

GENERATION X GETS THRUST INTO MIDDLE AGE

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Generation X'ers, of whom I am one, loosely include those persons born into the post-Baby Boom generation between the mid-1960's and 1980. As the Baby Boomers are now eligible for Social Security, the older members of Generation X are in their early forties. Most Gen-Xers came of age in the frivolity of the 1980's. We were children of popular culture. We were weaned on M-TV and video games. We were the first generation to whom technology, in the form of electronics and computers, came as second nature.

Gen-Xers alive in the 1960's and 70's were generally too young to remember the assassinations of President Kennedy, his brother Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. We were spared the horrors, at least directly, of the Vietnam War. We could not understand the disgrace of Watergate. We also could not enjoy the triumphs of the first walk on the moon, and the newfound freedoms, which were exemplified at Woodstock.

Those were the events that shaped our parents' generation. These events defined their coming of age. Baby Boomers were shaped by the prosperity following World War II. In comparison, they were spared the incalculable horrors of the Great Depression and that Second "War to End All Wars." They rebelled against what has become known as the "Greatest Generation" unappreciative that their parents' selflessness and dedication to a higher calling that made the yearned for freedoms of the Baby Boomers possible. In youth, many Baby Boomers adopted ideologies associated with "Free Love" and by reputation at least, despised authority and convention.

As many of children of the 60's adopted the more conservative natures of wage earners and parents, they came to appreciate the efforts and accomplishments of their own parents and all who preceded them. Each generation eventually has the mantle of responsibility placed on its shoulders. Some times the challenge is taken up voluntarily, and other times it is thrust upon those who must act. We can debate whether those of the "Greatest Generation" undertook their great acts voluntarily or whether they were thrust in the position of defending their most basic freedoms. Regardless, the recognition is not in the reason one takes on responsibility, but in how one handles the responsibility once it is received.

In my teenage years, there was the gnawing but nebulous concept of a "Cold War," but there was no immediate threat to national security or personal safety. The concept of all out war had given way to the doctrine of "mutually assured destruction" that dissipated any palpable domestic threat. Military maneuvers took on the form of "police actions" and limited military strikes. Gen-Xers were allowed to focus their interests inward and to develop expectations consistent with near limitless capacity constrained only by imagination. We were not burdened by the realities of life. We developed a new idealism distinct from but similar to the flower children of the 60's.

As young adults, we fought in one of those police actions, which came to be known as Desert Storm. In those efforts, we avenged the hurt and disappointment experienced by our father's in Vietnam, and we were bolstered by the confidence and satisfaction enjoyed by our grandfather's in World War II (at least on a more modest scale).

We took this ambition and confidence (some would say selfishness and arrogance) into our working years. The structures and methods of the past were quickly falling away opening up new opportunities. With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the demise of the Soviet Union, the Cold War thawed. Technology in the form of computers and digital communications opened markets and financial opportunities around the world. We as a generation were no longer isolated. We saw the world as our oyster, and its rewards were ripe for the taking.

The resulting excesses funded the technology bubble of the 90's and the real estate bubble that burst recently to reveal the current recession. In less than two (2) decades, we twice participated in collectively amassing and losing wealth hardly imaginable by our parents and grandparents. We demonstrated excess on a level never before experienced by mankind.

This current recession comes as Gen-Xers are nearing the mid-point of their careers. We are dealing with the challenges and rewards of growing families. Our older children are themselves preparing for adulthood. Even with these responsibilities of career and family. Most of us until recently considered ourselves "young." We still maintained the perspective of youth. We sought out challenges and expected the rewards of accomplishment.

While that perspective may not be lost, it is at least expanded. It is expanded to see ourselves as adults moving into middle age. It is expanded with the realization that we are not the center of the universe. It is expanded with the understanding that our selfishness must evolve into selflessness in care for those persons and things that are truly important to us.

Admittedly, these types of realizations rarely come as eureka moments. Instead, the realization tends to grow on us over time. Many moments are identifiable, and often they are part of the collective consciousness of a generation. In the case of Gen-Xers, these events include 9-11, the Gulf Wars, and of course, our recent boom-bust economic experiences.

More recently, we have had moments in which collective thrusts into middle age were felt by many of us. These were moments in which collectively we got older. These were instances in which pieces of our youth and identified as history and popular culture were shed, and we could begin to feel ever so slightly the increasing pressures of middle age.

With the death of each icon, political figure, or hero (real or imagined), we begin to feel the pressures of our own mortality. The lives of the deceased span several

generations. They may be, but are not necessarily part of Generation X, but in their passing the proverbial torch seems closer to passing to our own generation.

Certain events are elements of the common consciousness of several generations. Unfortunately, the negative events are usually the ones that come to mind, but that is appropriate. It is not in how we live our lives in easy times that we grow and define ourselves. We achieve growth and definition of character by the manner in which we address and overcome challenges.

Through the common challenges of our generation, there is no miraculous metamorphosis. We do not awaken one day with the necessary tools and with the clarity of thought and purpose to address all of life's problems. Nevertheless, these events are guideposts for us to evaluate ourselves and to examine our lives to determine how well we are prepared for the challenges and responsibilities that face us. Where we are found lacking, we are put on notice of an opportunity to change and improve. It is also an opportunity to look back upon our lives and remember and appreciate those with whom we have shared our lives. As we inevitably move into middle age, the keys will be to hold on to some of the hope and dreams of our youth while preparing to live out our lives taking advantage of the lessons learned and the wisdom gained in living.

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