

# CULTURE CARE

SECOND EDITION

Reconnecting with Beauty  
for Our Common Life



MAKOTO FUJIMURA



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

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## ON BECOMING GENERATIVE

MY FATHER, A RENOWNED SCIENTIST, taught for many years at Tokyo University. I was born in Boston as he was completing his post-doc program at MIT with Noam Chomsky. For many years after his research stint in the United States, we went back to Japan (until we came back to Murray Hill, New Jersey, for my father to work in their golden era of pure research at Bell Telephone Laboratories) and lived in Kamakura, one of the most beautiful towns in Japan, where the Minamoto warlords ruled from the twelfth to early fourteenth centuries.

One day, my father took my older brother and me to a small teacup shop located in one of the backstreets of Kamakura. He told us, “Pick one cup out of these many cups and I will buy it for you.” My older brother, who is now a very successful Silicon Valley entrepreneur, took his time to examine every cup, and after a long while, settled on one teacup of his choice. According to my father (and I do recall this exact moment), I, on the other hand, scanned the store in a second and went straight to a cup in the back of the room and brought it right to my father.

The owner of the shop watched this whole scene, and he immediately called my father to the counter. The owner said, “The cup your younger child chose, well . . . it’s one of the most expensive cups in this store. Are you sure you want to purchase it?”

My father had a bit of a stubborn streak (which made him a great scientist). Without hesitation, he said, “Well, I promised them I would get the one they chose. I don’t care if I must get a loan, I am going to keep my promise!”

This cup, a blue line design of a deer, became a favorite cup for my mother. Even after their divorce, my mother kept the cup until the end of her life.

Imagine what would have happened to my life if my father responded by saying to me, “Son . . . I am sorry, but you chose a very expensive cup. Can you choose a different one that is not costly?”

Would I have become an artist then? Further, what would my theology look like? Would I project a scarcity mindset, rather than generous and extravagant permission from God the Father? My father would tell this story over and over, with a gleam in his eyes, to the end of his life.<sup>1</sup> Even though my father was not a Christian, his actions, keeping his promise, and his pride of his son having a good eye, gave me much fuel to search for faith and develop my art, and to remain human in our “post-human” times.

### **BRINGING BEAUTY INTO THE DIVIDE**

When I lectured on culture care in Michigan, a Muslim woman scholar came up to me afterward and shared her tears with me. “In my country, culture wars literally mean life or death. Thank you for your thesis: culture care may save lives.”

When I began to lecture on this thesis, I never imagined that culture care could save lives. But when I consider the plight of the culture this woman comes from, I realize she is right. Further, with the scope of American influence today, culture war rhetoric can lead to literal wars. In such a polarized condition we need to create another path toward a conversation of diversity and plurality.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I became an unwitting “survivor” of 9/11, being trapped underneath in a Number 3 subway car as a tower fell on top of us. For a decade afterward, as the father of three “Ground Zero children,” I had to wonder—facing a literal warzone—what our words can mean to create a future. We live in a time in which political disagreements lead to violent insurrections and militarization of a government. We live in times where we must be very careful what

we say in our social media feeds. Yes, words matter and what we say, especially to divide and demonize “the other,” can lead to actual violence and deaths.

My life as an artist and as a founder of International Arts Movement (now IAMCultureCare) has been in pursuit of peace—not just for my own life but with a growing global network of people. We do so not with a scarcity mindset that leads to culture wars, but from an abundance mindset of biblical *shalom* that my father naturally had. What began as an honest journey to be an artist of peace 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 an artist’s path to find integrity and honor God facing Ground Zero ashes has blossomed into an effort to extend that care into other spaces of devastation, such as the tsunami-ravaged land of northern Japan or the slums of Southeast Asia. We can bring these values 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. Not only has “Ground Zero” expanded from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to New York City for me, but after the global pandemic, all of us alive are survivors that share sorrow, lament, and suffering in a fractured, increasingly violent world.

### **AN ARTIST’S JOURNEY TOWARD GENERATIVITY**

Being a full-time artist today is to defy the odds and often seems unrealistic and even impossible. How can I make a living as an artist? How can I support my family as an artist? How can I support 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 book launched a series of essays and conversations on culture care, to which I invited the contributions of artists, curators, critics, patrons, and other lovers of the arts and participants in culture. I have said that “A successful painting gives birth to ten other paintings.” This

thesis of culture care has given birth to other books, including *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making*, the undergirding theological principle for culture care. We anticipate more books on culture care, as each of the chapters here, especially “Business Care,” has become more robust over the years, involving my lectures at the Swedish Economic Forum to UK Parliament. To help frame the conversation for different types of thinkers, I begin by briefly considering three G’s sparked by the artistic process that have come to characterize my approach to generative thinking:

- genesis moments
- generosity
- generational thinking

In chapter two, I will draw these elements together with more formal definitions of the terms *generative* and *culture care* to help shape and catalyze an ongoing conversation.

The environment of encouragement that my father modeled and the unction that the woman scholar gave me for culture care efforts became genesis moments. They gave me new perspective and urgency. They challenged me to deliberately focus on endeavors in which I could truly be an artist of peace and abundance. These moments 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. Whenever I saw in the news the violent reactions born out of culture war scarcity rhetoric, I became more convinced as an artist to be an artist of peace and abundance. I also must admit, regularly I fall short of my own convictions. I need people around me to live into my own calling.

Genesis moments like these often include elements of the great story told in the beginning of the biblical book of Genesis: creativity, growth—and failure. Two of these elements 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 setbacks, like my daily struggle to live fully into being an artist of care facing Ground Zero. I have discovered that something important 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 key to recognizing genesis moments is to assume that 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 that spark, to speak of it with others, to value care—all this is generative, as each 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 SPARK OF GENEROSITY**

Such a spark that begins the generative process is always based on *generosity*. 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 dominated by this mindset, 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 sense of the word.

When I finally decided that I needed to focus on my art as a life's calling and vocation as a first-year student in college, I went home to tell my father that I would dedicate my life path to trying to make it as an artist. My father was a renowned scientist as a pioneer in speech and hearing sciences, and I did not know how he would react to my now determined path. His response was, "Oh, that is what I wanted to become. . . . I am glad you are going to pursue that."

This memory of my father is 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 them for granted and thought that everyone's homes were a nurturing environment for creativity. Then I went to middle school in America and discovered I was an anomaly! It was then that I started to realize I somehow had 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 the poet 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 of generosity begin with gratitude and lead to places we cannot predict.

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As I reflect on my father's generosity 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. These values grow in conversation with the past and in our intention to speak and create 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 shaping the future, attempting to produce work with enduring qualities that might in turn speak to new generations.

I have seen gratuitous acts modeled by my parents and family, especially my wife, Haejin, and her mother who grew up in a time of severe scarcity in Korea: Despite the challenges, she bought expensive art books so that Haejin and her brother could learn to see beauty.

I have failed at times to appreciate my own parents' generosity—but at least I have had the receptivity to repent! My father's generosity 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 my 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. I invited my father to attend one of the last International Arts Movement conferences in New York City before he passed. As we walked together to the Tribeca Performing Arts 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 called "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 my father's 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 the paths, as I did 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. The soil of culture is layers of generational stewarding. We are affected by layers of experiences, personalities, and works of

previous generations. Cultural histories affect us far beyond what we can recognize—or sometimes admit.

Generative principles flow out of generational blessing toward creativity. But the positive examples of my parents are all too rare. Many people look back on what can seem to be generational curses rather than blessings. I created IAMCultureCare 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 out of generational failures.

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This book is the first of several on culture care that expand on these and other generative principles and apply them to several cases. My book *Art Is: A Journey into the Light* recounts how I see the world as an artist and how that view may be helpful in creating beauty in the fractures of our culture. My wife, Haejin, and I wrote the book *Beauty and Justice: Creating a Life of Abundance and Courage*, based on generative living principles applied to beauty and justice flowing into the world. In the book we expand the three “G’s” of generative living, and expand the list to five, reflecting on how beauty and justice can be lived out as generative lives. 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 but a contribution to the greater good. Generative paths will birth resourcefulness, patience, and general creativity in all of life. They lead to cultural—and human—thriving.

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