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Millennials: Creating Change in a World Gone Mad

On January 1st, 2000, as the first rays of sunlight crossed the International Date Line, the start of a new millennium began. After the very prosperous 1990's, the outlook for many was that the good times would continue. Why wouldn't they? The Soviet Communist system had fallen leaving the Western World without a major enemy, and Chinese Communism had begun to embrace the money-making ventures of capitalism to a certain extent. January 1st was not only the first day of the 21st century, it also marked the awakening of a new generation: Generation Y, also called Millennials. This group of individuals, born after 1980 up to the late 1990s or early 2000s, is unique compared to the previous generations. The lives of the average western Millennial center on technology, as the dawn of personal computing began during their youngest ages and the Internet began connecting the world during their teenage years. The world known by western Millennials is small, smart, and a very dangerous place. It is this combination of interconnectivity, access, and crisis that has shaped the generation that composes the youngest of the voting eligible population in the United States, and may be providing the catalyst for change in the face of a dominant Boomer and Generation X population. However, it will not be an easy task, as standing in the way are obstacles including a

generation gap limiting cross generation understating, economic crisis limiting the financial power, and world instability. “With the obvious exception of youngsters born during the Great Depression, no generation in American history faces more daunting obstacles” (Queenan).

Lost in Translation

It could be said without question that every new generation is confusing and, to an extent, annoying to the generations prior. “For some time now, articles with titles like ‘How to Work with a Millennial’ and ‘Millennials in the Workplace’ have found their way into newspapers, blogs and magazines (including [Brandweek]) – all of them about this mysterious new generation of practitioners in the office” (Waite), as if this new generation required an owner’s manual. This problem with cross generation communication is not limited to the business world. The problem also exists in politics, religion, and technology.

Since the 2008 election of President Barack Obama, a rising political movement has grown, decrying big government and socialism. The Tea Party Movement, a broad group mainly comprised of white male Republican conservatives over 30 and earning more than \$50,000 a year (Gallup), is highly critical of the President. Millennials voted for Obama “by a 2-to-1 margin” (Wingfield), compared to “older voters [who] went for Obama only 50-48” (Wingfield). Many in the Tea Party Movement see things such as Health Care Reform as blatant attacks by the socialist left on America. The reaction by older individuals is expected; during their lifetimes *socialism* and *communism* were threats to the western world. They grew up with the threat of nuclear holocaust as the Cold War with the Soviet Union dragged on.

Millennials, however, saw the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end to the Soviet Union, while watching China transform itself from an isolated communist state to a global trade power adopting some capitalist principles. Millennials see aspects of socialism at work in Europe, and right here in America. Crying "'Socialism' does not have the same power that it did 20 years ago" (Lloyd). After the Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, the terms Free Market and Deregulation are more apt to trigger fears compared to Socialism, especially as youth unemployment tops 20% (Fox Business Channel).

It is not just in the discussion of socialism and capitalism that the generations have different vantage points. During the Cold War era, the threat of nuclear holocaust was real but never materialized. Compare that to the threat of Islamic extremist terrorism and Domestic terrorism, the threats of which have indeed materialized. From the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995 to the September 11th Terrorist Attacks in 2001, Millennials have witnessed events on par to Pearl Harbor throughout their entire childhood and adolescence. Poet bakeem Lloyd of Phoenix, Arizona makes a stark observation:

The threats we face today are coming from non-state actors who are well financed and do not have the same kind of moral, social or societal concerns that check the power and ambitions of the nation states. So informal groups like terror cells or radical groups are capable of recruiting like minded individuals from any continent to act anywhere in the world. That changes the definition of the battlefield and who is a soldier in ways that make war a way of life and not just a temporary state.

Millennials thus may have a little more in common with the Greatest Generation, or those who fought in the World Wars, than they do with Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers. Both Millennials and The Greatest Generation have dealt with surprise attacks on the homeland by a foreign foe, however unlike the Greatest Generation, the foe is not a nation, but an idea, and “ideas are bulletproof” (Hugo Weaving).

Better Educated, yet Unemployed

Recent data from Pew Research indicates “Millennials are on course to become the most educated generation in American history” (Pew Research Center). It’s a trend caused by two factors: increasing demand for individuals holding a degree, and, plenty of idle time due to an economic recession that has put much of the unemployment on Millennials (Pew Research Center), who often have shorter resumes due to their age.

It is this unemployment in the early years of adulthood that could leave a lasting legacy on Millennials. “An oft-quoted study by Yale University economist Lisa Kahn found that workers entering a labor market with high unemployment receive lower pay and that the pay penalty can last 15 years or more” (Samuelson). That lower pay doesn’t faze Millennials too much, as only 15% say having a high-paying career is one of the most important things in life, equal to living a very religious life (Pew Research Center). However, that may change in the coming decade “as baby boomers retire, higher federal spending on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid may raise Millennials’ taxes and squeeze other government programs” (Samuelson).

The delay in entering the workforce could also have the unseen effect as limiting the Millennial's spending power to force change in the world. However, finding ways around problems seems to be the cornerstone of this new generation. Just as they are taking the lack of employment as an opportunity to become more educated, Millennials just may find an opportunity to force change through other means. Millennials vote at a higher rate than other generations at their age, as well as volunteer at higher rates than previous generations (Jayson). The increase in community and civic involvement makes sense when reading a recent study published in the *Journal of Social Studies Research* in 2007. "The results" researchers Andrew Forrest and Dr. Allyson Weseley conclude, "suggest that to increase turnout for the 18-24 year old bracket we may wish to focus on increasing their knowledge of and building trust in the voting system" (Forrest and Weseley) Millennials are more educated, however, however are becoming increasingly frustrated with the current political status. While more Millennials, much to the chagrin of Tea Party members, identify as liberal, they're also losing the enchantment with the Democratic Party and Barack Obama from 2008, as some campaign promises are broken (Pew Research Center). As the Boomer and Gen X generation begins to retire, those in politics should take heed of their new constituents.

Changing the World, and Ourselves, Against All Odds

Rising unemployment and financial disarray should keep Millennials down, by all logic. They do not have the financial clout to exact change in the world around them. They are unemployed, living at home, and going to school (Pew Research Center). There should be no time for social activism. However, that is where things change. "Rather than working their way

up at a government agency or large nonprofit, ... [Millennials] in their 20s or early 30s are leveraging business partnerships, grants and donations for their own initiatives to do good in



Figure 1 Drew Chafetz, founder of love.fútbol, helps children in Villa Nueva, Guatemala haul rocks to make a fútbol field. Source: Alfredo Axtmayer/Washington Post
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/gallery/2008/10/13/GA2008101302185.html?sid=ST2008101400045>

the world” (Shapira). Whether it be organizations such as love.fútbol [figure 1] , which builds low-maintenance soccer fields in Guatemala, Orphans Against AIDS which provides educational funding for HIV/AIDS Orphans, the Genocide Intervention Network to spotlight global atrocities; or American youth Understanding Diabetes Abroad which gives insulin to Latin American diabetics, Millennials are changing the world against all odds (Shapira). It is not just volunteer interests or social entrepreneurship, “Evidence abounds of [Millennial’s] interest in public-oriented careers” (Shapira). Civic organizations such as Teach for

America has seen a 37% increase in 2009 applicants over 2007, the Peace Corps applications are up 16%, and AmeriCorps are seeing increased applicants. Given the combination of a stalled job market, a generation growing up in a time of uncertainty and danger, and a President advocating civil service, the Millennials have found that not having a job does not mean an end to working (Stone).

As a Millennial myself, and having recently been laid off from an employer of four years, I have turned to volunteer work while unemployed. Having served with the American Red Cross Grand Canyon Chapter during 2005, including Arizona’s response to Hurricane Katrina,

volunteering came natural. With an idle schedule filled only by one of three remaining college classes, I put my talents and expertise from the Information Technology field to use by volunteering with Chelan County Fire District 1 in Wenatchee, Washington. However, even with the opportunities to create change in the world around me, there remain walls and counterweights slowing down progress.

Among the walls standing in the way of a generation trying to find ways of being productive even if unemployed, and chipping away at the mounds of social issues around them, one continues to be a negative attitude from older generations. “They [Gen-Xers, and Boomers] cite studies proving that entitled, self-absorbed Millennials make the worst employees ever” (Queenan). Some older business professionals, such as Dr. Steven Berglas, an executive coach and management consultant with a background in psychiatry and psychotherapy, speak of Millennials with disdain. Referring to millennials as “The Everybody Gets A Trophy Generation” in his 2008 *Forbes* column, and complaining “[they] have been so coddled, so inoculated against insults and injury, that they are now too, well, *soft* to achieve entrepreneurial success.” He is worried that “millennials seem devoid of an impulse to fight and prove their superiority over others--not a surprising outcome when everyone gets a trophy” (Berglas). It is not just older Americans as the detractors; some Millennials also seem to be sour on their observations of their fellow generation. Writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Nathan Fisk, a small-business and political consultant living in Colorado states that “Today, our future is again under threat, but too few young Americans are taking up the call to action,” in an article filled with literary images of soldiers storming the beaches of Normandy in World War II, complaining that “the Facebook generation has made... virtually no sacrifice at all” (Fisk). It would seem Fisk and

Berglas both seem to be blind to both the reality of the current economic state and the struggle being taken by so many to both stay afloat and produce results. Berglas does go on to acknowledge social entrepreneurship within the Millennial ranks. However it is clear that he is not connecting successful social entrepreneurship to just plain successful entrepreneurship. The old notion that being successful at business means being wealthy is being challenged by the Millennials, who put helping others in need at a higher priority than high-income (Pew Research Center). It is just another example of different priorities for each generation.

However, there are some members of the older generations that have noticed the current way of doing things needs to be updated to meet the needs of modern society. One of those individuals has been Dr. Michael Wesch, assistant professor of cultural anthropology at Kansas State University, and born just 5 years too early to be a Millennial. One of the ideas Dr. Wesch perpetuates is the need to revision the educational model from the classic classroom to something that both embraces technology and the creativity of students. "It becomes less important for students to know, memorize, or recall information, and more important for them to be able to find, sort, analyze, share, discuss, critique, and create information". He notes things as simple as how many older university classrooms are designed, lecture halls using stadium seating and limiting interaction. "In short, it tells students to trust authority and follow along" (Wesch). Dr. Wesch continues to explore the challenges and issues surrounding education, fueled by the Millennial-driven social internet. "New media has thrown all of us as educators into just this kind of question-asking, bias-busting, assumption-exposing environment" (Wesch).

However, there are some changes Millennials are making on their own after seeing the mistakes of the recent years. After the financial meltdown, Millennials are starting to view savings as a very important financial institution, and the stock market a very high risk place. Even those who are investing are doing so in Roth IRAs (McGuire). The importance of saving money has become abundantly clear as many Millennials are forced to abandon solo-living and either return home, or, live with other people (Rubin). American Millennials are facing these changes alone, or with only the support of family and friends, as “compared to some other countries, the United States invests little in this demographic” (Rubin).

The Road Ahead

As of June 8th, 2010, the Total Public Debt Outstanding in the United States sits at \$13,056,957,049,453.42 and counting (U.S. Department of the Treasury). Since April 20th, 2010, an estimated 12,000-19,000 barrels per day (The New York Times) flows into the Gulf of Mexico from the on-going Deepwater Horizon oil spill. As Baby Boomers age, they will begin to add on to an already stretched Medicare and Social Security entitlement program (Queenan). All of these are going to be financial burdens on an already burdened millennial generation. “Americans have never shrunk from adversity, so in the fullness of time young people may put on their game face, create new industries, discover fresh roads to affluence and solve the nation's vexing economic problems. But all that lies far in the future” (Queenan).

Part of these challenges is already being tackled in some part by Millennials. In 2008 Millennials helped create the landslide election for Barack Obama, with hopes that his Presidency will restore America’s diplomatic relationship with nations of the world and slow the

imploding economy. So far his performance has been fair. For example, Obama has been able to get Russian President Medvedev to agree on how to handle Iran (Daragahi). However, the other challenges, such as reducing the national debt while supporting the older generations will be a daunting challenge for a generation that experts say will earn less in their lifetimes than previous generations (Samuelson) (Queenan).

Conclusion

Few of the prior generations can have the same point of view as millennials. Even the Silent Generation or the Greatest Generation, who endured the Great Depression and two World Wars, cannot view the world from the same set of eyes. Having endured our own financial meltdown, major acts of war on our own soil, two foreign wars being fought simultaneously, while still dealing with the ever increasing the national debt, environmental disasters, and an energy crisis, the millennial generation has a unique history. Add the unprecedented access to the breadth and width of human knowledge, the ability to play roles only previously reserved for professional photographers, photojournalists, or film directors, and the ability to communicate, face-to-face in real time with people from all around the globe, millennials also have the tools to meet the challenges head on. With less emphasis on religion, and being more ethnically diverse (Pew Research Center), many of the challenges that faced the Boomers during the Civil Rights Years are nearly non-existent.

Millennials understand what needs to happen to exact change. From participating in the electoral process, to just getting the job done, this generation is working hard to solve the

problems leftover from the 20th century, despite or in-spite of the odds and obstacles against them.

These are obstacles that will end up having to be passed by the leaders of the generation, and from evidence presented, the work has begun. However, though the statistics show more engagement, more education, and a better alertness to the problems of the world, the trend isn't absolute. Not all millennials are politically literate, engaged, or alert to the issues at hand. The longer the unemployment rate stays high, the less power millennials have to make an impact in the world. The growing right-wing extremist movement in the United States could further dampen chances of the economic growth needed to allow this generation to flourish as anger rises. Millennials have the opportunity further increase engagement, both politically and socially. We have the technology to communicate globally in an instant, to coordinate the movement of millions, and effect change in real time. The challenge now is to rise above the rhetoric of the extreme elements of society, politics, and the sluggish economy, to begin to influence the course of domestic and foreign policy.

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