

July 26, 2010: Generational Cycles

It's hard to deny that Baby Boomers have failed in the primary mission of each generation: to leave the country in better shape than what they found it. As Boomers exit the stage during the next decade, they are leaving a legacy of impossible debts, a bitterly divided country, and a have/have not social structure. Before we judge them too harshly, however, let's consider that from a generational sense, messing-up was the Boomer's destiny.

Generational cycles are explained in Strauss and Howe's book, *The Fourth Turning*. They say that generations come in four different types: Prophet, Nomad, Hero, and Artist.

- *Prophets* are values-driven, moralistic, focused on self, and willing to fight to the death for what they believe in - and they can convince other people to join them in the fight. They grow up as indulged children, come of age as the young crusaders of a major movement, enter midlife as moralistic leaders, and are the wise, elder leaders of the next crisis. The Boomers (age range 45-65) are an example of a Prophet generation.
- *Nomads* are ratty, tough, unwanted, diverse, adventurous, and cynical about institutions. They grow up as the under protected children of Prophets, come of age as alienated young adults, become the pragmatic, midlife leaders of a crisis and age into tough, post-crisis elders. Generation X (current age range of 30-45) is an example of a Nomad generation.
- *Heroes* are conventional, powerful, and institutionally driven, with a profound trust in authority. They grow up as increasingly protected children of Nomads, come of age as the heroic, team-working youth of a crisis, become energetic and hubristic mid-lifers, and evolve into powerful elders. The G.I. Generation (age range that fought World War II) is an example of a Hero generation. Millennials (age range 18-30) are expected to emerge as the next generation of this example.
- *Artists* are subtle, indecisive, emotional and compromising, often having to deal with feelings of repression and inner conflict. They grow up as the over-protected children of Heroes, come of age as sensitive young adults, rebel as indecisive midlife leaders, and become empathic elders. The Silent Generation (age range 65-85) is an example of an Artist generation. The iGeneration (age range 0-18) is expected to emerge as the next generation of this example.

Strauss and Howe believe that history shapes each generation depending on what phase of life it occupies as it encounters key historical events - a period of crisis will leave an impression on children that is different from the one it leaves on midlife leaders. So it is not a coincidence that the generational cycles keep repeating.

Here's something I find particularly interesting. Over the past 500 years of Anglo-American history, during periods of crisis (as in today), the children are always Artists, the young adults are Heroes, the mid-lifers are Nomads, and the elders are Prophets. Wow.

Another nugget: as protected children who never personally experienced crisis, Prophets (Boomers) are most likely to provoke a new crisis when they grow to control the nation's institutions. So that explains it.

I find hope in the generational cycles concept. We only have to wait another decade or so until the Heroes (Millenials) start taking over. Hopefully the United States will still be a sovereign nation at that point.

- Rob

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