versus Identity Diffusion
- Intimacy versus Isolation
- Generativity versus Stagnation
- Keeper of the meaning versus Rigidity

"The Generative individual cares for an individual in a direct, future-oriented relationship – as for example, a mentor or teacher. In contrast, the Keeper of the Meaning speaks for past cultural achievements and guides groups, organizations and bodies of people toward the preservation of past traditions.

"Matriarchs, genealogy mavens and antiques refinishers are all exemplars of what is involved in becoming a Keeper of the Meaning. Clearly such caretakers are not superior to caregivers.

“Who has not known at least one seventy-year-old woman who was able to be closer, wiser, more emphatic toward her grandchildren than she ever had been in the prime of life toward her own children? Grandfathers may need canes and false teeth and grandmothers need bifocals and hearing aids. But they and they alone, elicit a special trust from grandchildren and teach them meaningfully about the past.

“Integrity -- Erikson described integrity as ‘an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense. No matter how dearly paid for, it is the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions.’ Erikson suggested that wisdom was the virtue of Integrity.

“Wisdom is detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself. It maintains and learns to convey an integrity of experience in spite of the decline of bodily and mental function. Erikson suggests that one of the life tasks of Integrity is for the old to show the young how not to fear death.”

Dr. Vaillant made the following observations about these tasks.

“Some individuals, often due to great stress, tackle developmental tasks out of order or all at once. Adult development does not follow rigid rules.

“One life stage is not better or more virtuous than another. Adult development is neither a footrace nor a moral imperative. It is a road map to help us make sense of where we and where our neighbors might be located. It also contributes to our ‘wholeness’ from which our word ‘health’ is derived. In old age there are many losses and these may overwhelm us if we have not continued to grow beyond ourselves.”

Objectively examined, knowledge of these tasks can provide a matrix through which to analyze conflict, struggles, problems and/or stresses in one’s life. Knowledge of these tasks and the more detail which is provided in Dr. Vaillant’s excellent book can provide a useful tool for guiding individuals, spouses, children, and families to fruitful dialogue about problems which while they are longstanding, do not have to be permanent.

It is worth the effort because it is your life and it is your health.