REFLECTIONS ON FAITH AND WORK

Babybusters: Who Are They?

In 1991, William Strauss and Neil Howe published a seminal study entitled Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069. Their thesis is that four generation types can be traced throughout America's history, and that these four types appear in recurring patterns. In the chapter entitled "Millennial Cycle" -- their term for the present time -- Strauss and Howe describe the "Boomers," the "13ers," and the "Millennials," the three generations born since 1943.

This fascinating study was followed two years later by its sequel, 13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?, in which Strauss and Howe attempt to describe the generation born after 1960, a generation that argues, "We Don't Even Have a Name." They have been referred to as "Generation X" and "13th Gen" (calculated since the founding of America), but they view these contentless titles as examples of how they are looked down upon by their elders. They especially don't like the "Babyboomers," the previous generation that has received so much attention, chiefly for the number of members and for the political and financial power they have attained as America's movers and shakers.

◆ The Babybusters' Historical Context

Babybusters are the generation born from 1961 to 1981, and are between 16 and 36 years old today. The label "Babybusters" is applied to them because the birth rate in America dropped off dramatically in the 1960s, following the height of America's "baby boom" in the mid-1950s.

The historical context of the Babybusters offers important insight into this generation. When asked to identify the five most important historical events that have shaped their view of the world, Babybusters come up with almost identical lists. The first event on almost every list is the Challenger explosion, which parallels the Kennedy assassination for Babyboomers. Most Babybusters considered the Challenger explosion a "wake-up call," or a "reality check" indicating that all was not right with America.

The end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War are also identified as significant by Babybusters and, in both cases, were events that initially appeared to be occasions for victory and celebration but soon turned sour. The fourth and fifth most frequently cited events are the AIDS epidemic and the Rodney King affair.

Three of these five events are negative and lead to widespread cynicism about the American justice system, the role of police, and the competence of government leaders and space scientists. The other two were at least partially negative; they started out good, but ended up in doubt and failure. For Babybusters, this historical context has led them to believe they are living in a deeply troubled nation with intractable problems. They see no solutions and have little to no hope that government leaders have any answers.

❖ Babybusters' Social Context

This historical context is closely related to dramatic shifts in America's social context, which provide additional insights into the Babybuster generation. These young people were born and raised in an environment where the traditional family structure was disintegrating. Forty to fifty percent of them are children of divorce. They are a latch-key generation, a generation that witnessed three times more children raised in two-job families than ever before in our nation's history.

They are also a generation plagued by unparalleled crime and dysfunctionality. Here's another distinctive: Babybusters will be incarcerated and executed at a higher rate than any previous generation in American history. Each day 13 of them commit suicide, 16 are murdered, 1,000 become mothers, and 2,200 drop out of school.

By the time the average Babybuster reaches the age of 18, they have watched 22,000 hours of television -- twice the amount of time spent in school! Television has shaped their culture to the point where Blockbuster issues more cards than the library. Some observers note that Babybusters have been weaned from Sesame Street onto MTV. How can schools compete with this? They can't. School is boring by comparison to a generation of students who can't be amused if they are not plugged in!

Reports show that a typical Babybuster watches 89 movies a year. Between the movies and the television, they are bombarded with advertising jingles, which have become the "wisdom of the day" to them: "Have it your way!" "You deserve a break today." "If it feels good, do it." Or as Mazda claims: "It just feels right." This litany of lies encourages a sense of entitlement, a desire for high quality service and no sacrifice, and no delay in gratification. It also argues that truth is relative and intuitive.

❖ The Disillusioned Generation

Is it any wonder why this generation is so disillusioned? They feel alienated from life and many have a sense of helplessness about the circumstances they have "inherited." From their point of view, selfish Babyboomers and greedy Builders -- the generation before the Boomers -- have left them with the dirty work of fixing huge national and international problems, such as a massive federal debt, a polluted environment, growing racial disharmony, and AIDS. They got stuck with all the "repair work." It is understandable why many Babybusters feel like theirs is a "generation of janitors."

(The next issue will feature a profile of Babybusters and their attitudes. Stay tuned!)

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