

GENERATIONS – From the Naughty Nineties to Generation X

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The Athenaeum Society was founded in April, 1902, during the *Victorian Age*. You have, no doubt, heard of the *Naughty Nineties* and the *Roaring Twenties*. These phrases have been coined to sum up the prevailing attitudes, public morals, and customs of the people who shared these historical eras as age cohorts. Age cohorts are groups of people born within a given time period, and they are said to make up a *generation*, though there is no definite time frame for that concept. It is, roughly, a period of time during which one group of children grows up, assumes adult responsibilities, and has another set of offspring. Generations leave distinguishing marks. Age cohorts share certain formative experiences that make them a little bit like each other and a little different from other generations. Society is always changing, and each new generation confronts an environment slightly different from that which existed before.

Unique to human behavior (and unknown to any other species) is the fact that each generation seeks to establish itself as different from and independent of the just preceding generation (which includes their parents), and that gives rise to what is known as a *generation gap*. It also gives rise to new clothing fashions, new words in the spoken vocabulary, and vast wealth to entertainers who happen to come on the scene at certain times, so that they become popular with a new generation and incomprehensible to older people. That's why, since the 1940's, we've been through crooning, the fox trot, bop, rock and roll (of several vintages), disco dancing, and now rap. We've gone from Rudy Vallee, to Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, something called Marilyn Manson, and now we must contend with something known as N'Sync and an obnoxious character called Puff Daddy. Each generation has its music, slang, and other symbols, which can never be fully understood or even described adequately while they are in vogue.

During the Victorian Age, it is said that people were so morally straight laced that they could not enjoy the simple pleasures – at least not in public. This led Sigmund Freud to develop an entire personality theory based on the data that he accumulated while interviewing a long series of white, upper-middle class housewives who were too inhibited to achieve orgasm and too embarrassed to tell anyone about it, until they were taught that it was alright to discuss such matters, if you lay on a couch and talked to someone who took notes but never looked directly at you. His idea that women must find, through marriage, the resolution of their deep-seated problem of penis envy is offensive to modern feminists, but was considered to be quite *avant-garde* in its day.

During the Victorian Age there were no movies or television, of course, but the literature and drama of the time tell us much about the prevailing attitudes and opinions of the era. In those days children were punished when they misbehaved – often with spankings – and the parents in a household were considered to be the people in charge. It was the custom for men to have jobs to support their families. And their wives kept house, cooked meals, and looked after the children. This was necessary, because in those

days there were no day care centers or fast food places, and schools did not serve lunch, much less breakfast, for the youngsters. The Victorian Age was long past before I started to school, but we still had vestiges of it in such things as the Hayes Office that regulated the movie industry and required that married people in movies sleep in separate beds and forbade anyone mentioning naughty words like pregnant or sex.

The Roaring Twenties came later, and when I was a child I always noticed that most grownups seemed a little embarrassed about it. This was the time when young men learned to drink bootleg whisky and drive fast cars, and the young women took up smoking, cut their hair short, and wore skirts even shorter. My mother never wanted to talk about it. Vaudeville was a popular form of entertainment then, and the comedians were masters of suggestive leers and double entendre. But nobody used outright obscenity in their performances. Even words like "hell" and "damn" were forbidden. The girls of the roaring twenties were called flappers, and all the kids engaged in some very athletic dancing called the Charleston and the Lindy, which were good for aerobic conditioning but not very romantic.

Though marijuana was legal at the time, nobody bothered with it, and their fascination with the speakeasy and drinking whisky just because the federal government forbade it created an entire new and very profitable industry, known as organized crime. With no Al Capone to organize the mob, we probably would never have had a Cosa Nostra or John Gotti to contend with generations later. The marks left by generations on society are not always proud achievements.

The next generation was made up of people who actually had to try to earn a living during the depression and then had to fight World War II, so they did not have much time for nonsense. But they had the political wisdom and sense of social responsibility necessary to save democracy, first from the economic disaster that threatened it, and then from the fascist military powers that tried to destroy it. One might say that modern civilization came of age during this generation, as colonialism began to crumble, and the right of robber barons to exploit the general population began to be opposed. That generation did have some fun, of course. They invented a dance called the jitter bug, which required a lot more skill than the Charleston, and some of the young men wore something called zoot suits, which were uglier than the leisure suits that came later but did not last very long.

My own teenage years were during the postwar era, the late 1940's and the 1950's. Ours has been referred to as the *silent generation*, because we had been taught not to complain too much. And it was a prosperous time, though we had the threat of nuclear war hanging over us. In the fall of 1950, my senior history teacher told us that World War III had begun the previous summer when the Communists invaded South Korea. Fortunately, he was wrong, but his forecast was typical of the dreadful awareness that all young people of that time had: that powerful new weapons were being developed by the two great superpowers, and those weapons might be used one day in a terrible holocaust that would mean the end of civilization. My generation had their share of adolescent preoccupations and idiosyncracies, such as teenage girls swooning while

Frank Sinatra and Eddie Fisher crooned songs like “That Old Black Magic” and “Oh Mine Papa.” But if any of the entertainment icons of that day had been arrested for drug smuggling or carrying concealed weapons, their careers would have gone down in disgrace. It was a time when public morality was still held in respect. Even though the bar may have dropped a little when Clark Gable was able to say to Scarlett O’Hara “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn,” and get away with it, it was still a few decades before the “F word” would appear in public dialogue.

Just about the time I got married and began to take on the responsibilities of adulthood, we began to hear about the *beat generation* and how concerned they were about important issues. They were so concerned about important issues that they spent most of their time sitting around coffee houses reciting poetry that never seemed to have any words that rhymed.

But the beat generation was unique and in some ways more ominous, because it complained that in that era of peace and prosperity there were a lot of people who were unhappy, because society was not fulfilling all their needs. They were the first generation to imagine that society was supposed to fulfill their needs, but these needs were not to be confused with needs like food, clothing and shelter. The needs they complained about were more like “a sense of fulfillment,” or a “a feeling of oneness with mankind,” or “finding a coherent identity,” whatever those phrases mean. They had come from philosophers called *existentialists* and it was embarrassing to admit that one could never figure out exactly what *existentialism* meant, other than self absorption. So I did not think much of the beat generation, but if I had known what was coming later I would have liked them a lot better. For one thing they were peaceful, though ineffectual. But the one thing they did seem to accomplish was to move the art of complaining and protesting a little farther along, so that by the time the next generation came on the scene, the world was ripe for a group of young people that was willing to issue and even set out to pursue a set of demands that exceeded anything anyone had previously dared to ask for.

The next generation came to be known as the *Baby Boomers*, and they were about to embark on a series of events that would change forever the peace and tranquillity of America and the world. Baby boomers are people born between 1946 (those conceived immediately after the World War II veterans came home) and about 1964, during which the birth rate reached new heights. I realize, of course, that many members of that group (which I call *children of the sixties*, since so many were flawed by that raucous decade) are present, even as I speak, but the truth must be told. These young Americans envisioned themselves to be the most idealistic, least materialistic, and most spiritual generation in history, but it went on to become no more or less spiritual or idealistic than any other generation, and in the economic boom of the 1990’s became the most grasping and consuming generation in history. But it has never lost its sense of generational self-idolatry. This is the group that gave us war protests, draft card burning, brassiere burning, hard rock, flower children, hippies, gay rights, the beginning of the drug epidemic, Students for a Democratic Society, sit-ins in the offices of university deans, the National Organization of Women, the AIDS epidemic, Woodstock, and a host of groups

like the Rolling Stones and the Grateful Dead, and I could go on...and on...and on.

Generations are known for their heroes. In heavyweight boxing, the Victorians had John L. Sullivan, the great bare-knuckled champion who would fight as many as 75 rounds. The silent generation had Joe Louis, a great champion who set an example for boys of his own race as well as others. First, he proved Adolph Hitler to be wrong, when Hitler said that no black man could beat an Aryan champion. Louis knocked out the German Max Schmeling in the first round. And then, like many of the sports heroes of his day, he joined the army as an enlisted man to defend his country in World War II. Compare him with the Boomers' heavyweight champion, who was better known for composing doggerel poetry and bragging that he could "float like a butterfly and sting like a bee." Like many baby boomers, he disdained military service, because he had not had the privilege of helping to determine the nation's foreign policy.

Actually the baby boomers have led a kind of charmed existence, making life miserable for the rest of us while routinely imitating the proverbial object that comes up smelling like a rose. A certain president of the United States -- who shall remain nameless, because we don't discuss politics in this society -- engaged in the most immoral of behavior in the oval office that previously would have been considered a disgrace to the position, but which led the majority of the boomers to conclude that we really should not be concerned about the private lives of our national leaders -- a novel idea to the rest of us.

This generation was described in a recent *New Yorker* article as "a polymorphous mass of willful protoplasm able to reshape the world through the unconscious exercise of its desires." "What boomers want, boomers get," another author observed. Evidence of the omnipotence of their self-centered desires permeates the culture. The nation manufactured a plentiful supply of station wagons when they were Little Leaguers to haul them back and forth to their games, produced muscle cars when they got driver's licenses, then turned to thrifty imports when they were struggling young grownups, and then came out with minivans and SUV's when they became parents. The boomers were the first generation to dictate the terms of their own adolescence, and one psychologist referred to them as "the most plugged in generation" and says "their electronic world has become their community." As soon as they were old enough to shave, the nation had to stop what it was doing and spend a decade preoccupied with sex. Capitalism responded to their surging hormones by providing miniskirts, making topless fashionable, introducing water beds, and building coed dormitories in formerly conservative universities.

Even the major childhood diseases were conquered when they began to catch them, so they would not have to bear the pain of polio or the inconvenience of the German measles. Suburbia was created to give them sidewalks on which to ride their bicycles, and airlines invented frequent-flyer miles once they started traveling. When they lost interest in dating, VCRs materialized suddenly, and the selective service system was dismantled when they let it be known that they did not want to have anything to do with the military. And the Soviet Union fell when they got tired of being afraid of it.

Sports equipment manufacturers made souped up golf clubs and large face tennis rackets, when they developed an interest in playing those games. The cell phone was invented to enable them to talk incessantly while moving around the community. In anticipation of their evolving needs, as they age, the pharmaceutical industry has created Viagra for them, and a boomer-controlled insurance industry has agreed to pay for it. Though it had been predicted that this generation would be the first to be poorer than their parents, they were blessed in the 90's with the biggest bull market in history, and were treated to the fast food version of getting rich. Now their children, the younger and more industrious *generation X* are toiling in their offices and factories to generate the capital on which the boomers will retire.

Many of the boomers themselves recognize their own self centeredness. As one feminine boomer columnist wrote recently "...many of my friends and I who are in our 50's still like to think that we've still got it going on...we're always blathering about our menopause, our grandchildren, our memory lapses, our thinning hair, our failed marriages, our estrogen therapies, and so forth. And to be sure, boomer men aren't any better. It's hard to open a newspaper or magazine and not read about some guy's prostate problems or learn how popular tummy tucks, face-lifts and nose jobs have become for them." With typical boomer narcissism, they believe all this represents a kind of progress in human affairs.

When the academic world was shocked last year by the announcement that Mt. Holyoke College history professor and Pulitzer Prize winner Joseph Ellis had falsified his autobiography, often spicing his class lectures with tales of his combat experiences in Vietnam, even though he had spent all of his military service as a teacher at West Point and had never even been to Vietnam, a *Time* magazine writer, a boomer himself, observed casually that "Fellow baby boomers speculate that Ellis gave in to a generational tendency to exaggerate one's part in the great events of the 1960's." That "generational tendency to exaggerate" reared its ugly head again last fall when a boomer football coach – an Irish Catholic named O'Leary – was hired to coach Notre Dame, then had to be fired a few days later when it came out that he had falsified his job resume – having never played college football himself nor earned a master's degree, as he had claimed.

And the boomer demands continue. In the near future they want a cure for arthritis. They want coronary by-pass surgery on an outpatient basis. They want an expanded Medicare program to pay for their medications as they approach old age. And they want the elimination of inconvenient taxes, such as those on their parents' estates. They may get most of these things, because most current congresspersons are card carrying baby boomers.

But lest you think that these observations are the mutterings of a disgruntled old man, let me say that I am much happier with the current generation of young people – the generation of twenty somethings . They show much more promise. A new developmental psychology textbook says that they are more serious about education, are going to college in larger numbers, and are less vulnerable to the hype of advertising.

They get along better with their parents, and they are less involved in sexual activity and more likely to use birth control and to practice safe sex,

On the negative side, however, the book points out that they are staying home a little longer, they are returning home to live with their parents more often, they are staying single in larger numbers, they are cohabiting without benefit of marriage more often, and they are having more gay and lesbian relationships. So they are not perfect. But when you consider what their parents were like, what can you expect?

April 4, 2002