

On Becoming
GENERATIVE

An Introduction to Culture Care

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ON BECOMING GENERATIVE:
AN INTRODUCTION TO CULTURE CARE

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Dear Reader,

*This booklet is a special preview of “On Becoming
Generative: An Introduction to Culture Care.”
Complete version is forthcoming.*

*Towards our Generative Future,
Makoto Fujimura*


Fujimura
Institute



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*Dedicated to those who sowed seeds of generativity into
my life, starting with Judy and my parents.*

BRINGING BEAUTY INTO OUR LIVES

As a newlywed couple, my wife and I began our journey with very little. After Judy and I got married in the summer of 1983, after college, we moved to Connecticut for Judy to pursue her master's degree in marriage counseling. I taught at a special education school and painted at home. We had a tight budget and often had to ration our food (lots of tuna cans!) just to get through the week.

One evening, I sat alone, waiting for Judy to come home to our small apartment, worried about how we are going to afford the rent, to pay for necessities over the weekend. Our refrigerator was empty and I had no cash left.

Then Judy walked in with a bouquet of flowers.

I got really upset.

“How could you think of buying flowers if we can't even eat!” I remember saying, frustrated.

Judy's reply has been etched in my heart for over thirty years now.

“We need to feed our souls, too.”



The irony is that I am an artist. I am the one, supposedly, feeding people's souls. But in worrying for tomorrow, in the stoic responsibility I felt to make ends meet, to survive, I failed to be the artist. Judy was the artist that day: she brought home a bouquet.

I do not remember what we ended up eating that day, or that month (probably tuna fish.)

But I do remember that particular bouquet of flowers. I painted them.

Life is beauty, admire it.

Mother Teresa

"We need to feed our souls, too." Those words still resonate with me today.

Is Judy still right? Do we, as human beings, need more than food and a shelter?

Do we *need* beauty in our lives?

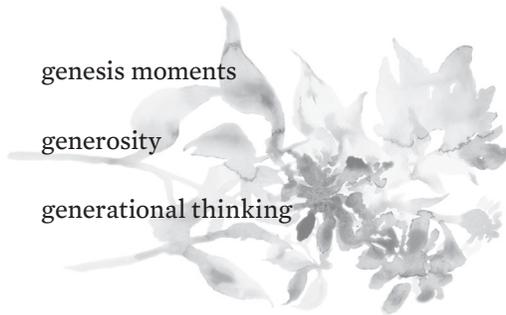
Given our limited resources, how do we cultivate and care for our souls? And how do these questions apply to the larger culture?

My life as an artist, and as a founder of International Arts Movement, has been in pursuit of questions like these—not just internally or for my own sake but with a growing global network of people. What began as an admission of my own failure to be an artist has now given birth to many principles that govern my life as an artist, father, husband, and leader. I call them “generative principles.” What started out as Judy’s care for our own souls has blossomed into an effort to extend that care into our home and our churches, and into a vision for culture at large. What I call Culture Care is a generative approach to culture that brings bouquets of flowers into a culture bereft of beauty.

AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY
TOWARD GENERATIVITY

I have found that what I am asked to do often seems impossible. How can I make a living as an artist? How can I support a family and a growing movement as an artist? These challenges seem to expand with every opportunity, but in my mind they come back to the same generative principles.

This essay launches a series of essays and conversations on Culture Care, in which I invite the contributions of artists, curators, critics, patrons, and other lovers of the arts and participants in culture. To help frame the conversation for different types of thinkers, I begin by briefly considering “three G’s” sparked by Judy’s act that have come to characterize my approach to generative thinking:



In the next section, I will draw these elements together with more formal definitions of the terms “generative” and “culture care” to help frame and catalyze an ongoing conversation.



Bringing home a bouquet of flowers created a *genesis moment* for me. Judy’s small act fed my soul. It renewed my conviction as an artist. It gave me new perspective. It challenged me to deliberately focus on endeavors in which I could truly be an artist of the soul.

That moment engendered many more genesis moments in the years that followed, contributing to decisions small and large that have redefined my life and provided inspiration for myself, my family, and my communities.

Genesis moments like this often include elements of the great story told in the beginning of the biblical

book of Genesis: Creativity, growth—and failure. Two of these are common in discussions about arts and culture. God creates and calls his creatures to fruitfulness. Adam exercises his own creativity in naming what has been created. But the story also runs into failure and finitude.

Generative thinking often starts out with a failure, like my failure to think and act as an artist. I have discovered that something is awakened through failure, tragedy, and disappointment. It is a place of learning and potential creativity. In such moments, you can get lost in despair or denial, or you can recognize the failure and run toward the hope of something new.

The genesis moment is to assume every moment is fresh. Creativity applied in a moment of weakness and vulnerability can turn failure into enduring conversation, opening new vistas of inspiration and incarnation. To remember what Judy did, to speak of it with others, to value her care—all this is generative, as her act can be honored and become a touchpoint for others, leading to the birth of ideas

and actions, artifacts and relationships that would not otherwise have been.



The flowers were also an emblem of *generosity*. Judy's generous heart—more generous than mine at that moment—valued beauty over the day-to-day worries that had so nearly narrowed my focus. Generative thinking is fueled by generosity because it so often must work against a mindset that has survival and utility in the foreground. In a culture like that, generosity has an unexpectedness that can set the context for the renewal of our hearts. An encounter with generosity can remind us that life always overflows our attempts to reduce it to a commodity or a transaction—because it is a gift. Life and beauty are gratuitous in the best senses of that word.

Judy's generosity with the bouquet is only one of many instances of generosity in my life. I was able to become an artist partly because of my parents'

generosity and encouragement. Both my father and my mother encouraged me when I desired to pursue the arts. That, for an Asian family, was extremely unusual. Music, painting, writing, and creating have always been part of my life. I took this for granted, and thought that everyone's homes were a nurturing environment for creativity. Then I went to middle school and discovered I was an anomaly! It was then that I started to realize I had somehow to defend my time for creativity in a culture that does not nurture creative growth.

Artists have a deep capacity to develop and share generosity and empathy, to point toward abundance and connections. We learn generosity as we try to communicate with a new audience, or help people express what they cannot otherwise articulate, or say something meaningful into the void. Even an artist who journeys alone, like Emily Dickinson, can develop a sense of communicating or communing with someone—the reader, nature, God—and so strengthen critical generative capacities to bring beauty into the world. An encounter with the arts can lead to generative thinking as generosity supplants our quid pro

quo expectations. (In the sciences, too, discovery is linked to the generosity of information shared among its practitioners.) The effects begin with gratitude and lead to places we cannot predict.



As I reflect on Judy's simple act and on my life in the arts, I am more and more convinced that anything truly generative is not isolated. Generative values are given to us as a gift by our parents and predecessors. They grow in conversation with the past and in our intention to speak and create so as to cultivate the values of multiple future generations. Generative thinking requires *generational thinking*.

Culture formation is generational, not birthed in a night. Generative thinking can inspire us to work within a vision for culture that is expressed in centuries and millennia rather than quarters, seasons, or fashions. People in the arts work in conversation with artists of the past as they

are preparing the future, attempting work with enduring qualities that might in turn speak to new generations.

I have seen gratuitous acts modeled by Judy's parents and family. I have failed at times to appreciate my own parents' generosity—but at least have had the receptivity to repent! My father's generosity in particular has led to so many blessings in the world that he did not expect or even realize—all flowing from his love for art and music. Such acts from our parents are now reflected in unexpected ways not least in the lives of our creative children, all of whom deeply value beauty and model generosity.

Even the term “generative” is a gift to me. My father, Osamu Fujimura, is a pioneer of acoustics research. I was born in Boston because he was doing post-doctoral research at M.I.T. with Noam Chomsky. Recently, I invited him to attend an I.A.M. conference. As we walked together to the TriBeCa Performance Center where I was about to give a keynote, he asked me what I was to speak

on. I told him the speech would be “On Generative Culture.” My father responded, “interesting . . . the word ‘generative’ . . . that was my thesis topic.”

I knew that. I had even read the thesis. But for some reason I had sidelined this influence and forgotten to link my theme to his lifetime of work! He was instrumental in bringing Chomsky's Generative Grammar Theory to Japan. I was grateful for the rediscovery and was able to present my version of generative thinking with a proper attribution of his influence.

Our lives are directed or constrained by paths paved by the generations before us. Sometimes we can trace them, as with my father. Often they shape us unawares. What is true of legacies from our parents is true also for our communities and racial and national histories. Cultures are not created overnight. We are affected by layers of experiences, personalities, and works of previous generations. Cultural histories affect us far beyond what we are able to recognize—or sometimes admit.

Generative principles flow out of generational blessing toward creativity. But the positive example of my wife and parents is all too rare. Many people look back on what can seem to be generational curses rather than blessings. I created I.A.M.—and continue to advocate for the arts—from a conviction that all people need a place of nurture toward their creative growth. Acts of generosity can inspire genesis moments even from generational failures.



This series on Culture Care will expand on these and other generative principles and apply them to several cases. It is my hope to engender conversations and so gather a community of people committed to generative living. This, it should be emphasized, is not an end in itself but a contribution to the greater good. Generative paths lead to resourcefulness, patience, and general creativity in all of life. They lead to cultural—and human—thriving.

CULTURE CARE DEFINED

Culture Care is to provide care for our culture’s “soul,” to bring to our cultural home our bouquet of flowers, so that reminders of beauty—both ephemeral and enduring—are present in even the harshest environments where survival is at stake. We may need to learn to cultivate these reminders of beauty in the same way flowers are cared for and raised. Culture Care restores beauty as a seed of invigoration into the ecosystem of culture. Such soul care is generative: a well-nurtured culture becomes an environment in which people and creativity thrive.

At this point it will be helpful to gather the threads to find a working definition of our terms. At the most basic level, we call something “generative” if it is fruitful, originating new life or producing offspring (as with plants and animals) or producing new parts (as with stem cells). When we are generative, we draw on creativity to bring into being something fresh and life-giving.

We can also approach generativity by looking at its shadow, “degenerate,” the loss of good or

desirable qualities (a term also frequently used of generations). What is generative is the opposite of degrading or limiting. It is constructive, expansive, affirming, growing beyond a mindset of scarcity.

One of Chomsky’s early definitions of “generative grammar” refers to the set of rules that can be used to create or generate all grammatical sentences in a language. He was looking in human languages, as did my father in his work in acoustics, for a universal generative principle, an explanation of our ability to generate seemingly infinite phrases by switching out elements from a finite vocabulary and grammatical framework. Building on this, we might say that a generative approach will identify and model the “grammar” or conditions that best contribute to a good life and a thriving culture.

Discovering and naming this grammar, identifying and then living truly generative principles, is a process that depends deeply on generosity. This is because it requires us to open ourselves to deep questions (and to their answers), which is impossible when survival seems to depend on

competing for scarce resources. But when we acknowledge the gratuitous nature of life—not least the world’s inordinately diverse beauty—gratitude galvanizes us to ask and welcome questions that reach beyond our own context and experience. Artists at their best help us with such questions by presenting an expansive vision of life that reveals beauty in ever-wider zones. They can reveal new facets of human flourishing even in the midst of tragedy or horror, pointing toward hope and meaning.

Another key generative principle emerges as we begin to escape the cramped thinking of a culture of scarcity: stewardship. Beyond mere survival, beyond job function, bureaucratic specialization, or social roles, is a wide scope of human concern and responsibility. We are all given gifts for which we all must care. Just as we are learning the importance of taking care of our environment to leave the earth healthy for future generations, so we must all care for culture so future generations can thrive.

The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing to find the place where all the beauty came from.

C.S. Lewis

Implied in the above themes is a measure by which to assess principles that claim to be generative: Thinking and living that is truly generative makes possible works and movements that make our culture more humane and welcoming and that inspire us to be more fully human. We can be comfortable, even confident, in affirming a cultural contribution as generative if, over time, it recognizes, produces, or catalyzes more beauty, goodness, and flourishing.

What emerges from generative moments is something new, transformed from its source, something that is both free and responsible to make its own ongoing creative contribution. Think of a great tree that grows from a small seed. First, the seed must die. If it finds welcoming soil, it morphs into a tiny shoot. In time, with nurture, it comes to full growth, a thing of beauty at many levels, all on a scale out of proportion to the original seed, and full of generative potential in its turn. The tree provides shade and shelter, flowers and fruit, wood for warmth or walls or works of art. It might contribute to a landscape or resist erosion. It might inspire poems or plays, paintings or photographs. It might

spark a scientific discovery, host children at play, or lead a man or woman to reflect on the nature of life.

We can say that Culture Care is applied generative thinking. Culture Care ultimately results in a generative cultural environment: open to questions of meaning, reaching beyond mere survival, inspiring people to meaningful action, and leading toward wholeness and harmony. It produces thriving cross-generational community.



By intentionally using the word “beauty,” I am swimming upstream. When I began to exhibit in New York City in the mid-nineties, “beauty” was a taboo, not to be spoken in public. It signified cultural hegemony, imperialist power, the corruption of the past, or the cosmetic sheen of superficial contemporary culture.

The first time I spoke at Dillon Gallery in SoHo, I quoted the sacred text of Isaiah 61:2-3:

*...to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.*

At times in my own journey, even long after Judy's reminder of a bouquet of flowers, I have struggled to incorporate beauty into my life. As a National Scholar graduate student in Japan, studying the art of Nihonga, I found myself using such extravagantly beautiful materials as gold, silver, malachite, azurite, and exquisite paper and silk. I wrestled with beauty revealed in front of me, created with my own hands. I did not then have a conceptual framework to incorporate beauty as a valid premise of contemporary art. At that first artist's talk at Dillon Gallery, I spoke of this

struggle, and how, on finding the central reality of Christ, I was for the first time able to find in Christ himself an integrating premise behind beauty.

For Christ also began his ministry with a reading from Isaiah 61.

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free*

Then he shocked those in the audience by claiming that "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be the one who can provide for us a "crown of beauty instead of ashes." He claimed to be the source of this beauty.

In mentioning beauty—let alone Christ—in a room filled with people of the art world, I knew that I was transgressing against what was culturally acceptable for them. But as his follower, I needed to acknowledge Christ’s claims, to hold them up in this public sphere as something we can test. I wanted to begin to reclaim beauty, and to frame it for our time as a gift given to us by the Creator. I wanted to help recover a view of beauty as a gift that we discover, receive, and steward.

The next day, a critic who was in the audience called and surprised me by saying: “I have never heard anybody quote Isaiah in the art world and mean it with conviction. I was moved by what you had to say.” Thus began a journey to create and present beauty in the harsh and cynical environment of the New York art world.



The framework of Culture Care rests on a number of foundational assumptions. Many resemble what one might expect when applying the principles of environmental stewardship (known in some circles as creation care) to cultural stewardship. I am assuming that efforts to restore the cultural environment are good and noble, and that our efforts will benefit the next generation. I am assuming that an attempt to speak with people through conversations and questions that are outside the current cultural and ideological divide is healthy and will ultimately help culture thrive.

As a Christian, I find the source and goal of beauty, of generative thinking, and of responsible action in the biblical understanding of what our lives are for. We find our creative identity in God. Genesis moments can be assumed simply because God is the great Artist, and we are God’s artists, called to steward the creation entrusted to our care. The good news of the Bible is that in Christ we are journeying toward ultimate wholeness, integration, and well-being. We are becoming more fully what we were made to be, to the benefit of all creation.

But Culture Care and generative principles are not concepts only for Christian believers or churches or religious conversations.

Culture Care is everyone's business.

Everyone can—and I gratefully acknowledge that many people from all sorts of backgrounds do—contribute to the common good. These conversations are open to all people of good will. To make culture inhabitable, to make it a place of nurture for creativity, we must all choose to give away beauty gratuitously.

“Gratuitous” can be a negative word, as in “gratuitous violence,” but here I am using it to speak of intentionality, and even forcefulness, which, as we will see in later chapters, is necessary in our deeply fragmented culture. I will also be looking at how the reality of beauty can help integrate such fragmentation.

May our work be seeds into the soil of culture. Better yet, may these conversations strengthen our hands to cultivate that soil, so that the good seed can take root deeply and flourish. May our cultural garden, our cultural orchard, become a place of shelter for many creatures, including our own grandchildren. May we always be willing to present a bouquet of flowers, even for a fledgling artist who may not yet know of his need for beauty.

NOTES, ETC.

*(Use these pages to begin your generative journey.
Jot down notes, draw, dream...)*

Abbreviated version.