

How Boomers Turned Conventional Wisdom on Its Head

A Historian's View on How the Future May Judge a Transitional Generation

"Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64."
— Paul McCartney (1964)

"A man is a success if he gets up in the morning and gets to bed at night, and in between he does what he wants to do."
— Bob Dylan (1997)

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by W. Andrew Achenbaum, Ph.D.

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Imagine that today is April 15, 2112, almost four decades after the death of the oldest Baby Boomer (1946–2075) in the United States. Let's put this demographic milestone into perspective: Abraham Lincoln died on this date 247 years ago; Jamestown, Virginia was settled about 500 years earlier. Enough time would have transpired by 2112, in my opinion, to evaluate the Boomers' place in history. How should we go about assessing the cohort's legacy?

Did Boomers intend to leave behind certain values and norms as their legacy? Did parental desires and media commentaries shape expectations associated with Boomers' long-awaited rendezvous with destiny? How did historical circumstances sustain Boomers or frustrate them (or both) along the way? What did Boomers really contribute to the well-being of those who followed? How long will their impact last? Even in 2112 assessments of the Boomers will be subject to revision. The cohort was so diverse that various elements America will interpret the Boomers' legacy in divergent ways. What follows neither exults nor damns the cohort. While the evaluation is mixed, it praises that courage of that segment of the Boomer vanguard who sought to adapt the spirit of the 1960s to novel conditions in a new millennium for the sake of those who followed.

A Diverse and Dynamic Cohort

Boomers, particularly those born between 1946 and 1955 showed signs of their potential clout while still young.¹ Their numbers at birth produced a demographic bulge, far larger in size than their parents' birth cohort. (This is not the biggest in U.S. history, however. Generation Y, those born between 1983 and 2000, surpassed the Boomers' share of the U.S. population.²) Nevertheless, as Boomer babies matured, the convoy altered every stage of life. Institutions had to accommodate their size and needs. Boomers turned conventional wisdom on its head. By the time they reached age 64 (Paul McCartney's threshold for old age), this cohort in total constituted a quarter of the U.S. population, a force to be reckoned in politics, the labor market, and society.³

No other birth cohort in U.S. history proclaimed itself to be a generation louder than did Boomers. According to a MetLife Mature Market Institute study, 83% of those born in 1946 liked being called "Baby Boomers."⁴ In this regard Boomers differed from other illustrious cohorts in U.S. history. Signers of the Declaration

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of Independence expected to be hung as traitors, not to be venerated as "Founding Fathers." In contrast to Boomers, they were provincials at birth, unlikely to become agents of revolutionary change. Similarly, those who survived the Great Depression and World War II were not celebrated until late in life as the "Greatest Generation." When they were young, what mattered was "this division into working class and business class which exhibit[ed] the outstanding cleavage" in modern American culture.⁵ Nor has Boomer cohort-centrism or its world view passed on to younger people. Struggling to create distinctive niches amid changes

in the global economy, members of Generation X (b. 1965–1982) and Generation Y (b. 1983–2000) find chronological boundaries arbitrary. Those who came after Boomers rarely relate to others on the basis of age.⁶

In contrast, Baby Boomers always set themselves apart. Their music resoundingly set parameters for their collective identity here and abroad. Paul McCartney, a mere 16 when he penned “When I’m 64,” projected Boomers’ hopes and fears as they faced adulthood.⁷ McCartney wondered if his young listeners would retain vigor past their prime. Or, would their last acts be played out unnoticed on dark stages? Bob Dylan at age 56 laced irony into his critique of Boomers entering the Third Quarter of Life: getting in and out of bed had become a big deal as they matured, attesting to the extent that Boomers wanted to remain self-reliant and independent. One way or another they expected to get their way.

Furthermore, Boomers maintained a resilient (albeit contradictory) set of values, which was manifest in youth. At times Boomers affirmed inclusive, egalitarian, democratic American ideals; moments later, they could be selfish, self-absorbed, and greedy.⁸ When they watched events unfold and interpreted their significance, Boomers thought their accounts of history were unique, the only ones worth noting. Who remembers or cares what their parents and teachers were doing while Boomers sat in front of TVs during the 1950s or hid under school desks to rehearse for possible nuclear attacks. JFK’s assassination shattered youthful illusions of innocence and immortality. Many Boomers took solace and inspiration from Paul Simon’s lyrics for “Sounds (sic) of Silence.” These words, sung at the 10th anniversary of 9/11, pierced the hearts of Boomers who at successive stages of life felt compelled to come together in rituals of their making, when stunned by events beyond their control and sensibilities.

Boomers Coming of Age

The heady — and occasionally hellacious — ferment of the 1960s captivated some Boomers while alienating others. The media, looking for headlines, paid more attention to activists and members of the counter-culture than to those disenchanted by upheavals. Poets captured the energy, by turns idealistic and displaced. “I shall create! If not a note, a hole,” wrote Gwendolyn Brooks in “Boy Breaking Glass” (1968). “If not an overture, a desecration.”⁹ For all their differences, members of the cohort agreed about several issues. Boomers felt confident that they were sparking revolutions, sexual and otherwise. The vanguard, born between 1946 and 1955, believed that theirs was the age group most immediately affected by everyday consequences of the civil rights movement, women’s liberation, and gay rights. Boomers eventually came to share a common dread of growing older.

Nor were Boomers alone in heralding their generation’s special destiny. Advertisers pitched new toys, foods, and clothes to their parents; it fueled and fulfilled the desires of post-war Americans who felt that they, as adults, could provide for the needs and desires of their children better than their own wishes

had been satisfied when youngsters. In due course, ads targeted Boomers with the wherewithal to buy things for themselves. Madison Avenue and the Internet never quite figured out how to successfully segment the “Boomer senior” market, however.

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Educators, politicians, and commentators distinguished this birth cohort from ones that preceded and followed it. The *Time* Man of the Year in 1966 was the Baby Boom Generation, to which the editors included anyone under age 25.¹⁰ Their parents believed that Boomers, growing up in affluent adulation, were groomed to redesign the American

landscape. Although the Children of the Great Depression may have projected onto their offspring some of their own unfulfilled hopes, the older generation thought their expectations would come true. Boomers altered norms as children and youth. This cohort seemed bound, pundits claimed, to challenge established mores and overturn conventional wisdom.

Repeatedly affirming the Boomers' capabilities caused people to play down variations in cohort composition. Unaccentuated racial, ethnic, regional, metropolitan, and class distinctions had been apparent in the 1940s. Persistent disadvantages in education, medical care, housing, and community resources widened gaps between rich and poor families, inner-city teens, and suburban youth. Opportunities for upward mobility arose as Boomers moved into adulthood. Still, by stressing modal patterns in characterizing the age group, commentators glossed over health and income disparities still quite evident in the cohort's later years.

In addition, obituary writers usually exaggerate Boomers' historical impact on American society.¹¹ Those born between 1946 and 1955 did not reincarnate sex — contrary to what many Boomer adolescents bragged or their parents feared. Nor did this birth cohort in its prime reconstruct the U.S. political economy in order to make prosperity's rewards more accessible to the disadvantaged. The burdens of citizenship — such as military service in Vietnam — did not become more equitably distributed. In the face of challenges at home and in the world at large, Boomers had to devise their own measures for success. Those appalled by the deceit and travesties around them demanded radical changes. Others doubted that struggling should foment revolution. The last album by the Beatles, a group by then in disarray, set the tone for a generation unsure of moorings as it went about reinventing itself:

*And when the broken-hearted people /
Living in the world agree / There will be an answer, let it be*

"Let it be" (1970)

The Boomer Politic

Large numbers of Boomers “dropped out,” and others demurred when promises of a Great Society gave way to Reaganomics. Observers on the left and right anticipated that Boomers in due course would vote *en masse* to protect their Social Security, Medicare, or Medicaid benefits. Events did not unfold as commentators anticipated. Despite economic setbacks in later years this cohort did little to modify the dynamics of retirement. Few saved enough for rainy days. That said, the Baby Boom Generation over their lives did remold enough aspects of modern America to turn conventional wisdom (their own and others) on its head.

Neither a transformative nor a revolutionary force in U.S. history, Boomers emerged as a *transitional* catalyst for change. This cohort did not fulfill predictions that they would change the sweep of U.S. history as much as the Founding Fathers or their parents. To interpret the Boomer legacy against the backdrop of its advanced billing requires nuance, for segments of this cohort had a real, albeit uneven, impact on society.

Analyzing diverse age group’s political involvement reveals something of the zigzag pattern that was to unfold over time. No one in 1955, looking at kids in playgrounds, would have predicted the rebellious independence that followed, when youthful Boomers joined brave (usually older) leaders to fight for racial equality or to protest the war in Vietnam. Nor would anyone who chronicled the Boomers’ pleas to give peace a chance or to set new fashion styles have guessed that many in middle age would exceed their parents in their materialistic grasping.¹² Contrapuntal changes already emerged in the group’s dynamics.

Some Boomers lost hope in attempts to challenge authority. Violence terrified others. Still others disengaged. As a result, many Boomers grew complacent about inequalities at home and impervious to genocide abroad. “The 1970s were the decade of transition. Societies shifted from an agenda of greater social equality, security, and inclusion, toward a socially harsher, more business-friendly regime.”¹³ Robert Putnam documented in *Bowling Alone* a decline among Boomers and their children in political and civic engagement as well as in maintaining social ties.¹⁴ Boomers copped out, zoned out, or joined the Silent Majority.

The pattern of disengagement appeared to reverse itself later on. Observers saw signs of reawakening within the cohort, though not always as anticipated. Some Boomers in their prime veered right; they supported and financed conservative manifestoes. Meanwhile, other peers reasserted their claim as change agents; they sought to rekindle liberalism in new form. These movements grew independently. Gray-haired and bald Boomers no longer staged love-ins, peace

demonstrations, or hash bashes. Missing from their leadership constellations was anyone close to a latter-day FDR or Eisenhower. Except for Bill Clinton (b. 1946), Hillary Clinton (b. 1947), and George W. Bush (b. 1946), the older Boomer generation produced no compelling political figures. The presidential campaign of Mitt Romney (b. 1947) failed in 2008. Personal issues derailed Henry Cisneros (b. 1947), a popular mayor of San Antonio and former HUD. Those born between 1946 and 1964 seemed mainly content to be bystanders in late life. Boomers such as Barack and Michelle Obama (both b. 1964) identified with Generation X.

The Boomer political legacy builds on what transpired in the 1960s. Most upheld notions of fairness and justice learned from their parents, teachers, and clergy. Yet here too, in the realm of values, a shift occurred. Boomers did not define “dignity” and “equality” in similar ways. They wanted deficit reductions while they insisted on protecting their tax credits.

Boomers lost faith in institutions that had served their elders. They came to mistrust professions they had respected earlier in life. Unions declined in importance. Leaders of mainstream political parties no longer could count on their votes. Idea brokers like Norman Podhoretz and Eldridge Cleaver were denounced as turncoats for recanting earlier beliefs.¹⁵ Late-life Boomers sometimes undermined AARP, their well-funded and savvy policy advocate.¹⁶ The organization lost Boomers over health care issues; membership declined when AARP sought to shore up Social Security financing. Some Boomers opposed making any incremental changes. Others thought that AARP represented only wealthy seniors, not citizens at large.

Amidst a swirl of contrapuntal impulses (grand expectations, self-interestedness, cynicism, and disillusionment), Boomers managed to forge egalitarian, democratic ways of relating to one another. The cohort placed a premium on tolerance. The age group was not oblivious to dissimilarities in gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation, of course. Yet Boomers addressed discord within their ranks by respecting differences, not dismissing them.

Rather than subscribe to the inevitability of zero-sum games, most Boomers sought opportunities to enhance everybody's chances for getting ahead. In later years, this cohort walked the talk: Over time Boomers integrated *holistic* inclusivity into nearly all spheres of daily life. Transmitting this credo to others was integral to the Boomers' ultimate legacy work.

What follows are five manifestations of how this cohort turned conventional wisdom on its head:

First, since Boomers wrestled with themselves and others to promote a commitment to holistic inclusivity through the institutions and values they reworked, we begin with the cohort's success in arranging the three boxes of life — education, work, and retirement.

Second, we analyze how upheavals in social relationships broadened this age group's sense of comity and civility by widening the range of inclusivity.

Third, we explore Boomers' efforts to alter health care and their impact on advancing healthfulness.

Fourth, we assess how spiritual awakenings worldwide altered the U.S. cohort's ways of thinking and doing.

Fifth, and this leads, finally, to how Boomers actualized their legacy. The disillusionment that had crushed youthful optimism presaged a renewal of hope for some born between 1946 and 1955. This subset of Boomers mobilized to attain better lives for themselves and for those to come.

First: Boomers Rearranged the Three Boxes of Life

Boomers anticipated that their lives would unfold sequentially through three well-known boxes of life.¹⁷ Most expected to graduate from high school. (A third in fact attended college; a select group pursued professional and graduate training.) Somewhere between their late teens or early thirties, most Boomers entered the labor force. They figured on staying in this second box of life unless childrearing, sickness or disability, or layoffs forced plans to change. Then, like their parents, Boomers supposed that they would opt for early retirement or work until they became ill, pensioned, or chose to quit.

The Longevity Revolution, which added 30 years on average to life expectancy at birth in the U.S. between 1900 and 2000, made it possible for Boomers to rearrange these three boxes of life. Extra years afforded individuals greater opportunities (often enveloped in unforeseen contingencies) to depart from expected patterns.¹⁸ Boomers chose paths that did not always conform to the wishes and guidelines of their parents or grandparents. Yet, insofar as they took risks and followed their instincts, Boomers enabled those who followed to pursue paths that suited their predilections under different sets of circumstances.

From kindergarten through senior year, Boomer classroom settings varied. Public-school superintendents expanded facilities to the degree that community tax bases allowed. Money made the difference in facilities, curricular options, and teachers' pay. In due course colleges and universities responded to Boomers' presence, building multi-purpose student centers and adding majors and electives to attract and retain undergraduates. A college diploma, all agreed, was *the* ticket to upward mobility.

Two other educational developments opened pathways for nontraditional students in this cohort. Community colleges, an inconsequential branch of higher education prior to 1946, mushroomed; this enabled those too poor or ill-prepared for post-secondary programs to transfer to colleges and universities — or to earn a baccalaureate degree later in life. Many Boomers viewed community college as a stepping stone to their job-related objectives. At the same time, broader opportunities for adult education arose for mature learners. Eager to improve and reinvent themselves, roughly 45% of adults aged 45 to 64 participated in adult education.¹⁹ Corporations offered in-house training for older workers. Elder hostels, freestanding learning centers, and continuing education programs on campuses designed certificates and non-credit options for Boomers who wanted enrichment or retooling.

Meanwhile, the world of work underwent transformations.²⁰ Unlike their fathers who remained loyal to employers, Boomer men enjoyed less job security over their careers. Women born between 1946 and 1955 departed from the employment histories of their mothers and grandmothers, who typically had worked briefly before marriage or after widowhood. In contrast, women Boomers acquired the education, training, and experience needed to compete with men for jobs; many juggled childcare responsibilities and career advancement (usually for less pay). Congress passed the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, but older workers, still facing barriers, opted for disability benefits or early-retirement inducements.²¹

Many Boomers liked early (and earlier) retirement. Some opted for phased retirement, others “unretired” and re-entered the work force in encore careers.²² Non-profits and government agencies counted on Boomers’ willingness to devote time volunteering in faith- and community-based projects when they were not travelling or pursuing other cultural activities.²³ Becoming grandparents proved immensely satisfying. Some bought second homes to spend more time with family. Although such retirement preferences often resembled their elders, Boomers framed priorities differently from previous generations.

The recession of 2008 and concerns over health coverage shattered the “myth” of retirement as an elder’s earned right to leisured lifestyles.²⁴ Boomers wondered if they could maintain current standards of living, especially if they lacked adequate health coverage. The middle class felt squeezed. Still, few Boomers took equity out of their homes through reverse mortgages.²⁵ The downturn caught the cohort off guard financially, but individuals pursued goals somewhat muted as they began to face finitude.²⁶

Rather than programming life through sequential boxes, Boomers added varieties to the standard repertoire learning, working, and retiring. Misfortunes, to be sure, often derailed hopes and happy outcomes. Most Boomers nonetheless exercised considerable freedom in making life choices (sometimes regretting their decisions later). Significantly, the cohort tried to ensure that this generalization applied to African-Americans, women, new immigrants, and gays, not just middle-class white males. Wealth and income gaps patently widened over the course of Boomers’ lives, which caused some inequalities to harden into class divisions.²⁷ Such reversals of fortunes, however, did not undermine the ethos enshrined by Boomers, which sought to make the American Way of Life more attainable to peers from diverse backgrounds.

Second: Boomers Widened the Range of Inclusivity

Throughout U.S. history, individuals (some famous, most anonymous) have fought for racial justice, to narrow gender inequities, to assimilate ethnic and religious outliers. Struggles were sporadic, usually grassroots mobilizations. Rarely did reformers coordinate specific social movements for Democracy's sake.²⁸

Boomers came of age as various pleas and protests for liberating the oppressed and marginalized were fractionalizing the body politic. A series of legal cases in the 1940s and 1950s overturned Jim Crow laws, but racism permeated the nation. Some Boomers joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other human-rights activists who risked jail and death first for fighting racial injustices and then for denouncing the war in Vietnam.

Taking cues from the civil rights movement and reformist impulses, other coalitions galvanized. Women expressed outrage at inequities at home, work, and neighborhoods. Feminists recalled Abigail Adams's entreaty to husband John to "remember the ladies" as he rode to the Constitutional convention. Religious prejudice, especially anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism, receded in post-war America. After JFK's election, most WASPs conceded that they had no monopoly on success or civic responsibility. Children of immigrants, meanwhile, displayed their ethnic pride by highlighting their hyphenated identities as Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, and other hybrids. Mexicans, who exceeded the number of Europeans coming to the U.S. after 1965, mobilized when work conditions and threats of deportation became intolerable. Lesbians and gays mobilized against prejudice and discrimination.

Boomers did not instigate these various struggles for equality, but it largely fell to this generation to forge a new order of intimate relationships and to institutionalize an ethos of inclusivity into U.S. society. Accommodation did not come easily, particularly for families that had long enjoyed privileges or for blue-collar workers who had fought hard for employee benefits and extra money. Some denounced the new rules as unfair. Yet social scientists showed that denying educational and employment opportunities to newcomers and the disadvantaged exacerbated inequalities and disparities in American culture.²⁹

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Nevertheless, as neo-conservatism became ascendant, a large segment of Boomers flatly rejected the norms and politics of inclusivity. They advanced arguments consonant with currents of religious fundamentalism on the rise worldwide. Long a haven to bigotry as well as liberty, the U.S. melting pot became a stew of hatred. Those outraged by the proliferation of affirmative action plans waged culture wars, partly because they feared less status and loss of future gains.

Responses to the women's movement illustrate how Boomers, caught in an historical vortex, overcame resistance as they advocated for greater tolerance and inclusivity. Inspired by notables such as Betty Friedan, Maggie Kuhn, and Shirley Chisholm, men and women born between 1946 and 1955 sought to renegotiate terms of endearment at home and what passed as fair practices at work. For much of U.S. history, people usually picked partners from similar backgrounds. Boomers broke conventions. No longer was religious background (if any) a crucial determinant of marital suitability. Interracial marriages became common; Mayflower descendants wed children of immigrants whom they met at school or work. *The New York Times* publicized Boomers' same-sex marriages and civil partnerships.³⁰ Conversely divorce, once a social taboo sanctioned mainly in cases of adultery or domestic abuse, became acceptable and accepted. Yet, divorce settlements rarely proved fair to all parties. Marital dissolution disadvantaged women more than men.³¹

Women made strides in higher education and the marketplace. By the 1980s, more women than men earned diplomas; soon they predominated in Ph.D. programs, law schools, medical classes, and seminaries. While women no longer were overrepresented in teaching, nursing, and social work, gender gaps persisted. The Equal Pay Act of 1964 reduced income disparities, but females still earn less than males in comparable jobs. Family responsibilities complicated career choices, since women typically shouldered most elder care and child-rearing responsibilities.³² Glass ceilings still exist, although the number of (minority) women serving on corporate boards and managing Fortune 500 companies has risen dramatically.

Boomers in late life also changed the face of widowhood. Women greatly outnumbered men at advanced ages; "casserole brigades" rolled out in retirement communities and block parties. Still, women of the Boomer generation created other options. Those who remained in familiar surroundings, close to friends, were more willing than their mothers after spouses died to seek out alternative modes of intimacy and to maintain long-distance relationships.

Third: Boomers Advanced Healthfulness — Structurally and Personally

With the passage of Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act in 1965, and the creation of the National Institute on Aging (1974), Federal lawmakers underwrote initiatives in the private and public sectors to make old age healthier. Advances in adult Boomer life expectancy were attributed to reducing deaths from heart disease and strokes through medical breakthroughs (better diagnoses, medications, and emergency medical services) and changing behaviors (smoking cessation, dietary modifications, controlling blood pressure).³³

Much remained to be done, however. Nearly as many people were dying from cancer four decades after Richard Nixon signed the National Cancer Act into law (1971). Boomers saw that their medical expenditures did not guarantee better health or prevent chronic and acute diseases so prevalent among those who were past middle age. At the same time Boomers, like all people, had to confront end-of-life issues. Care for the elderly, particularly as death approached, accounted for roughly a third of all Medicare expenditures.³⁴

Medical research and best practices ultimately reduce health-care costs across the life course. Ridding the body of senescent cells may prove effective in treating arthritic joints and cataracts.³⁵ New technologies enabled older Boomers to perform daily tasks and live independently, but adhering to a stringent diet in managing diabetes, which typically presents between ages 30 and 50, did not necessarily diminish risks in later years. The National Institutes of Health in 1998 created the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine to develop strategies for managing pain and evidence-based practices to promote healthier behaviors.

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Even so, some diseases associated with advancing years elude treatment. There is no accepted cure for Alzheimer's and other dementia that afflict millions of elders. Falls presage a cascade of debilities at any age. Thus half of all U.S. hospitals with more than 100 beds offer palliative care for patients of whatever age or every stage of disease. (Hospice care covers only patients with a prognosis of six months or less to live.)

Indeed, the chronic ailments afflicting Boomers concerned health-care specialists almost as much as heart attacks, respiratory diseases, and cancer. Widespread obesity contributed to a variety of cardiovascular/muscular problems, diabetes, and increased chances of premature mortality. Doctors told elders that they were eating too much and exercising too little. The old were not the only ones at risk: early-childhood obesity adversely affected subsequent health modalities, leading to lower-body disabilities among men and women over 45.³⁶

Meanwhile, mental illness remained a silent co-morbidity factor. Estimates of depressive symptoms among Boomers ranged from 11% to 16%; some experts put prevalence up to 44% for community residents. Depression rates among minority elders exceeded those for whites due to health, employment problems, family woes, and stress.³⁷ Rather than seek therapy or join support groups, Boomers typically medicated themselves to relieve pain.

No wonder that substance and alcohol abuse were seen as life-course banes afflicting unreported numbers of Boomers. Drugs and drinks had featured prominently in this group's recreational activity since high school. Addictions contributed to poor health, mental illness, and anxiety, which in turn accentuated loneliness, emptiness, or fears of dying. As a consequence, the Baby Boom generation gained the dubious distinction of being the first cohort in U.S. history to reach old age on average in a less healthful state than their elders.³⁸

The prevalence of chronicity alarmed lawmakers, health providers, and Boomers. Fiscal considerations spurred self-interested responses — but only so far. Although their parents had appreciated that life-threatening medical emergencies could drain life savings, wealthy members of the Greatest Generation refused to underwrite catastrophic insurance once they realized its redundancy for *their* coverage (1988–1989).³⁹ Some Boomers proposed linkages between Medicare and Medicaid to better reflect the state of geriatric care and palliative medicine. Yet 50 years after Lyndon Baines Johnson's original measures, acute care still drove Medicare; Medicaid still served low-income people. Most Boomers wanted their physical and psychological needs met in settings where they were assured friendly, comprehensive care.⁴⁰

Boomers demanded more home care. Researchers demonstrated that such health-care delivery was more cost-effective and less disruptive than institutional long-term care.⁴¹ Most Boomers over 65 wanted to age in place, near neighbors and kin. They wished caregivers to come to them instead of their going to nursing homes and psychiatric units.

Boomers also incorporated preventive care into their lifestyles. (Health-fitness crazes — Sylvester Graham’s crackers, cod liver oil, natural spas, and cold showers — predate holistic medicine.) Boomers practiced healthful lifestyles, incorporating exercise (43%), special diets (26%), or yoga (10%) into daily routines.⁴² Even those with widening waistlines and a taste for local brews supplemented diets with herbal remedies. Shoppers were willing to pay extra for organic greens. When they tired of jogging, Boomers tried walking five times a week.

New industries evolved. Sales of organic fruits and vegetables rose from \$1 billion to \$26.7 billion between 1990 and 2010. Americans spent \$5.7 billion in 2008 on yoga classes and products, including clothing and CDs. Nike, the sports shoemaker, soared to 135th in the Fortune 500.⁴³ Trainers, dietitians, and gurus — not to mention plastic surgeons — catered to this age cohort’s desire to enhance their youthful vitality, ideally their looks. Vanity played a role, but the real motive for staying fit and eating well fed into the age group’s psyche.

Being “relevant” appealed to Boomers regardless of their politics, income, or social status. Their quest for meaningfulness took different forms over their life course. Keeping up with fads assured teens’ acceptability. In the 1970s Boomers communed with nature. Honoring their bodies as temples tapped spiritual awakenings that captivated nearly the entire generation in mid life, although not everybody would phrase it that way.

Fourth: Spiritual Quests for Meaning Changed Many Boomers' World Views

Advances in communication and transportation brought the world to Boomers, who viewed natural disasters, political upheavals, royal weddings, and wild animals on TV, at movies or on the Internet. Boomers flew to intriguing remote sites in Southeast Asia, Peru, and Turkey. Still, this cohort preferred the comforts of home. Boomers managed to be cosmopolitan and parochial simultaneously; personal and collective searches for “meaning” reinforced values and norms that segments in this age group started to embrace in youth.

Boomers took spiritual practices to heart. As children, they had filled pews and Sunday school classes. (Americans historically have been very supportive of religious institutions.) Participation in mainstream faith traditions peaked in the 1950s but, as Will Herberg pointed out in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1956), Americans' theological underpinnings were shallow. This may suggest why so many Boomers switched or abandoned denominational affiliations by middle age. Paralleling their endorsement of alternative medicine, a growing number of Boomers explored spiritual pathways that complemented or substituted for faith-based traditions.⁴⁴ Some read C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* (1942) and Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948). Other Boomers searched far and wide for meaningful spiritual direction. Many who embraced forms of Buddhism amalgamated Eastern chants into Jewish or Christian rituals. Others found Rumi, a 13th-century Turkish mystic, insightful because of his earthy, often sexually charged romancing of the Transcendent One.

The hallmark of Boomer spirituality was universalistic syncretism, which complemented on a global scale their politics of inclusivity. Contemplation often fueled the cohort's social activism. In the footsteps of Dorothy Day, who started the *Catholic Worker* and soup kitchens in New York during the Great Depression, some Boomers built homeless shelters and HIV clinics in urban areas. Others donated to Muslim welfare and service organizations or circumvented the Equator to help the needy. These Boomers were in the vanguard for putting faith to work. For them, spiritual convictions framed and animated worldly endeavors.

The very forces that nurtured spiritual impulses among a particular Boomer subset — globalism, a disaffection with organized forms of religion, a desire for deeper fulfillment in thought and deed — did not touch other segments of the cohort who tenaciously clung to their prejudices. The death toll from AIDS in the 1980s reinforced homophobia among some Boomers.⁴⁵ Many ignored the plight of veterans who suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. For such Boomers, a refusal to acknowledge debilities and disappointments that accumulate over time facilitated efforts to deny their own finitude.⁴⁶

Differences that shadowed the Boomers never resulted in age-based schisms across generations. But the cohort's failure to resolve or put aside internal antagonisms diluted its vision of inclusivity and appeals to justice. Tensions complicated their potential legacy work without dooming it. Rejecting many of their parents' centrist positions and institutional bulwarks left Boomers unwilling or unable to find common ground within their ranks or to bond with others.⁴⁷

Individuals and groups who cannot get beyond differences or develop fresh ways of building on one another's ideas and ideals often fail to (re)create and sustain safe meeting grounds. How ironic:

Boomers Steve Jobs (1955–2011), Steven Wozniak (b. 1950), Carly Fiorina (b. 1954), and Bill Gates (b. 1955) created accessible Internets that expanded the realm of mass communication. Meanwhile, Steven Spielberg and Oliver Stone (both b. 1946) transformed the film industry. The emergence of new forms of social media provided a platform for exchanging ideas and embracing differences. But countervailing circumstances obscured the potential capacity of sites to foster constructive dialogues.⁴⁸

Boomers failed to secure a vital center in which they could reconcile and harmonize their own sense of worth and justice amidst a fraying social fabric at home and clash of cultures globally. "The disjunction between personal optimism and profound cynicism about the political system is a striking feature of Baby Boomer attitudes," an astute observer opined.⁴⁹ The cohort's political paths diverged: More Boomers joined the Tea Party, a conservative movement adamantly opposed to raising taxes necessary to sustain Federal old-age entitlements,⁵⁰ than subscribed to Occupy Wall Street, which sought to reduce income inequities and find the un(der)employed work.⁵¹

The hallmark of Boomer spirituality was universalistic syncretism, which complemented on a global scale their politics of inclusivity.

Far from voting as a bloc, growing numbers of senior Boomers, forsaking Democratic and Republican parties, became Independents. Conservatives held ground; a fifth of those born in 1946 grew more conservative with age.⁵² Many Boomers simply became disaffected. Confident that they could take care of themselves — for that was a central trope — Boomers evinced (contrary to their professed inclusivity) little concern for the commons.⁵³ “The personal is political,” once a Boomer battle cry, for many turned hollow and solipsistic.

Yet the picture is not all bleak. The threats of nihilism and transience prompted a critical segment of the Baby Boomer generation to engage in types of legacy work once deemed unattainable. Recounting the story of this group’s fervor, imagination, and efforts to consummate unrequited promises that might succeed in inspiring future generations is a fitting way to end this evaluation of the age cohort.

Fifth: Leaving a Legacy*

Most Boomers wanted to fulfill a perennial duty of elderhood by transmitting personal values — behaving responsibly, getting an education, and being self-sufficient — to their children and grandchildren.⁵⁴ At least three other matters became priorities for some of the oldest Boomers as they entered on “Golden Pond.” First, this post-war cohort chose to reaffirm and reinstate the aims of Social Security. Younger workers often dismissed the Boomers’ defense of the program as self-serving, since their elders enjoyed benefits that persons under 40 figured that they would never get. But retired persons were not the only beneficiaries of Social Security’s transgenerational compact. Unfortunately, many Americans did not understand why Franklin D. Roosevelt had created public/private partnerships to shield citizens from the impact of unemployment, invalidity, and destitution in late life. Protecting workers and their families from shared risks led the Federal government to claim a constitutional duty to mandate collective responsibility for the “general welfare.” Such ideas, embedded in the New Deal concept of social insurance, found little traction in U.S. civic discourse. Most Americans believed that Social Security went to old people who neither needed nor earned benefits.

And this misconception brought a second issue to fore, the longstanding animus against age. Mocking old folks’ foibles pervaded American society long after racist, sexist, anti-immigrant, and homophobic jokes or slurs about physical and mental handicaps had become politically incorrect. Nearly a third of older Boomers encountered age discrimination.⁵⁵ Ageism became more insidious than when Dr. Robert Butler coined the term in 1969. Many Americans seemed unwilling or unable to comprehend that growing older was part of living.

Myopic thinking about the challenges and adaptations associated with individual aging had parallels in a third global issue. Climate warming, which magnified over the course of the Boomers’ lifetimes, clearly threatened the earth’s ecological balance.⁵⁶ Still, skeptics disregarded mounting evidence about an imminent environmental crisis. Others were so overwhelmed by the problem that they scarcely knew where to begin. Unwilling to participate in grassroots activities that might have served to avert or postpone Doomsday scenarios, many Americans chose to deal with issues that could be resolved more quickly.

* I know that some will disagree with the gist of this section. Remember that the essay claims to appear in 2112, but it was written a century earlier — 15 months after the first Boomers turned 65. That my interpretation of the future may prove unduly rosy and idiosyncratic simply shows that historians make better Monday morning quarterbacks than social forecasters.

Boomers obviously had a stake in all three issues, though none was the cohort's responsibility alone to fix. Confusion always clouded Social Security's future: Alf Landon tried to win the 1936 presidential election by attacking FDR's payroll taxes; conservatives wanted to privatize the system in the early 2000s. People assumed that age-based policies are more neutral than ones defined by race, gender, or immigration status. Yet their proliferation has handicapped young and old in securing employment, in medical screenings, and in advancing through organizations. Young Boomers left heaps of garbage at Woodstock; there were never enough recycling bins at Earth Day sites.⁵⁷ Mass consumption and population growth exacerbated the situation globally.

A convergence of happenstance, historical vectors, and societal circumstances in the first third of the 21st century thus accorded Boomers an opportunity to put their ideals and experience into action. This age group in late life urged rising generations everywhere to mobilize interest and to devise solutions to safeguard social insurance, to fight ageism, and to avert environmental ruin. Boomers felt called to mount a campaign on three fronts just as their parents had been mustered to wage world war in two theatres. How these generations responded to destiny ultimately defined their respective legacies.

Boomers did what they always did best: They inspired young and middle-aged alike by setting conventional wisdom on its head.

To some Boomers, the tripartite challenge recapitulated earlier choices about radical engagement, by challenging this cohort to revisit dreams about possibilities beyond their bailiwick. Boomers in late life had another chance to expand a common good to be shared with peers and strangers. Preserving social insurance, valuing young and old, and saving the earth

actualized Boomers' longstanding quest for inclusivity at home and across national borders. In the process, despite past trauma and current vulnerabilities, some members of this cohort had to determine how to muster the courage to redefine their marks on the future. As Elvis Presley put it, Boomers could try to "do something worth remembering."⁵⁸

Obituary writers rightly noted how Baby Boomers, who once indulged in grand passions, became cynical or disengaged with increasing years. That characterization fit many. So did Erik Erikson's contention that all generations facing death must resolve the conflict between integrity and despair. Another motif, I think, better explains why a pivotal group of Boomers after age 65 risked taking another

chance on radical change. At advanced ages they chose to sustain a legacy worthy of their youthful ambition.⁵⁹ These Boomers could look beyond the sorry sight of Elvis Presley, bloated from constipation, as he sang “To Dream the Impossible Dream.” Like Presley, people born between 1946 and 1955 knew that they, too, were no longer young. Despite the odds, these Boomers purposively dared to renew and reinvent themselves by reworking their commitments to justice and inclusivity.⁶⁰

Boomers were not the first individuals to become disillusioned with the American experience. Every period in U.S. history suffered a loss of innocence, a sense of dispossession. The Kennedy-Johnson decade was no exception. The high expectations and dreams of the 1960s ended in rage. Nixon occupied the White House.⁶¹ With time as a balm, the gift of extra years enabled some Boomers to discern that disillusionment can be the wellspring of hope. “*Disillusionment* is the process by which some of us decide to fight against these mechanisms of occultation, of displacement, of repression, and this in order to extract our condition of mortal being from its unconscious state, to inscribe it explicitly in our psyche, and to translate it in a concrete way through than appropriate transformation of our behavior.”⁶² Reaffirming hope for a better world, hardly a desperate move in the eleventh hour, mobilized Boomers.

A resilient few — Boomers willing to be transitional change-agents — sought to meld youthful passions and a lifetime of experiences to wrestle with significant issues. These activists adapted to shifting values and changes in political economies. They revived their music and iconoclasm for new times and, in the process, became models for others to emulate. They often toned down their rhetoric, but they redoubled their vigor while playing for high stakes.

At the very moment when dire conditions seemed about to overwhelm their agenda, Boomers led by example. Rather than bemoan waning capacities or obsessing over what might have been, Boomers did what they always did best: They inspired young and middle-aged alike by setting conventional wisdom on its head. This age cohort, seasoned at thinking out of the box, once again harnessed their talent, energy, and hard-earned wisdom to promulgate bold promises as they worked to attain their objectives for the common good.

Epilogue

“As I looked out at the Freshman Class at George Washington University on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, they represented for me the next 10 years, and the decade after,” declared Eboo Patel, a Rhodes Scholar born in India in 1975, who wrote *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. “When you serve, you are part of the future...When you build bridges that show we are better together you lower the barriers that make people believe we are better apart.”⁶³

Patel’s words conveyed the spirit of the 1960s to a rising generation. His frame of reference rested on visions of activists older than Boomers, such as Rabbi Abraham Heschel and poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Had he been born two decades earlier, Eboo Patel might have been a prime Boomer. Like them, his presence and voice embody the spark of hope and confidence necessary to transcend the particularities of cohort-specific issues. Patel, like some of those born between 1946 and 1955, was effecting a generational transition by reaffirming important ideas through novel modes of discourse. Patel recast traditional values so that they could serve rising generations who inevitably would grapple with a different set of historical circumstances.

Innate talent drives much of Eboo Patel’s success. But he also benefits from ties, direct and indirect, to Boomer legacies. A member of President Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based Neighborhood Partnerships, Dr. Patel used a platform created by a Boomer in 1976 and wrote a blog, “The Faith Divide,” for the *Washington Post*.⁶⁴ Eboo Patel may not stand on the shoulder of giants, but he builds on accomplishments made by Baby Boomers at a critical moment in U.S. history. This age cohort deserves much credit for orchestrating social change. It helped young and old everywhere to think about how they see others, how to make a difference. The Boomer legacy rests on a commitment to invent and sustain movements that promoted meaningful, inclusive participation of people willing to look forward with hope.

Notes

- 1 For purposes of this paper, mainly older Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1955) will be considered. More than those born between 1956 and 1964, this age group identified itself as a distinctive generation. Economic, educational, and social differences within this subset of Baby Boomers were less marked than among younger Boomers. See Robert B. Hudson, ed., *Boomer Bust?* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), esp. the Preface and ch. 1.
- 2 The Baby Boom then a Baby Bust followed by a resurgence in births caused labor-force problems. See Martin M. Greller and David M. Nee, *From Baby Boom to Baby Bust* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1989); "MetLife Mature Market Institute Produces Demographic Profiles of Different Age Segments of American Adults; Contrasts between the Groups Are Striking," (February 16, 2010).
- 3 Researchers at MetLife Mature Market Institute found that a majority of 62-year-old Boomers would not consider themselves "old" until they reached age 75 or higher. See *Highlights of The MetLife Study of Boomers: Ready to Launch* (2007).
- 4 MetLife Mature Market Institute, *Boomer Bookends: Insights Into the Oldest and Youngest Boomers*, February 2009, p. 17. Of the 83% more than a third of the front-end Boomers only "somewhat liked" the designation. It is worth noting, in contrast, that roughly half of those born in 1964 do not like the appellation at all; they identify with Generation X.
- 5 Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1929), p. 21.
- 6 Steve Gillon schematizes differences among Boomers and Generation X and Generation Y in *Boomer Nation* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 265. For more on cohort traits, see Tom Osenton, *Boomer Destiny: Leading the U.S. through the Worst Crisis since the Great Depression* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009) and Michael Gross, *My Generation* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 2000). On the dread of old age, see MetLife Mature Market Institute, *Boomer Bookends*, p. 23.
- 7 The Who's Roger Daltry put the matter far more darkly when he sang, "Hope I die before I get old." Those who follow the Boomers ask in blogs, "Who Is Paul McCartney?" <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/who-is-paul-mccartney> accessed 2/20/2012
- 8 Boomer narcissism was evident by the time they reached age 30, according to Landon Y. Jones, *Great Expectations* (New York: Ballantine, 1980), p. 310.
- 9 Brooks (1917–2000) was not alone. William Stafford (1914–1993) recited "A Ritual Read to Each Other" at anti-war demonstrations:
*For it is important that awake people be awake.
Or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
The signals we give — yes, no, or maybe —
Should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.*
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- 11 See, for instance, Leonard Steinhorn, *The Greater Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006).
- 12 James H. Schulz and Robert H. Binstock, *Aging Nation* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), p. 21.
- 13 Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 365.
- 14 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
- 15 Ted Goertzel, *Turncoats & True Believers* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1992).

- 16 Frederick Lynch, *One Nation Under AARP* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), esp. pp. 161-163. AARP launched campaigns to diversify its membership composition and advocate for younger groups, including children; defended Medicare and Social Security; and supported innovative health reforms at the state level.
- 17 W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Older Americans, Vital Communities* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Chang-Meng Hsieh, "Money and Happiness," *Ageing & Society* 31 (Fall 2011): 1289-1306.
- 18 Robert N. Butler, M.D., *The Longevity Revolution* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007).
- 19 MetLife Mature Market Institute, *Ecologies of Risk* (Palo Alto, CA: Institute for the Future, 2008), p. 2.
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- 21 R. W. Johnson and J. Park, "Employment and Earnings among 50+ People of Color," *Working Paper* No. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2011); Boston College Sloan Center on Aging & Work, "Workplace Flexibility Used by Employees With and Without Disabilities," October 31, 2011.
- 22 The full picture is more complex than summarized here. The U.S. trend toward (early) retirement with a pension dates back to the 1870s. See W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Old Age in the New Land* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 49. Some Boomers began to reverse the early-retirement trend in the 1980s and work longer. See Sara E. Rix, "Will the Boomers Revolutionize Work and Retirement?," in *Boomer Bust?*, ed. Hudson, vol. 1: 77-94; Joseph F. Quinn, "Work, Retirement, and the Encore Career," *Generations* 34 (Fall 2010): 45-55.
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