



Generations

Silently Working for a Fair World

By Max Wells

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“(The ‘60s) felt like the world had tripped on something and was plunging headlong down the stairwell; Vietnam protests, urban riots, substance abuse, eroticism and the ideological passion of the young aimed angrily at their elders, like the water cannons pointed back at them.”

I was an impressionable nine-year-old when I attended the New York World’s Fair in 1964. It was like seeing a glimpse of the future; cars hovered, kitchens gleamed, garbage didn’t smell, and deserts were transformed into gardens. Standing atop the steps to the USA pavilion, I felt confident that if I fell, the stairs were so well designed that I couldn’t possibly hurt myself. They’d thought of everything.

That fair, and the impression it made on me, reflected the generation then in power. Born between 1901 and 1924, the GI Generation of WWII had returned two decades earlier as conquering heroes. Now in their mid lives, their still unstoppable energy was characterized by their comic book hero Superman. They were unafraid to take on Communism, Nazism and the eradication of poverty. They built model cities, and invented, perfected and stockpiled the nuclear bomb. A generation “willing to bear any burden, pay any price,” and purposefully dedicated to “send(ing) a man to the moon by the end of the decade.”

It was these Promethean heroes on whom I elevated my childish

gaze. My teachers, men in their 30s, also idolized them, sought to emulate them, and impressed on me the need to do the same. Success, they intoned, was simply a matter of studying hard, staying within the lines, and respecting our elders.

Against this backdrop, the ensuing decade felt like the world had tripped on something and was plunging headlong down the stairwell; Vietnam protests, urban riots, substance abuse, eroticism and the ideological passion of the young aimed angrily at their elders, like the water cannons pointed back at them. The wheels began to fall off the GI bandwagon; from Nixon in the White House, to the Chicago Democratic convention, to the Kent State shootings, to mass produced cars that were deemed “Unsafe at Any Speed.” GI men came under attack from their juniors and from women. Suddenly the statues had feet of clay.

The generation that came after the GIs, ignominiously labeled the “Silent Generation,” was born between 1925 and 1942 and were rising adults during this period of upheaval. As young children, many had experienced, or were affected by the Great



Visitors ride in a newly unveiled Ford Mustang at the Ford Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair, May 1964.

Photo by Bill Pierce/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

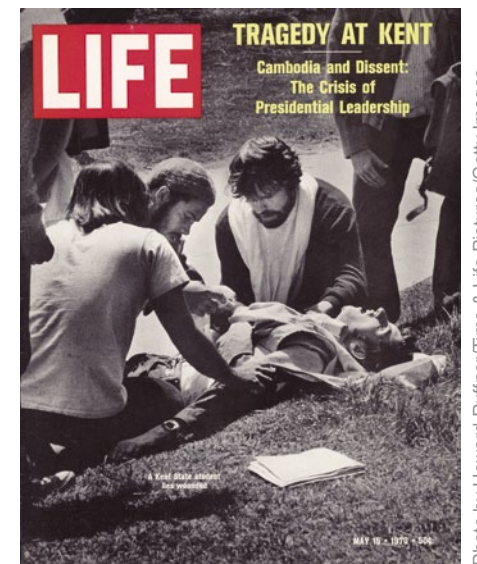
Depression of the 1930s. As the nation girded for threats from outside, they grew up being reminded that older generations were making sacrifices for them. As college freshmen they watched as the thirty something GIs got the pick of marriageable women. Later, more interested in the system than individual enterprise, only 2% wished to be self-employed, the majority wanting the security of working for a large corporation.

Mostly, it wasn’t the Silents who fomented the disturbance of the late ‘60s. “Mostly,” because, though it was the Boomers (born between 1943 and 1960) who added passion and a willingness to go outside the lines in their protests, it was the Silents who were pathbreakers. From music (Elvis b. 1930, Dylan b. 1941) to Vietnam resistance (Abby Hoffman b.1936), the Silents produced almost all the major figures in the Civil Rights Movement (MLK b. 1929, Cesar Chavez b. 1927). It was they who reached out to all cultures, races, ages and handicaps, trying to make the world a more equitable place. Sixteen percent of Harvard’s class of ‘64 joined the Peace Corps, the top postgraduate destination for that year, whereas the class of ‘65 began criticizing that institution, a harbinger of the Boomer’s anti-establishment rebellion. And it was the Silents who produced the greatest generation of psychiatrists, songwriters and comedians. They were the communicators who prevented the

nation from being torn between the overbearing GIs and the outraged Boomers. Despite all this, they produced no presidents. When it should have been their turn, it was an aging GI (Bush Sr. b. 1924) who defeated the Silent candidate (Dukakis b. 1933) in the 1988 election, silently mocking him for trying to play with the big boys’ toys.

A “cultural generation,” like the GI, Silent or Boom, is composed of people whose common location in history lends them a collective persona. Historians William Strauss and Neil Howe have offered an explanation of how cultural generations arise, how long they last, and how they change personality.⁽²⁾

According to the authors, we have four phases of life, each with distinctive roles in society. These are: *(Continued next page.)*



Wounded student John Cleary after members of the National Guard opened fire on protestors at Kent State University, May 15, 1970.

Photo by Howard Ruffner/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Table 1: American cultural generations

Generation	DoB	Age
G.I.	1901–1924	88+
Silent	1925–1942	70–87
Baby Boom	1943–1960 ⁽¹⁾	52–69
Generation X	1961–1981	31–51
Generation Y	1982–2000	12–30
Generation Z	2001–	11–

- Elder (66–87) — Role of stewardship: mentoring, channeling endowments, passing on values
- Mid-Life (44–65) — Role of leadership: parenting, teaching, directing institutions, using values. This phase wields the most power.
- Rising Adult (22–43) — Role of activity: starting families and livelihoods, serving institutions, testing values
- Youth (0–21) — Role of dependence: growing, learning, accepting nurture, acquiring values

Depending on the phase of life, a war or other “Social Moment” affects an individual’s personality differently. During a time of conflict, for example, Youths will be protected, Rising Adults will arm to meet the threat, Mid Lifers will take a leadership role, and Elders will establish the purpose of the war.

Differences between cohorts (phases of life) that existed before the war will be amplified and reinforced by inter-cohort interaction. For example, Youths will mirror each other’s anxiety, while Rising Adults will encourage each other’s valor and sense of duty. The groups will form four distinct peer personalities.

After the Social Moment, the four distinct peer personalities still exist into the next life phase, taking with them their acquired traits. This is shown in the first two columns of Table 2 after Social Moment 1. Generation “C” enters the powerful Mid-Life phase as conquering heroes. “E” enters Rising Adulthood as a sensitive and eloquent generation (the UK’s “air raid generation” or the “Silent Generation” in the U.S.).

Post-war generations have very different experiences. “F” goes through youth with the war heroes “D” in power, and achieves Rising Adulthood with the less confident leaders “E” in power. Likewise, “G” grows up with E in power, never having experienced the accomplishments or leadership of “D.” Consequently, “F” and “G” experience different nurturing and leadership styles, resulting in different peer personalities.

Even absent the influence of an outside event like a war, the relinquishing of roles when “D” goes into Elderhood and “E” assumes Mid-Life power occurs suddenly through another social moment, shown as Social Moment 2 in Table 2. This Social

Moment is triggered by the tension between new and old roles for “D” and “E,” and by pressure as “F” and “G” push to acquire their own roles.

According to Strauss and Howe, there is a generational “Turning” every 20 or so years, a “Social Moment” every 40 or so years, and a complete cycle, in which the cohort personality types repeat themselves every 80–90 years.

The effects of cultural generations have been noticed by writers for millennia. Homer’s “Iliad” is, in part, a story of Odysseus’ return from war a victorious hero, his subsequent hubristic exercise of power and his diffident and less confident son Telemachus learning to adapt.

In the early 1900s it became apparent that cultural generations played a role in the economic, political and cultural life, and people began to recognize and label them. However, the concept wasn’t popular and vigorous debates in France just before the First World War pitted those who sought to explain a “mass mentality” in the newly emerging field of sociology against opponents who thought that the very concept distracted from the proper way to educate youth, namely in Latin and Greek and learning the French classics. In a case of the messenger being blamed for the message, the new thinkers were accused of corrupting France’s youth.⁽³⁾

The test of time has favored the early proponents of “mass mentality.” Certainly,

cultural generations are part of the popular vernacular, and marketers use them as a way of segmenting the market and honing their message. The downside, as with any label, is that it leads to stereotyping.

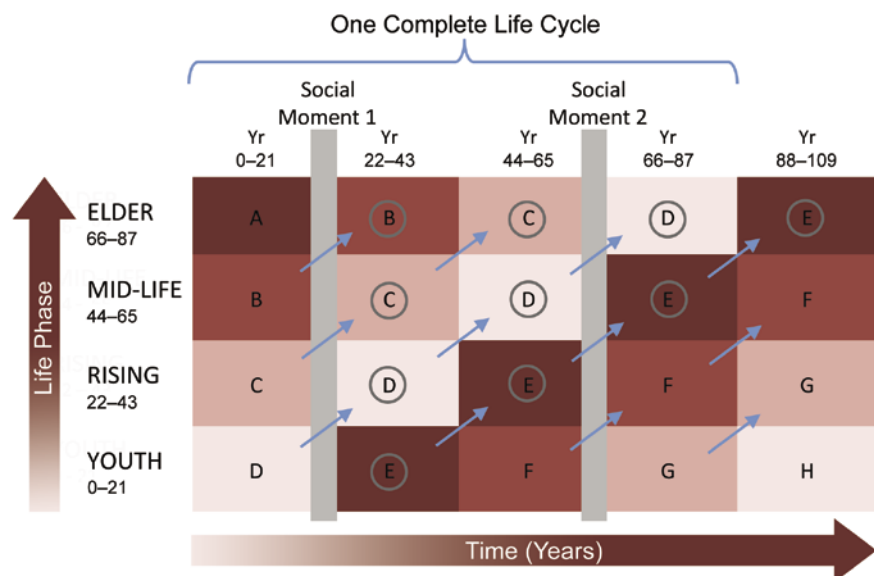
The test of a theory of this type is how well it can predict the future. Some critics have panned the work as being so woolly as to be “unfalsifiable.” Others have been more generous. I find the explanation of the how and why of generations, shown in Table 2, to be the best (the only) one I’ve seen. Back in 1991, Strauss and Howe predicted a “Social Moment” sometime between 2004–2025. I’ll leave it to you to decide if we’re in one, or waiting for one. And I welcome your comments. ■



Max Wells is the publisher of the *Wise Publishing Group*, which specializes in the stories we create as we move through life. Max’s vision is to distribute lifestyle, travel and self-exploratory content that helps readers embrace all that is good, joyous and sublime in the journey.

- (1) I use the years defined by Strauss and Howe, rather than the population boom (1946–1964) defined by demographers.
- (2) Unless specified, the source used was “Generations: The History of America’s Future from 1584 to 2069.” William Strauss and Neil Howe, Harper Perennial, 1991.
- (3) “The Generation of 1914.” Robert Wohl. Harvard University Press, 1979.

Table 2: How the generations change over time. Circles mark the cohort groups in or entering that phase of life during Social Moment 1.



Q: My husband and I recently found out that our 40-year-old son is a daily pot smoker. Should we be concerned?

A: Yes, concern is appropriate. Almost all marijuana varieties found these days are powerful hybrids that easily outgun the killer weed of the past. The Small Sack of Shitty Shake has truly been replaced by the Big Bag of Bodacious Buds. Also, marijuana is, in fact, addictive.

Some people are able to use marijuana on an occasional basis without obvious detriment. And there are people who use daily and still manage lives and jobs with great responsibility. However, daily use is likely to have significant consequences on health and motivation. Weed suppresses immune function, making a person more likely to catch common illnesses and stay sick longer. I’ve heard a naturopath say that marijuana strips the myelin sheath from around nerve cells, slowing the nerve’s bandwidth. Whether this is true or just poetry, fuzzy “lows” follow highs.

More significantly, chronic marijuana use affects motivation. My colleagues in chemical dependency counseling see many clients who incrementally give up on activities, friendships and ambitions for a progressively smaller life. This diminishing world can be deeply painful. Underneath a mellow, easy-going exterior, chronic use hides the real person and their pain over lost dreams and diminished achievements.

Pot use frequently coincides with other problems. Anxiety disorders, trauma and other untreated issues often precede becoming a serious pot-head. Depression can drive use or develop because of it.

If you want to help your son, I suggest you start with an open-minded discussion with him about his use; try and get him to talk about both the pros and the cons of weed, so he can articulate for himself what he likes and what he doesn’t like. If the disadvantages are significant enough, maybe he’ll be open to talking to a counselor about his use and addressing whatever issues led to the habit. If he decides to make changes, there are groups, including Marijuana Anonymous, who will take him seriously and can support his journey.

Q: My father passed away a little over two years ago. My 80-year-old mother recently started dating a nice-enough man 20 years her junior. I’m having issues. Your thoughts?

A: My condolences for your loss; two years is barely any time at all when it comes to losing a parent. It’s likely your mother is also still adapting to the end of her partnership with your father. I hope she has had ample opportunity to grieve and reminisce.

I also hope you can come to accept (if not celebrate) your mother’s enjoyment. There is precious little in life that duplicates the sweet intoxicating cocktail of new romance. Also, embarrassingly, recently widowed individuals often have intense sexual feelings. It’s been argued to be an evolutionary impulse—your mate dies and your hormones/genes tell you to reproduce and preserve the species, even when you are way past menopause.

It sounds like this fellow is nice enough, but if you are worried about gold diggers and this thing moves towards marriage, it is okay to be matter-of-fact with mom about prenups.

If your issues are more about feeling sidelined, you have my sympathies. Whenever we feel left out and want to be closer to someone, a good exercise is to practice letting go. Let go of your expectations of your mom and your judgments about her choices. Try to view her as a person you happen to know and would like to know better. Hold her in your mind’s eye and (try to) delight in who she has been and who she is now. If you can convey this warmth when you see her in person, she’ll feel it and want to include you in her happiness. ■



Psychotherapist and Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC) Evan Kimble brings together different elements: science and spirituality, passion and grace, East and West, laid-back and intense. You can reach him at advice@wisepublishinggroup.com or via his website at www.safepassagetherapy.com

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