

CHAPTER ONE

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*The Boomer Dilemma*

**R**ight now, millions of baby boomers are realizing they are no longer teenagers. For the next eighteen years, a line of approximately 78.2 million boomers will begin their exodus from middle age into senior citizen territory. Starting in 2010, almost eight thousand boomers will be turning sixty-five years old every day, or three hundred and thirty boomers every hour, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

People in their forties and fifties are seeing wrinkles, gray hair, and bodies that are not what they used to be, and it is scaring them. They think of where their parents and elderly relatives were at the same age and remember them being old. Boomers don't feel prepared for that. Having devoted their middle-aged years to the frantic pursuit of securing a future for themselves, boomers are now waking up to the realization that the joys and vitality of life are passing them by.

From the 1960s, when boomers came of age and started entering the work force and finding their individual identity in society, to the present, boomers have fundamentally shaped American culture as we know it today. Every artist knows that there is a direct correlation between the mind and imagination of the artist and what he or she paints on canvas or sculpts in clay. An angry or depressed artist

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will produce works that emit those emotions to a viewer, and an artist full of joy and inner contentment will transmit a feeling of vibrancy and wholesome expansion. A similar parallel can be made to the values, lifestyles, pursuits, and attitudes of boomers and the world we now experience in the twenty-first century. It is important to understand this relationship to better appreciate and comprehend the boomer legacy—a trail that I now define an increasing alienation from and confusion about one's authentic self. Although their legacy includes important innovations in science, psychology, social reform, gender equality, and spirituality, it has likewise contributed to America's current cultural crisis and has shaped the nation into a populace that has lost its sense of civic virtue. By turning its back on the community- and family-based values that were the hallmark of boomer parents, the boomer generation is primarily responsible for our society's descent into social apathy, trivial pursuits, and unhealthy lifestyles.

I should make it clear that I am not suggesting that members of the "Greatest Generation," those born between 1911 and 1924 and who served in World War II, did not play a significant role in today's age of globalization, consumerism, and multinational corporate domination. Economists such as Milton Friedman, whose theories of free-market economics have essentially shaped the American economy since the Reagan presidency, when Alan Greenspan was first appointed as head of the Federal Reserve, belong to the Greatest Generation. However, the subsequent boomer presidents, Bill Clinton and George Bush, further strengthened the free-market economic system. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, we have been experiencing the rapid proselytizing of a religion of consumerism—which underlies both the spiritual materialism of New Age thinking and the moralistic colonialism of right-wing fundamentalism in American religiosity—at the expense of once-vital industries and authentic

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spiritual altruism that made America the exemplar of the world during the aftermath of the Second World War.

The boomers are a generation that entered adulthood between the 1960s and the 1980s. They are a generation that wanted to have it all. Indeed, the baby boomers were the first generation that had been led to expect that they could have a superb education, a fulfilling career, a home with all the most recent appliances and gadgets, enjoyable relationships, and a family. While theoretically the boomers could have everything, practically, many could not. And many, although they attained all the prizes in the game plan, found that they could not achieve the happiness they had assumed would go with these prizes. They had worked too intensely, made (and in some cases also lost) a lot of money, and in the process burnt themselves out. Now, in the twenty-first century, we have millions of people who, if not completely demoralized, are walking around with a pervasive sense of unease and uncertainty. They have no energy. Their youthful idealism and rebellious expression, once this generation's historical signature, has nearly vanished. Now many boomers wish they could start all over.

The good news is that they can begin, if they're willing, a process of change and real transformation to renew the more positive ideals that once inspired their determination to address the wrongs, prejudices, and erroneous judgments in American society. Doing so requires actualizing one's self-awareness and synergizing this awareness with positive intentions and actions to improve the lives of others and their communities. One of the things I enjoy most is helping people reach a point in their lives where they're willing to make necessary changes, which is why I've written this book about the baby boomers' dilemma and our innate ability to live in the moment and recover what boomers have lost.

It has been wonderful to hear from people of all ages—from

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teenagers to octogenarians and beyond—that my writing has made a difference in their lives. But in talking to members of the boomer generation I’ve been struck by the fact that so many are dissatisfied or have lost a sense of authentic purpose in their lives. These are some of the most well-educated, privileged, and savvy people in the nation. Why, in many cases, haven’t they been able to use these assets to make necessary changes and find a measure of contentment? Some have understood intellectually the need to look within and reprioritize their lives, but they’ve been unable to translate that understanding into meaningful change. They’ve conscientiously tried exercises such as meditating or going on spiritual or health retreats, but their outlooks have changed little. As members of this generation have left youth and advanced into middle age and beyond, many have a feeling of emptiness and continue to search for something they haven’t found. The spiritual experiment for seeking self-discovery has been one of the characteristics of the boomer generation. One early statistic estimated that 42 percent of boomers left their families’ religion or faith group; this is a significant figure and indicates how important the pursuit of self-expression has been among boomers. Their adventurous spirit in exploring alternative lifestyles, new models of health, different foreign philosophies and religions and art, is still influential today.

You might think it has been this way for every generation, that every generation undergoes difficulty in finding contentment and everyone has midlife crises. I don’t think this is completely true. Boomers sacrificed the values and qualities that built America in exchange for lives of superficiality and a vision that focused attention on things that lack any essential meaning. For this reason, I find that this generation is having a particularly rough time recovering what it has lost.

The question is “why?” The baby boomers grew up during a

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unique time in American history. They may have reached adulthood in the socially tumultuous late 1960s and 1970s, but people actually absorb their values in childhood, and for boomers that was the 1950s and early 1960s, a time when conventional values, seemingly reinforced by America's recent victory in World War II and by a growing industrial economy, were stronger than ever. Some conventional values were, and remain, good, but some assumptions and attitudes prevalent in those days were counterproductive to human fulfillment. My observation is that many boomers still carry around, unquestioningly and even unknowingly, attitudes and assumptions picked up during those years that are now causing them to make repeated mistakes in their personal choices.

Later I will outline some of the more critical mistakes that I see baby boomers commonly make. Although these are my observations, the important thing is the investigatory process and coming up with answers that are right for you.

At times I will address the boomer generation as a collective group; on other occasions I will address boomers as individuals, looking at the conditions of their inner lives. Each, however, mirrors the other. Our inner world shapes the conditions of our outer world. If we are angry at ourselves, we will project that anger onto others. The collective of all individual inner worlds—especially when they share the same values and follow the same regimens during their lives—shapes society as a whole. Although we frequently twist ourselves into thinking that our suffering, alienation, stress, and depression are solely our own, we also share these problems with everyone we meet, especially our children.

When we have the better part of our nation engulfed in a labyrinth of consumerism and ceaseless selfish pursuits for self-gratification, we ultimately end up with a society of citizens alienated from their authentic selves and from each other. It is my conviction that it is a



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moral imperative for boomers today to rekindle the spark that ignited their earlier civic and spiritual ideals and creative activism to restate a sense of sanity and balance in American culture. This was the underlying impetus for me to write this book. It is not important that you and I as boomers reap the rewards from our actions during our remaining days. Rather our motivation should be for the benefit of our children and their succeeding generations who will ultimately inherit the reins from us to govern and preserve American society in the not-so-distant future.

*The Greatest Generation and Their Boomer Children*

It is my belief that today's senior citizens—the members of the Greatest Generation—are the new “lost generation.” They are the last of the American vanguard to have found meaning and purpose in the preservation and sustenance of the nuclear family, their communities, and nation. Before the arrival of boomer culture, preserving the health of these social units had always been a hallmark of American society. For the boomers' parent's generation, community defined a person's character. The Greatest Generation prided itself in what it had gained and what could be shared with others. Theirs was a culture of authentic altruism. It was all about interconnectedness and relishing the time spent with children, grandparents, and neighbors. Having food on the table surrounded by family, a steady job, a public education system for the children, clothing, and a house were all that was essential.

Stability is one of the keywords that best defines boomers' parents. One important area where they observed a pragmatic sense of stability was in the way they understood money and handled their finances. For them, a person's monetary power was determined by the amount of money saved rather than speculative assets. In other

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words, they perceived their financial worth in very concrete rather than illusory figures. Of course, credit cards did not exist then and any kind borrowing was generally the exception rather than the rule. This was a generation forced to live within its means, ensuring stability and continuity in their lives.

Not long ago, I had a chance to visit my old neighborhood in Parkersburg, West Virginia, a small city on the Ohio River. By today's standards of suburban sprawl, everything looked small and worn. While strolling along the familiar streets, once the play area for me and my friends, I heard two elderly voices call my name. It was Ms. Zoller and Ms. Croft, now in their eighties. They recognized me as if it were fifty years ago when they were young parents. I stopped to have a conversation and was amazed how they could recall minute details about my life growing up in Parkersburg. I asked them why they continued to live here and one of them replied, "Where are we supposed to live? This is all we know. Everyone else is gone but at least we know each other." I could not help realizing that both of these kind women lived so much in the past. Whenever they had an opportunity to speak about how things used to be, their faces would light up. At the same time, I could not help but feel these two ladies, like most senior citizens, feel their children have pushed American society far beyond their reach.

The work ethic has always been a part of American culture, and the Greatest Generation raised it to the highest standards. They believed that everything we wanted had to be earned through effort. Therefore, parents of boomers rarely gave free handouts to their teenage children, unless they were among the very wealthy. For example, if a boy wanted a new bicycle, his dad might say, "Okay, but I will only meet you half way. You have to perform chores around

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the house, or earn money cutting neighbors' lawns, and then you can have one." This was the kind of child-raising environment that transmitted a healthy merit-based work ethic to boomer children.

Then there came a brief time during the 1960s when the baby boom generation started to question their parents' work ethic altogether. Remember the "be-ins"? People were asking, in effect, "Why can't we sit around with flowers in our hair, and just be?" It may sound totally corny today, but I still think it was a darn good question. Unfortunately, it looks like most people have answered it, "Nope, it was a good idea at the time, but we can't just sit. Life's too complicated and demanding, so we've got to rush around like maniacs in our sport utility vehicles with our cell phones crammed to our ears. We've got to prepare for the next meeting, the next deal, the next activity, our children's future, our retirement. There's no time to just be."

Why is the boomer generation like that? Part of the reason is insecurity. The boomers were promised a golden future in the 1950s. At that time, everyone knew that with some study and hard work you could have all the basic essentials of the good life—the home, the car, and the family—most likely all would be financed by one salary from a company you could count on staying with for years. Two general assumptions were that most people would do better materially than their parents, and that society and the American Dream were by and large based on a meritocracy, so that the smarter you were and the harder you worked, the better you would succeed.

The change started in 1973 with the oil embargo. Suddenly there was a gasoline shortage, and talk about future severe energy shortages that would compromise our American way of life. As energy prices went up, so did inflation. And as the economic situation worsened, there no longer seemed to be a guarantee of the good life for everyone who worked hard. Women gained more access to the working

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world in the 1970s, which constituted progress in a real sense; the downside was that increasingly both members of a married couple had to work full-time just to keep the children fed.

In the 1980s, Reaganomics further eroded people's sense of security because the idea of a social safety net was questioned, and government programs were being weakened or dismantled. The prevailing ethos was that of "everyone for himself," so that even if you were doing well during that time you knew deep down that should things fall apart, you'd be on your own. It was no longer government's place to step in and help.

It was also during the 1980s that our tax system was changed in a way that furthered the stratification of economic classes, so that the "haves" wound up having more than the "have nots." While there might have been enough of the pie to go around if it was evenly divided, that was not going to happen, so the idea was to become one of the "have" group, whatever it took. The boomers had been made an implicit promise by the Greatest Generation—that with a little effort one could have a golden future—and if later years seemed to rescind this promise, they'd just have to work harder to keep the promise alive.

That's why becoming a workaholic seemed a sensible option to many. An extension of this thinking was that one's children should become workaholics too, to ensure their futures. The idea of competition infiltrated most areas of life, growing into the defining characteristic of our nation and society that it is today.

I do think that competition is a wonderful thing when you're competing against yourself. For instance, while most people who run the New York City marathon have no hope of beating the front-runners, anyone can compete with his or her own performance of the previous year and try for a personal best. That's a healthy kind of competition that helps people grow. But the kind of competition

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where you feel that you and your family have to grab yours before somebody else does is an unhealthy, mentally corrosive kind of competition. Many members of Generation X and the so-called Millennials—those in their twenties—define their lives around aggressive competition without regard for higher spiritual values in their present work or in the long-term results of their accomplishments. With the start of the downturn of the economy in 2007, more and more people are living pressurized, future-oriented lives that are based on the assumption that they're competing with the world.

The psychological consequence of always being possessed by the need to get ahead is that the mind becomes completely focused on satisfying its material desires and what the next move is to take the lead in the competitive game. The broader vision that enables us to perceive social and spiritual crises in our midst goes unnoticed. The problems around us are simply irrelevant because our self-gratification and need to get ahead in our consumer world takes precedence. Eventually, social and spiritual apathy set in.

During one of my radio programs in 2007, Dr. Jim Garrison, cofounder of the Gorbachev Foundation and president of Wisdom University, was a guest and we had very engaging dialogue about the aura of apathy that pervades America. According to Garrison and other historical scholars, the U.S. has been on a trajectory of growth and dominance on the world stage similar to that of other imperial powers throughout history. Today America stands at the apogee of what is known as the "imperial arc"—when wealth and power have been consolidated within a minority of elites (in our case, Washington and Wall Street)—the stage before imperial powers begin their gradual descent in status to becoming just another nation struggling among other nations. Or, in the worst case, the imperium decays into the dustbin of history. One requirement for

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building a vital civilization is a population's sense of civic virtue and willingness for self-sacrifice, generally known in American history as the Puritan ethic. If there were evident wrongs committed by the governing powers of the nation, citizens felt an obligation to speak, and regarded their effort to correct those wrongs worthwhile. The values of civic virtue and self-sacrifice were certainly an admirable trait of American society during World War II when the Greatest Generation transformed industry with innovative technology and science to come to the aid of its Allies in Europe and defend against the Japanese. Likewise, the boomers during the 1960s and early 1970s believed exerting their sense of civic virtue was worth the effort to bring an end to the Vietnam War.

But what happens when the consolidation of powers becomes so domineering—such as dictating what citizens should eat and purchase, what drugs will cure their illnesses, and how they should entertain themselves—is that people no longer feel they can effect any positive change in their community and nation, and question whether making an effort is even worth it. Instead they begin to exchange their sense of civic virtue for self-entitlement. I believe this accurately explains the overwhelming apathy throughout most of American society today. But even more interesting, especially when we acknowledge that this consolidation of wealth and power in Washington, Wall Street, and the corporatocracy is a product of baby boomers' addiction to competition, consumerism, and the pursuit of wealth, it also explains why such a large number of today's younger generation hold no higher ideals.

I don't think we have to strategize, scheme, and sacrifice for the future in ways that cut down on our enjoyment of the present. The flip side of excessive future-orientation is to discover happiness and joy in the present. Once we realize the moment as an endless fountain

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of happiness, contentment, and inspiration, we can regenerate our earlier ideals and imagination to find new solutions to the problems of our day.

*Ideals and Imagination*

In the early half of the twentieth century, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung parted company from his mentor Sigmund Freud over their diverging theories of the definitions and roles of the imagination and the unconscious. For Freud, the unconscious was simply a waste basket of repressed emotions, which manifested as dreams and were signs, as it were, for earmarking conditioned learning and behavior. Jung, on the other hand, understood that the unconscious and the human gift of imagination possessed the keys to our creativity and our ability to see beyond the appearance of what reality presents to our senses. In his view, dreaming was a natural process inherent in the human being to heal the psyche. Our modern-day successors to Jung among boomers in humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have ushered in important transformations in the areas of alternative medicine and health. For example, the benefits of creative visualization for aiding immune responses to fight cancer and other debilitating diseases have now been researched in university and institutional laboratories and found effective. In addition, what is now called mind-body medicine has attributed many of its insights to Jung and other pioneers who explored the powers of the mind and imagination.

Imagination has been essential for many of the constructive cultural revolutions initiated by great humanitarians and visionaries. Countercultural movements, for better or worse, have always relied upon the powers of imagination to envision a lifestyle or society different than the status quo. Yet imagination needs to be tempered with reason to allow us to witness the healthy possibilities of our

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potential, to generate higher ideals to strive toward, and to inspire us with the motivations to improve ourselves and our communities. Imagination without reason and pragmatism easily goes awry because it lacks a grounded ideal for properly measuring the value of the images arising from the subconscious. Famous philosophers and psychologists have frequently warned of imagination's ability to slide into delusional perceptions about oneself and one's capabilities if not tempered by reason. The 1960s counterculture displayed both the best and worst of imagination's power. On the positive side, it contributed to youthful boomers speaking out against their parents' support or complacency toward the unjust war in Vietnam. It fueled the civil rights and feminist movements. During this time young adults also expressed their individual freedoms, freeing sexuality from their parents' puritan values and directing the eyes of the nation to the values of living a more simple lifestyle closer to nature. On the downside, the hippies' free reign of imagination, especially when stimulated by drugs, resulted in many bright, idealist boomers ruining their lives and facing tragic endings. Many more simply ceased to develop and mature, remaining as adolescents in aging bodies, and either succumbed to a variety of dysfunctions or abandoned their ideals to follow the siren's call for embracing a pseudo-American Dream in pursuit of wealth, power, and possessions.

One could argue that there were a lot of boomers who, while they didn't fully embrace the counterculture, identified with it somewhat. There were people like this on college campuses all over the country. But it's my feeling that these people had been so primed in the 1950s to respect the powers that be, that while they may have undertaken some token rebellion when it was the thing to do, later in life they fell back into the earlier mindset of letting others call the shots. On many campuses striking a hippie pose was the "in" thing

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to do, so that for many people whose hearts weren't fully into it, looking like a hippie was no more than an extension of the conformity of the 1950s.

Have you ever seen how elephants are trained in Indonesia for logging? Early in life, they are cross-chained with large chains that make it impossible to move or break free. Later on the chains are replaced with a simple little reed tethering the elephant to a tree. The elephant could break the reed with one yank, but doesn't. Early conditioning has created what seems like a real constraint, but isn't. Similarly, many people go through life limited not by real constraints but by illusions based on early conditioning. Like the elephants of Indonesia, they're being controlled not by real chains, but by the ghosts of earlier chains.

When the boomers were children, life and parenting supported the freedom of a child's imagination. As children we were able to pile up chairs and folding tables, toss blankets over them, and amuse ourselves with a fort or hideaway for hours on end. A flashlight in a dark room could be as entertaining as today's latest alien attack computer game. The former activates a healthy, creative imagination far more than the packaged illusion of the latter. There was of course less parental control during playtime, allowing kids to roam and play in the neighborhoods with friends, climb trees, and get filthy during their imaginative sojourns in parks, woods, and fields. Unlike today, the industrial complex of toy manufacturers and producers of children's television did not spin out endless illusions to occupy a child's imagination. There was a quality of realism in the toys of yesterday, or else toys were modeled off of fairy tales and fictional characters that possessed charm, innocence, beauty, and goodness. I am certain that the executives of children's entertainment firms never gathered groups of kids in a boardroom and allowed

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their imaginations to manifest grotesque monstrosities or the horde of Barbie dolls imitating Britney Spears and anorexic fashion models. These are solely the products of the baby boomers' desire to increase corporate profits, enhancing their own livelihoods at the expense of children's imaginations. The corporate shapers of children's entertainment, moreover, have taken advantage of the boomer parents' needs to have their children entertained while they indulge themselves in their hectic lives.

Every generation can be defined by its particular highs and lows. The highs comprise the unique gifts and *sitz em leben*—one's place in the greater scheme of life—defining a generation's true potential. The lows encompass all the negative conditions inflicted upon a generation by its parents and social and political institutions. It is fascinating to witness the interplay between generations during the course of recent American history. The Biblical account of the exodus from Egypt and the quest for a promised land can be reinterpreted as a myth for every generation. Each generation embarks on an exodus from the captivity of the social paradigm and values controlled by its parent's generation in order to create its own promised land. However, every generation's promised land in turn becomes an Egypt, a land of exile and alienation, for the succeeding generation. This cycle of generational sojourns through the social paradigms and expectations of preceding generations has been reenacted over and over. In every case a generation's ability to imagine a higher ideal has shaped its destiny. Here we are going to look at how the baby boomers' promised land has become a land of exile and alienation, full of disappointments, frustration, and anger, for their children. The danger I see is that the majority of today's younger generation might be the first in American history whose capacity to envision higher ideals for themselves has been smothered by the boomer generation's neglect to nurture positive values in its homes and

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communities. By the boomers' replacement of a viable work ethic with a culture of tension between competition and entitlement, young adults are now struggling to find a meaningful identity.

When imagination is snuffed out of a society, stasis and depression ensue. Mao Tse-tung's Communist agrarian revolution, which ultimately led to the Cultural Revolution and the atrocities committed by the Red Guard, is an extreme example. Mao and his comrade elites discerned everything in Chinese society as either black or white, permissible or banned. Many forms of traditional Chinese culture, entertainment, music, literature, art—all those activities that we generally associate with the imagination—were outlawed and replaced with political displays that didn't deviate from the ideal of Mao's socialist vision. Any product of the Western imagination was immediately suspect and regarded as an enemy of the revolution. All personal pursuits, even hobbies, were either sanctioned because they benefited the government's social ideology or were branded heretical, punishable by long prison internment or even death. For several decades, apart from entertaining their imaginations privately or in dreams, the Chinese population lived in a world empty of imagination and hence any valid spirituality, unable to manifest free expression in their personal lives.

During the past decades of the boomers' reign over American society, a very subtle form of subversion of the imagination has occurred. I do not want to suggest that this control over our children's imagination is intentional or even particularly conscious. What is important for us to realize is that the child's world today, defined and orchestrated by the boomers' social and corporate institutions—Hollywood, toy manufacturers, the computer and television entertainment industries—has been primarily defined by grown-ups, and this continues at the expense of children's freedom, their inherent

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personal gifts, and the power of their imaginations. There is no high ethical standard by which these industries operate other than competing for the population's attention to consume and consume more in order to sustain the illusion of a healthy, growing economy. The result has been the shaping of children's vital imagination into a hallucination, not by the innocence and free expression of the child, but by a bombardment of seductive images to mold children into loyal consumers for the future. This is not an expression of a healthy and positive imagination that reinforces spiritual values and free-thinking during a person's formative years.

Following the stage of innocence and preschool exploration of the world, children enter a school system to learn how to become productive members of society. How did the education system fail boomers, and in what way is the education system today, controlled by this generation, failing its children?

A critical shortcoming of a large segment of boomers has been their buying into a consumer-based corporatocracy and hence ignoring their generation's higher ideals for social and spiritual transformation. The pursuit of possessions and material comforts to provide a false sense of security has a psychologically numbing effect upon us. Things possess their own kind of gravitational pull when the mind and emotions become identified with them, often stronger than the lofty airiness of spiritual values and altruistic social goals. A fearful life preoccupied with its welfare and security in the future is a life of constant struggle, competition and turmoil. The ancient Greek two-faced goddess Hecate, also known as Kore, portrays the dual sides of life experience. In the Greek Mysteries she was regarded as an image of the world soul, the energy behind all that lives and breathes. On the one hand, when our mind is immersed in the density of possessions and consumed with the pursuit of finding security in things and inane activities, Hecate's face appears wrathful. It indicates that when

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we turn our attention only toward how we can satisfy our gross physical senses, the world becomes a realm of constant struggle and unnecessary suffering. Alternatively, when we place our attention on higher values, on how we can improve ourselves, manifest our full potential, and benefit the lives of others, Hecate's other face appears caring and benefic. Life then flows effortlessly. For the Greeks, Hecate's face of joy embodies what sages have referred to as the contemplative life, a life with opened eyes; the life I refer to as living in the moment.

Another instructive image about possessions' psychological burden is found in the famous ancient poem, "The Hymn of the Pearl" in the early apocryphal text *The Acts of Thomas*, which influenced the wonderful German film *Wings of Desire* by Wim Wenders. The poem is an excellent analogy for how we lose our bearings in life when we become overly attached to the accumulation of possessions and forget our spiritual identity and higher values.

The hymn is about a king who sends his boy to recover a pearl guarded by a serpent in the sea. During his sojourn, the boy enters a country renowned for its obsessive pursuit of possessions and its self-indulgence and superficial pleasures, which he had earlier been warned about. The boy is quickly seduced by the citizens' lifestyle of mindless, selfish trivialities and is lulled into forgetfulness about his true origins as the son of a great king. He becomes simply another citizen, void of any unique identity, just another obedient servant of the country's ruler. Eventually a messenger delivers him a letter from his father. The letter awakens his memory to who he truly is, and he continues on his journey to recover the pearl.

The story is a compelling portrait of young adults' immersion in boomer culture. The question is: Where are the parents who will deliver the letter reminding their children of their authentic self and purpose on Earth?

Boredom prevents us from actualizing our true potential; in fact,

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it makes us forget we even have one. We might engage ourselves in endless activities and busyness, but this only gives us a superficial feeling that we are not bored. Just like the boy in the hymn who forgets his royal heritage, we inadvertently become servants to whatever the social system tells us. We lose sight of the precious pearl awaiting us, a symbol of our authentic self and true potential, which brings joy, peace, and happiness into our lives. Yet we have become conditioned from childhood to be experts in boredom, and our educational system has been the supreme guru in initiating us into a society of mediocrity, empty of spiritual value and fulfillment.

The serious failures of today's education system began before the baby boomers and the World War II generation. The origins of the system we have inherited today can be traced back to America's towering early twentieth-century industrialists: Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and Henry Ford. In 1924, the ever-insightful social critic and satirist H. L. Mencken wrote that the purpose of public education during his time was not

to fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence. . . . Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim . . . is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is the aim in the United States, and that is the aim everywhere else.

In his excellent expose on the origins of modern education, *The Underground History of American Education*, John Taylor Gatto identifies three fundamental principles that had defined the best of American education in the past: 1) to develop good, caring people, 2) to develop good citizens in the community, and 3) to make every student discover their higher, unique purpose and to guide them in developing it to its maximum. These principles, in fact, mirror the



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aspirations of the nation's founding fathers, such as Jefferson and Franklin, who envisioned a robust, discerning, and enlightened America.

However, with the advent of the industrialists mentioned above and others such as the founder of the Social Efficiency Movement, Frederick Winslow Taylor, in the 1910s these principles were replaced with a single goal: since children were seen as a "human resource," education's directive became to prepare students to find their place in the industrial world. This goal was not only the vision of the industrial leaders, but was also adopted into American politics in the White House. Gatto documents these words of Woodrow Wilson before he became president, "We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class, of necessity, in every society, to forgo the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks." It is my belief that this perversion of public education's role into producing bored workers and consumers in the future continues today in a modified manner. The difference is that sitting at a machinist's bench has been replaced with sitting in a corporate cubicle with a computer.

We might remember that there was a single fear that utterly petrified industrial moguls like the Carnegies and Rockefellers; that is, the threat of a workers' revolt to topple their positions of power and control over vast wealth, power, and influence as they had witnessed with the Bolshevik Revolution in Czarist Russia and the rise of unions in industrial Europe. For this reason, the American power elite during the early twentieth century needed to reshape all American institutions—education, medicine, universities, management, et cetera—to assure that the population was isolated from independent, free-thinking influences in order to prevent their imaginations from entertaining higher ideals and visions that might threaten the dominant

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social paradigm. Few Americans know that the current mass public education system that we have today was originally adopted from a model developed in Prussia, which had been proven to produce bored, mediocre minds who would surrender themselves to their allotted place in society without challenging authority. The result has been that every generation has since removed another nutrient from public education until today we have Wonder Bread schooling—colorless, bland, tasteless, and void of any authentic nutritional value for human consumption whatsoever.

Baby boomers have succeeded in further dumbing down education by making standardized testing a reductionist science. Perhaps unbeknownst to them, it has been a superb tactic ensuring that the fire of passion and imagination is finally extinguished in their children. Replacing the earlier principle of identifying each student's unique talents and developing them to a higher and more inspired level, standardized testing is doing little more than providing students with the bare of essentials, equivalent to teaching every child how to go to the bathroom and to brush their teeth on their own. The result is a generation, now in their twenties and thirties, who are extremely intelligent, able to recognize the lies and hypocrisies of boomers' corporate, political America, and that of all its many institutions including the faith communities. However, instead of possessing ideals to carry society to a higher level of realization, most are spiritually adrift and extremely distrustful of everyone except a close circle of friends. Worse, because their imaginations have been severely repressed as children, both at home and in school, they are a generation wandering in a desert without any authentic vision for a life other than competing for money, dominance, and indulging in ceaseless entertainment. And what happens when maturing youth lack the imagination to create a noble ideal to strive for? They expect entitlements and rewards for simply inhabiting a body and being in

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a culture that has lost its ethical bearings and whose only purpose is endless consumption.

Baby boomers' commitment to corporate interests has also ensured that our children remain not only mentally handicapped but also physically unhealthy. Large revenue-generating food services in public schools provide children with the worst imaginable foods for human consumption. We have allowed companies to make soft drinks—heavily concentrated with sugar, caffeine, and phosphoric acid (equivalent to gargling with battery acid)—readily available throughout schools. It is well known that junk food disturbs our mental faculties and can lead to depression because it offers no essential nutrients for the brain. Consequently, children are bouncing off walls in classrooms and acting unruly and aggressive toward each other. Their mental capacity to concentrate on any given topic or task for an extended period of time is limited. Change the diet of children and we will witness a decrease in the seeming ADD and ADHD epidemic. The boomer parents who permitted businesses and vested interests in educational organizations to toxify their children will no doubt proclaim innocence. In response I am reminded of a modern Sufi saying, “Innocence without wisdom is ignorance; wisdom without innocence is arrogance.”

Although this might appear a bleak scenario, we should remind ourselves that while imagination can be repressed, it does not disappear altogether. Every person possesses latent visionary qualities and ideals that can be actualized. Imagination is inherent in the human being and I have hope that the children and grandchildren of baby boomers will rekindle their imaginations and act upon their ideals in a positive manner. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of China to Western ideas and values, there was a burgeoning of spiritual idealism that was never completely absent but had remained dormant during the decades of Communist ideological

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oppression. But I have little hope for anything truly constructive, authentic, and transformative being actualized en masse by baby boomers as they prepare for retirement in gated communities or struggle against the inevitability of age while they spend the rest of their lives in boredom.

Boomers do have the opportunity, however, to reinvent themselves by reinvesting in the development of their inner lives in order to improve the quality of their outer lives as well as the lives of their children and friends. It is never too late. As children, boomers were not consciously encouraged to develop their inner lives. Although daydreaming and seeing little invisible people and playmates might have been cute, we were told it was just fantasy and it would not benefit us. It wouldn't put food on the table or get us a home or the man or woman we would marry later. Many boomers take their criticism toward the inner life of their children even further—denying its usefulness outright. Children and teenagers are told repeatedly—not just by parents but also by the entire multimedia culture—that they should focus only on the outer world because that is where success and happiness will be achieved. Consequently, our inner lives are impoverished. With few exceptions, churches and faith groups have completely failed to encourage the inner life although traditionally this was spirituality's ultimate task. It has always been the premise of authentic spiritual paths that the toxicity we experience in the outer social world is but a reflection and manifestation of the toxicity within ourselves.

One of the greatest teachers for helping us redeem ourselves for having ignored and even denigrated our inner life at times, is nature. If we frequent settings outdoors—even if it is simply an urban park with trees and the sounds of birds—we can reconnect with the deeper world inside us. The sun is always present wherever we are. We come in contact with water daily, and with the greenery of the plant king-

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dom. Green is also the color of internal healing in many traditional healing and spiritual paths. Once we can realize the preciousness of life and our planet, we will revitalize our appreciation for the preciousness of our own lives. Only then can boomers transform aging into saging and begin mentoring the generations drawing closer to replace them.

*Neo-patriotism*

Before September 11, 2001, globalization was already a key concept on the minds of many people around the world. There were best-selling books by authors taking sides in debating globalization's merits. For example, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has been a rabid supporter of American corporate interests enveloping the planet, while the Nobel Prize laureate in economics, Joseph Stiglitz, has been one of globalization's most outspoken critics. The news frequently reported on demonstrations all over the world against the captains steering globalization: institutions such as the World Bank and IMF, the World Trade Organization, and elite multinational corporation clubs like the World Economic Forum.

Globalization is a highly complex phenomenon and difficult to wrap our minds around but in its present state it is a baby boomer creation for finding ways for Americans and citizens of other countries to consume more and more. One thing we can probably agree upon is that almost everyone today feels like the planet is a much smaller place than it was fifteen or twenty years ago. Regardless of globalization's rights and wrongs—and there are many of each—the emergence of a planetary consciousness where every person is both a citizen of a nation and a resident of the planet has gradually taken root. Today, to be a strict isolationist is to be mentally alienated from the modern world. However, after the attack on the World

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Trade Center, this global awareness seemed to be placed on hold as Americans fell back into a patriotic, nationalist mindset. Even in our age of globalization, Americans generally still hold a distorted perception about the world, other nations and cultures. Among citizens in the developed world, Americans, in terms of percentage of the population, hold the fewest passports. As a nation, we have seen less of the world than other countries have. Even among those who have traveled outside America's boundaries, their international experience is usually limited to tourist watering holes like Cancun, Barcelona, or Miami, to resorts that can be found anywhere around the world. Of course, if you live in the Netherlands, for example, you would only have to drive a couple hours to be in a new country with a different language, a different cuisine and culture, and a different political climate and customs. Consequently, Europeans are far more sensitive to the diversity of the human community. For this reason we still find a remnant of statesmanship among some European leaders whereas in America statesmanship is all but extinct.

I find it quite fascinating to observe how the new fervent nationalism—a belief that “my country is best” against all others—reflects a fundamental belief held by the parents of boomers. However, the differences between the nationalism of the Greatest Generation and our current boomer nationalism are immense. The pride the Greatest Generation had for the nation was authentic and reflected a reality shared by other nations. America was loved around the world for its role in defeating the aggressions of Nazi Germany and Japan. The industriousness of the American worker and our innovations in almost all scientific disciplines were held as exemplars for other nations to emulate. The United States back then was often considered the best country in the world—this is certainly what boomer children were taught in school. Today, people may make fun of multiculturalism

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and the political correctness thereof, but it's still constructive to question the old belief in "my country, right or wrong." In fact, it is more important to hold this belief accountable today than ever before.

One of globalization's positive contributions has been providing us with greater exposure to other cultures and the possibilities to learn from them. The baby boomer generation helped begin this process with the counterculture and activism of the late 1960s. The boomers, as a group, began the burst in foreign travel, with their desire to experience all the world had to offer. Many immersed themselves in the lifestyles of the different cultures they visited, and in turn introduced foreign cuisines, child-rearing practices, alternative medical modalities, and techniques in self-development and spirituality that have become readily available throughout America.

To illustrate one simple example with child-rearing practices, anyone carrying a baby around strapped to their chest or back during the 1950s would have been considered out of their mind. But this is precisely what mothers throughout Africa and South America have done for thousands of years. These cultures knew that by keeping the infant close to your body, even while you work and go about your daily chores, the child remains content and happy. Americans, to their credit, caught on. Boomers also began exploring prolonged breastfeeding and natural childbirth, which in the 1950s were the kinds of things that only so-called primitive people did. Or look at the "family bed" concept, where everyone—parents, babies, and young children sleep together, as they do in many Native American and other indigenous cultures. This is not what we've traditionally been told is right in this country, but there are increasing numbers of psychologists today propounding the family bed concept, and more American families are practicing it.

Although there was a time when Americans opened themselves to learning about the cultural richness and wisdom of foreign societies, I

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believe we have witnessed the diminishing of this ethic since 9/11. There has been a return to the belief that “America is best” and a renewed support in Wilsonian U.S. intervention in other parts of the world, with a goal of protecting our nation’s interests and well-being under the guise of spreading democracy. At home, particularly amongst the boomers on the Christian far-right, this is being interpreted as a blessing of providence under the banner of a new Manifest Destiny, which is completely alien to the teachings of America’s founding fathers. However, other economies have already rapidly overtaken us; European nations have far better foreign policy relations with developing countries, and the EU and Japan are better protecting their citizens from pesticides, genetically modified foods, and harmful toxic chemicals in common household products. I heard from a friend among a group of American global activists who met with members of the Brazilian elite during the World Social Forum in Brazil—a movement to counter the huge multinational corporate interests held by the World Economic Forum—that these wealthy family heads said, “We no longer want our children to go to college in the U.S. It isn’t that your education isn’t excellent. It is. However, we don’t want our children exposed to your current values and attitudes toward life. Instead, we plan to send our children to universities in Europe, Australia, or Japan.” It used to be the case that privileged families all around the world wanted to enroll their children in American universities because our higher education was held in such high regard. But today, tell any American that European education might be better and might provide a healthier environment for learning than in the U.S. and you will receive a tongue thrashing. The belief in America’s past laurels continues to determine the way we perceive ourselves, our nation, and the world.

It’s important to understand that the issue of horizon-broadening goes beyond interest in other cultures. At a deeper level, if people aren’t willing to look at their cultural assumptions, they aren’t going to be willing to look at any of their assumptions about life. They’re

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just going to plod through their days unquestioningly, following down the same narrow path that they've been following for years and that others have followed before them, stuck in the same old ruts that are getting deeper and deeper all the time. Were I to suggest getting off this path, and getting on a wider, fresher, more scenic one, these people are going to give me reasons why making a change is not practical. The problem is that there can be no essential learning when the mind is closed. There are people who refuse to make even small mental changes in order to expand their outlook on life. This is a shame because with the world as our classroom, there is so much we can learn.

You can go to Spain and see how they don't have to say "Let's do lunch" there, because they "do lunch" every day with their families, enjoying a relaxed main meal for at least an hour. It keeps family ties strong, and is better for the digestion than our custom of eating our largest meal in the evening.

You can go to Hungary or Turkey and observe how young people there are guided by their elders through the difficult passages from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Guidance there is not just something you get from an office in school. In these other cultures, aging is understood as process of becoming wiser and elders continue to take on the role of guiding the youth in the ways of wise living.

You can talk to Native Americans about what the concept of nature means to them. It's a sacred part of everyday life, not merely some frill to be enjoyed on weekends, or a force to be controlled, owned, erased, or put on exhibit. Instead, nature is perceived as a living entity and as the fundamental source of our sustenance. Therefore, they believe it is the duty of people to preserve the environment.

I could go on, touching upon dozens of cultures, but it all boils down to this: If you're open to the world and avoid prejudging it,

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the world will open up a wealth of useful knowledge and perspectives for you. This is true on every level of experience.

A friend of mine has an interesting story about how prejudging doesn't work:

Up until my late thirties, I'd just sort of assumed that you were friends with people in your own age group who were going through roughly the same stage of life you were. There was a woman in my neighborhood whom I only began talking to because we'd both gotten involved in a local political struggle to save trees in a park. It seems silly now, but I found her a little scary at first because she was in her seventies, her skin was all wrinkly, and her eyes were slightly crossed. When I saw her, my first reaction was "strange." She'd never had kids, and was not the type to pretend interest in other people.

Here's what I discovered: I had more in common with this woman than with a lot of the moms my age. She truly cared about the local park and its trees because, like me, she liked to walk on a trail there. She had the kind of spirit, energy, and interest in the world that some people call youthful, but that is really ageless. When I talked with her it was like being back in the exciting world of a college campus, where exchanging real ideas was an important part of conversing. To tell the truth, getting together with her was a lot more stimulating than talking with other mothers about the cutoff date for kindergarten. But I never would've suspected this at first glance.

I would like to share another example of this principle. It might not always be a person's intellect or what they do that attracts us. Sometimes it can just be a person's being and presence. The producer of my radio program has traveled extensively around the world and has spent time with many notable people—the Dalai Lama, Mother

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Teresa, Mikhail Gorbachev, Jane Goodall, and others, but once when were talking, he said that when people ask him who the most inspiring person he ever met was, only one person immediately comes to mind. It happened to be a middle-aged woman with advanced leprosy living in an old graveyard in New Delhi. He said that he would visit her in her tiny hut, which had a tombstone for one wall, and sit there and watch her make tea for him. She owned almost nothing; she was a social outcast, considered utterly impure by Indian society. But as he watched her balance the kettle over the burning cow dung in a pit in the clay ground, pouring the tea into cups with her fingerless hands, he saw that she made every movement with perfect grace. She moved about on stubbed legs like a ballerina, her eyes were caring, and her presence full of peace. He said he learned more about the dignity and potential inherent in a human being from the silent presence of this woman than from any of the other better-known teachers he studied with.

So we need to venture outside of our judgments, constrained beliefs, and compartmentalized lives to open up to experience. What if you were to simply refrain from prejudging everything you think about? You wouldn't reject all the places you hear negative things about. You wouldn't dismiss people until you got the chance to know them. Think of how much more of the world you'd be open to experiencing.

You can never change anyone in life (not that you have the right to anyway); if you think you're smart enough to change someone, think again. We live in a world of multiple realities. There is a place for everyone. If you don't accept other people's realities, they may close off a side of themselves. All you are doing then is accepting someone who has changed superficially to be accepted. As a result, you never expand your outlook on life, and you pay a price for that. If

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you can accept a person who is completely different from you, and honor those differences, you will have the opportunity to build a rich relationship. The differences can enhance you as much as (or more than) what you have in common does.

We have come to accept knowledge as growth, that all we need is more new information to make wise decisions. If we have enough facts and equations, then somehow a solution to a problem will automatically become clearer to us. I would challenge this assumption. First, we can ask ourselves whether the world is really better due to all the information we have piled up. Why do so few people have healthy, functioning lives? It certainly has not been because we are deficient in information. Therefore, consuming facts and information has its limits.

There has been much written about living in the new Information Age. Boomers have been the masters of information gathering and hoarding. Our present age is really the boomer era that was ushered into the lives of Americans with the advent of the personal computer, when our ability to mine vast collections of data and facts for whatever exploitive purpose took off. The endless acquisition of information is in many respects just another expression of the boomers' consumer society. It makes us feel better if we think we know more. The consequence has been that we have many intelligent and knowledgeable boomers but the authentic wisdom necessary for applying this information is at poverty levels. Although we are not short on information, we have become seriously deficient in developing new perspectives and new ways of framing problems that leave old beliefs, prejudices, and bigotry behind.

Ultimately, the information we acquire must coincide with universal truths. For example, if we are conditioned not to trust someone because of prejudiced and erroneous information we read or hear about, perhaps regarding a person's nationality or religion, on

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the surface we may believe this to be true, but our inner consciousness knows it to be a lie. It is not a universal honesty. You have to match your individual beliefs to universal truths. To do this, you must frequently take a big step outside of your belief system. To understand what is universal, we have to look at the consequences of our beliefs. That which honors life is universally true. No one has the right to take another life, for instance. And no one has the right to dishonor anyone.

Some people see what's right for them personally, and then they stop their thinking right there. I interviewed some boomers who worked in a company that made pesticides that were banned in the United States but sold legally overseas. I found out that hundreds of thousands of pesticide poisonings, and thousands of deaths from those poisons, had occurred in China and other countries. I asked these people, "Is it right for you to be working in a company that makes a product that hurts people in another country?" Their answer, almost uniformly, was, "I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm just making a living." They were making a living by taking other lives, but that didn't seem to matter.

People do not feel connected to their extended reality. That's why a bomb maker doesn't think about where the bomb is going to be used. Imagine working in a factory that makes land mines. Every day, children throughout the world are getting their limbs blown off because someone planted a mine. There are millions of these mines, and even decades after so many wars have ended, responsibility and efforts at top levels to cease landmine production fall short. I could never work in a factory where I knew that something was being made that could destroy a human life. I could not work for mega-corporations like Bechtel and Halliburton that destroy the infrastructure and resources of other communities and nations in the name of Western development and globalization. When boomers

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were coming of age they held more value in living by universal truths, but some of them have forgotten this. So we should never forget that everything we do extends to others. This is why it is so necessary for us to see the larger reality that affects us all.

The people in control of the nation and economy want you to spend what you don't have on what you don't need. So they get you to believe you have to maintain an image, and this becomes part of the American Dream. But the part of the American Dream they don't tell you about is the nightmare of the payments that you can't meet, and the imbalance in your own life as you devote more time to work and less to family, friends, community, and outside interests. One morning you wake up thinking, "We have everything we're supposed to have. Why are we so dysfunctional?"

Imagine how devastating it would be for the people in power if you stopped buying. They wouldn't like it, but you would have the freedom to do more. If you wanted to go on a long trip with your family, or alone, you could. If you wanted to go to other countries and enjoy different cultures, you could. For some people international travel can initiate an expansion of their horizons, enabling them to identify as a citizen of the earth instead of just a patriot of a given country. If you wanted more quiet time for meditation, you could work that into your life. You'd be able to build your life around what is essential to you.

Letting go of the American Dream involves a new mindset. It means that we have to content ourselves without many of the toys we are addicted to. It also means learning to feel good about yourself in the face of judgments from others. If you are a fifty-year-old with a college degree who gives up a job and house and moves to a remote area to start a new life, you are going to be considered irresponsible by most people. You must realize that you are being responsive to your own needs, and that that is more important than living just

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for others. After all, you can't live this day over. Until you make your time valuable, it is used only for spending. You are merely a tool of the multinational corporations. Once you reorient yourself, you do not belong to anyone else's belief system and you are free to go wherever you want to go and do whatever you want to do. Honor your time by your own standards, not by someone else's.

*Religious and Spiritual Materialism*

With all of my discussion about the limits of our society's overindulgence in consumerism and competition, and the loss of deeper spiritual values associated with nurturing the wisdom found in our inner lives, someone might say, "Wait a minute, Gary! America is the most religious nation in the developed world. As of early 2002, surveys by respectable research groups, such as the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Barna Research Group, estimate that 86 percent of American citizens report their affiliation with a religious faith—whether orthodox, traditional, or unconventional. So how can you say there is a substantial loss of spiritual values in America today?"

My answer is quite simple. Adhering to a belief system is not the same as living with the deeper awareness about the essential meaning of that belief's values in one's life. A belief system is just that: a system. It is a system that stands alongside or in opposition to other systems. And history shows that all systems change. Since systems are edifices of human imagination, all systems are impermanent. If Christians in the twenty-first century could transport themselves to the origins of Christianity in Palestine two thousand years ago, they would likely not fully relate to the faith practiced at that time. Therefore, it is important to realize that belief systems, although powerful and capable of exerting great influence over a society, are still by definition subject to change. Nor does a religious system necessarily impart universal values upon its members. For example, there

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are many devout Christians, Jews, and Muslims—in America and abroad—thoroughly devoted to their respective belief systems, who are eager to bomb each other off the face of the earth.

Some of today's faith communities have become places of refuge for many boomers, as well as for members of other generations, who have arrived at the realization that the domineering edifices of American society—in politics, finance, business, healthcare, education, et cetera—are impersonal and unsupportive of community-building today. The surge into more orthodox religions, particularly evangelical Christianity, is not necessarily about a person's personal desire to embark upon a path of self-discovery as much as it is about finding human acceptance and a sense of community in a culture that has turned cold and has left its citizens to fend for ourselves. Many boomers with hectic lives and insufficient time to spend with their children and families have recognized this need. But instead of taking it upon themselves to make the necessary lifestyle changes to accommodate other family members, they have found faith communities to be the answer to their needs and prayers.

Conventional religion is not the only major expression of faith in American culture that boomers have participated in. There is also an alternative belief system that has burgeoned into citizens' lives via mass media and popular self-empowerment gurus, which falls under the umbrella term of the New Age.

The recent success of *The Secret*, both the book and its subsequent film, is indicative of a pervasive outlook that is particularly strong among baby boomers. The essential premise of *The Secret* is that if we put out a positive idea into the universe, the universe will manifest it for our benefit and happiness. The ethical, moral, and spiritual motivations behind what a person projects with his or her thoughts is inconsequential. The so-called secret is that there is a "law of attraction" intrinsic to the human being and the universe,

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and if we learn to manipulate this law we can possess all those things that at one time were identified with the ideal American Dream. There are substantial faults with this notion. First, there is no new secret to this philosophy because it has been common sense in spiritual traditions since time immemorial. Second, there is nothing spiritual about this secret because it simply repackages a principle well known to depth psychologists and has nothing to do with higher spiritual ethics of compassion, kindness, and true wisdom. Finally, *The Secret* makes a fundamental error of ignoring the more essential spiritual need for making dramatic changes in people's lives, which can only be achieved by healthy motivation, commitment, discipline, and effort. Simply using our positive thoughts to attract a soulmate, a BMW, a new home, or better job will never instigate the necessary lifestyle changes people must make to live more enlightened and fulfilling lives.

What is most important for an investigation of boomer culture is not *The Secret's* philosophy but why such a book and film have captured the imaginations of so many citizens and popular mass media, featured on *Oprah* and so many other shows.

In the 1970s, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa wrote a book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, which was remarkably prophetic about the religious and spiritual landscape we are now experiencing during the twenty-first century. Trungpa's basic criticism of the way Westerners approach spirituality is that they refuse to let go of their ego-clinging when trying to develop themselves psychologically and spiritually. They meditate with an egoic intention such as "I gotta get there. I gotta get there," but the "I" is only the ego jabbering, and the ego is only an impermanent conditioned entity without any independent existence. While we might imagine that the ego can achieve happiness and peace, it in fact shuts us off from ultimately reaching a place that is essential and real. Once

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we realize that we are guided by our higher selves, our insights will change. We realize that nothing is permanent. Material things come and go because life is fluid. The trouble has been that almost all of today's postmodern belief systems would have us believe in permanency. In truth, everything, including our egos, changes all the time.

Today's pseudo-spirituality that is confined to the gratification of the ego—whether it be *The Secret* or the New Age movement in general—is an outgrowth of the boomers' need to find a quick fix, a spiritual bypass as it were, to avoid having to commit to the hard work of authentically transforming themselves. In my opinion it represents a desperate effort to find spiritual meaning in a society that has become overwhelmingly reductionist and denies the importance of vital spiritual values and the need to live by them to produce constructive, positive change.

Although the basic principle behind the “law of attraction” is valid, I would suggest raising it to a higher level. Instead of the Mercedes and more possessions that are impermanent, think of enduring universal qualities that you want to experience in your life. For example, if you focus on the quality of beauty, you will witness beauty where you never saw it before. You will even see beauty transpire through people who don't obviously exhibit beauty in their lives. If you think of solace and peace, you will feel quietude even when walking through the hustle of a large metropolis. If you think happy and pleasant thoughts you will discover yourself smiling at people you never smiled at before and chances are you will be rewarded with a smile in return. These are universal attributes that make our lives precious and full of excitement.

While conventional religion, particularly the kind of conservative evangelicalism that continues to increase in popularity, and New Age spirituality might appear to be diametrically opposed, I want to suggest they are more closely aligned than one might think; in fact they

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are two sides of the same coin. In the forms they appear to us now, both are boomer developments, although each can trace its roots to earlier generations' religious and spiritual experiences.

A major characteristic of a materialist culture is subjugation and acquisition. Conquest has in fact been a defining historical trait of Western civilization—colonialism, feudalism, Manifest Destiny's acquisition of territories, religious crusades to gain converts, male domination, and so on. The developed nations' embrace of globalization and free-market economics have been perceived by some scholars as a postmodern expression of colonialism. The primary goal, whether it be intentional or not, is to subjugate the national interests of poorer nations for the purpose of acquiring these nations' resources; the result is better profit margins for multinational corporations and developed governments. Media and corporate advertising, the pushing of drugs on television by the pharmaceutical industry, the news distortions of media's politically motivated spin doctors, can all be seen as extensions of colonialism. However, it is a colonialism far more subtle than what we have seen in the past; it concerns the colonization of the mind. This is a colonialism that subjugates the best of our mental capacities in order to gain our emotional support or get us to buy a particular product.

Both the religious materialism of conservative religion and the spiritual materialism of New Age thought are based upon the principles of subjugation and acquisition. The difference is that New Age beliefs operate at the individual level, whereas moralistic religion focuses on the collective level. The New Age reinforces the ego's self-gratification by promulgating a belief that a person can subjugate the universe for one's personal desires and wants. In this sense it is a distorted expression of the boomers' free-spirited revolt in favor of people manifesting their unique individuality in the 1960s and 1970s.

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Conservative religion, on the other hand, does not promote the individuality of its believers. It is concerned with subjugating a large collective of people in order to acquire influence and power for furthering its moral agenda and belief system in society and the body politic. Unlike the New Age, the conservative religion of boomers does not trace its roots to the freethinking and self-exploration of the 1960s; instead it is a distortion of the Greatest Generation's community-based ethics that boomers grew up with.

Neither the New Age movement nor conservative religion is an answer for the critical social and spiritual needs of the twenty-first century. Although each has likely brought a degree of personal satisfaction to its adherents and has probably soothed anxieties and insecurities, neither can ever truly be a force for authentic spiritual change, either in individuals or a collective, because both are distortions of universal values shared by people all over the world. What is most needed today is an enlightened reinvention of positive values from the boomers' upbringing, and synergizing these with their rebellious spirit of idealism and life-affirming imagination. This is the boomer renewal I envision that is most needed to transform society for the benefit of future generations of young people whose world will be drastically different than the one we are living in today.

Living consciously means living spiritually. And living spiritually means paying attention to people in need. Most of us consider ourselves to be fine people, but our actions prove otherwise. One of the largest obstacles to breaking free of the chains preventing us from acting spiritually is our selfishness.

On a global scale, selfishness is manifested as multinational corporations and governments exploiting every inch of the planet. In Africa and Asia, massive poverty exists in part due to corporate intervention. Yet do we see Fortune 500 companies giving even a

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small portion of their revenues back to provide proper wells for clean drinking water? Do they invest in planting trees where they have devastated the environment through deforestation? Are they building medical facilities so local residents can combat local diseases such as malaria, dysentery, and tuberculosis? In almost all cases, there is little to no effort.

The heads of the multinational corporations are respected individuals. Most are religious people who donate large sums to their churches and synagogues. Almost every one of our politicians in Washington claims some form of religious belief or affiliation, and while they may hold sincere and legitimate belief in their faiths, their actions in the public sphere rarely demonstrate that they are truly spiritual or authentically compassionate. True decency involves helping other human beings, and attempting to improve the lives of those who have been wronged.

Swami Muktananda, a Hindu wise man from India, once said, “Expect nothing, and you will never be disappointed.” The problem is, people generally expect more. They expect to receive in proportion to what they give, and that is not always what happens. As an example, you may have the consciousness that allows for compassion; you may be able to listen to others and understand them, but that doesn’t mean that those others will have the same capacity to offer compassion in return. You can’t expect another person to be just like you. So don’t blame others if they’re unable to give you what you’ve given them. If you have to give 90 percent in order to receive 10 percent, that’s still a balanced equation if that’s all the other person can give you in return. They gave what they could; that’s their ability level. It’s rare that you’ll find someone who is able to give equally. Accept that, and you will truly be compassionate and caring.

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Beginning with the reign of the Catholic Church when it became the worldly power over Europe, material power—the power to govern and control—replaced spiritual power. In the twenty-first century we are witnessing our world, nation, and social fabric dying. It is not simply dying from competitive greed and the exploitation and destruction of the environment. In a deeper way, it is also expiring from people's denial of a spirit that authentically connects and unifies us all. Our society will never be healed by corporate executives, new scientific advances, and politicians. Both the New Age movement and the pervasive conservative religions that dominate American religiosity are blinded by their spiritual materialism, thereby fundamentally denying the dynamics of an authentic spirituality.

These movements are trying to heal what doesn't need healing—because our true and genuine spiritual selves are already whole and pure. The authentic self can only be found by developing our inner life; it is the only trustworthy leader capable of expressing the wisdom that can guide and heal ourselves and others.

### *Happiness*

There are several factors that contribute to our development from childhood into adulthood and will ultimately determine how well we will fulfill our individual purpose in life. Two of these factors are most important and frequently play a tug-of-war with each other. One is our individual energy, a birthright that we are born with when we emerge into this world. It includes all of a child's latent talents and skills that, if nurtured conscientiously, will allow the child to blossom and live a productive and healthy life. The other, which is more important for this discussion, is the conditioning we absorb from our environment, which includes our parents and family members, our school and our culture. This includes not only the verbal



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lessons that children are given and the actions they witness, but also the energy, positive and negative, that they absorb from their environment. For this reason it is not unusual to see a frantic child accompanied by a frantic parent.

Last year I had a conversation with Professor Tal Ben-Shahar, a Harvard professor of positive psychology whose courses in happiness are the most popular on Harvard's campus. Professor Ben-Shahar estimates that 94 percent of all college students in America today are overly stressed and unhappy at their core. If true, and I believe he is correct, this is a frightening statistic. Young people today have been conditioned by the pressures of their boomer parents and by the onslaught of mass media and advertising to achieve a vision of success that is nothing more than giving obeisance to the deities of wealth and possessions. Moreover, they are taught that only aggressive competition, combined with distrust toward anyone other than oneself, is the means for reaching this goal. In the twenty-first century, happiness is sorely limited to whether you have more than your neighbor.

However, if we consider the statistic that only 6 percent of young adults today are authentically happy, that means that almost our entire society, nearly everyone who interacts with a growing kid, is also fundamentally unhappy. This is a strong indictment against the world boomers have created for themselves and their children. Is it any wonder then that our leaders—in government, corporations, educational systems, and faith communities—ignore the important issues for improving the essential quality of the citizens' lives that they represent? Our entire media world of talking heads is mostly populated by unhappy, disgruntled individuals.

There is an insightful saying of the Buddha, "Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the can-

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dle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared.” But the Buddha is speaking about a happiness only found in a place of contentment within ourselves. Buddha’s only possessions were his robes and begging bowl. All the possessions we own—including all the speculative assets boomers have assumed are theirs for the taking—are subject to change and decay. Imagine the stress and fear of all the families who are losing their homes from foreclosures, watching their investments and possessions decrease during the recession that commenced in late 2007. There are so many people in America today who are desperately unhappy because they have not acquired the American Dream promised them. Particularly in this worsening economy, financial hardship is an ongoing concern. But the more we focus exclusively on material issues, the longer we will overlook the pervasive, epidemic problem of people defining the value of their lives in terms of reaching a particular social status and the amount of possessions they can surround themselves with.

It may come as a shock to some boomer readers to learn that on February 19, 2008, the *New York Times* reported that the Centers for Disease Control noted a sharp 20 percent increase in suicides among middle-aged baby boomers (between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four) over a five-year period. The rate among boomer women rose 31 percent. At a mundane level, I believe our society’s overuse and abuse of antidepressant drugs is largely a triggering factor behind this statistic. More importantly, however, are the causes for why so many boomers have a need to take antidepressants.

There is a deeper and more spiritually based rationale for the rise in suicides among boomers, male and female alike. I recall a conversation I had with Sandra Ingerman, a psychologist and an accomplished shaman in New Mexico. She stated the problem well,



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“If we don’t want to live, the universe will create the conditions to shorten our lives.” This is a very powerful statement and food for thought.

Boomer men’s emotional immaturity and insecurity about their aging and loss of sexual vitality has partially contributed to the depressed social climate many middle-aged women are forced to live with. Being too preoccupied with themselves and their careers, boomer men retreat from their inner world where life is sensual, and instead chase after the youth that is receding away from them. Finding a woman many years their junior to try to re-create their earlier sense of sexual vitality is an escape from and denial of aging. As a result many boomer women have been feeling the loss of male companionship and intimacy.

For boomer children, possessions weren’t generally viewed as permanent but were to be explored, experienced, and then let go. Your joy was in using and sharing more than in owning. Once we became adults, though, we didn’t want anyone else to touch our things. One floor is only for the president, the executive vice president, and the executive secretary. Everyone else is kept out. But the president, the executive vice president, and the executive secretary may not know who they really are. They may get their identities from their titles, and from the fact that they have their own floor.

What happens when you cease to base your identity on what you possess? You find other things more meaningful, such as a sunset, the sound of ocean waves, or the graceful movement of an animal. You’re freer to experiment with new jobs, new activities, new environments for living, new people. I truly believe that unless you are able to separate yourself from your possessions, you will never find true happiness or see the beauty in this world.

Something I have noticed during my meetings with parents and their children, with few exceptions, is that the children of boomer

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parents who have continued to live in the spirit of the ideals that earlier defined their generation—dedication to practicing some form of viable spirituality and realizing that the quality of life is more essential than the quantity of things they can consume—are happier, more content, and more balanced. On the other hand, those parents whose lives are overwhelmed with work, preoccupied with keeping a career schedule that doesn't permit quality time with their children, and who are constantly competing with the Joneses, have the most unhappy children. Their children are also among those with the most learning difficulties such as ADD and ADHD.

You have probably heard of AA and OA, Alcoholics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous. But if you ask me, we could really use an additional self-help organization: TAA: Thing Addicts Anonymous. Millions of baby boomers need to join such a group. They're thing addicts.

Now don't get me wrong, I think the boomer generation is wonderful in many ways and they've accomplished much. They freed us from many stagnant notions of age-appropriate behavior, sex-appropriate roles, and codes of dress. As a consequence, people are a lot freer to be who they want to be than they were several decades ago. In the area of parenting, boomers advocated to include fathers in the experience of childbirth and in the daily care of young children. In the field of health, they're largely responsible for introducing more natural healing modalities. People condemn this generation for being pleasure-seeking, but I think pleasure-seeking has certain benefits, and Americans should be experiencing more of the pleasures in life that contribute to our happiness. But that pleasure-seeking has to be experience-seeking, not thing-seeking, and boomers often confuse the two.

This confusion may have to do with the era in which baby boomers grew up—their parents lived through World War II and all the

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deprivation and shortages that went with it. After the war, they felt they deserved a few pleasures, one of which was having a family; hence the baby boom itself. But people were also able to indulge in a variety of new possessions, such as houses, appliances, and cars, all of which went along with the new suburban way of life that many Americans were then adopting. A good economy, the growth of our highway system, and the development of cheap mass-building techniques were all factors contributing to the rapid growth of suburbs after the war. People's sense of optimism and entitlement impelled them to start experiencing the good life. We had won the war, after all; America was the greatest country on earth, and there was no reason we shouldn't live like it. Children who grew up in the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s were surrounded by these good feelings, and with the idea that material acquisitions were part and parcel of being an American in the middle of the twentieth century.

During the Cold War with the Soviet Union, it was almost as if buying things was a patriotic act, because doing so demonstrated how well our system worked. We still witness vestiges of this thinking today with America's dwindling economy in the twenty-first century. Repeatedly we hear politicians and economists speaking about ways to spur the economy by legislating changes that will increase consumer spending. For the listener, one would think that the entire value of the nation is based upon how much citizens can spend and consume. The sad fact is that our leaders also equate the happiness of the nation with citizens' capacity to purchase more and more stuff.

Another factor facilitating the acquisition of things was the development of plastics. One of the reasons baby boomer children were able to have more toys than the previous generation did was that plastic was beginning to supplant metal and wood as a cheaper material for toy manufacture. In addition, as toys became cheaper and Americans richer, families could afford to toss toys out and get new

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ones in a way they never could before. Hence we started to become a “throw-away culture” in the 1950s. Today people are tossing away computers like they did used toys, after a year or two of use.

But there is good news today, and it’s that some of the baby boomers and other age groups are asking themselves the question: Why has a “standard of living” always been equated with how much stuff you own? And they are concluding that possessions are not necessarily the most important part of the good life. There’s a burgeoning trend called “voluntary simplicity.” This involves cutting down on what one has in terms of things while increasing activities that bring a sense of joy and happiness, such as spending more time with family and friends, participating in local activities that support community values, and enjoying the pleasures of nature and hobbies such as gardening and hiking.

There is an interesting contemporary lesson about happiness to be learned from the other side of the globe. The king of the small Buddhist Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, in defiance of the large international and multilateral agencies’ attempts to judge the value his nation based on productivity and wealth, trashed the idea of a Gross National Product (GNP) as a realistic factor for determining Bhutan’s health. Instead, King Jigme Wangchuck promoted the idea that a nation’s health should be determined by the degree of happiness experienced in its population. Hence he coined the term “Gross National Happiness” because the joy and peace one experiences in the presence of the Bhutanese, which is almost unmatched by any other people around the world—except for perhaps isolated indigenous peoples—is a result of material and spiritual development occurring side by side. For the Bhutanese, “voluntary simplicity” is simply a way of life that has existed for centuries. But chances are a government agency devoted to assuring the happiness of American citizens wouldn’t work, because voluntary simplicity is an individual

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effort that requires people to understand the benefits to be gained by unraveling the clutter from their lives.

The reasons people turn toward voluntary simplicity are several. First, many people are simplifying their lives to save money; they can no longer afford the upper-middle-class suburban lifestyle that is still put forth as the American ideal. Second, there's the environmental concern, with many advocates of voluntary simplicity feeling that America's high-living, throw-away lifestyle puts a huge drain on the planet and is unfair to less-developed countries and to future generations as well. Also, modern American life has become so complex and demanding that people get tense trying to fit everything they're supposed to do into a twenty-four-hour day; thus, it makes sense to try to simplify the demands and cut down on stress. Further, some are drawn to this movement for philosophical and spiritual reasons; for example, they permit themselves frequent quiet time to rejuvenate their inner happiness and peace. This in turn helps them to speak, act, and share in the most harmonious and constructive ways with their children and others.

We work toward making our lives comfortable. Comforts provide a sense of security. But they also prevent us from trying anything new. We become afraid to quit our jobs and find new work, change relationships, or even change the way we eat, dress, or comb our hair. New situations create discomfort. We have no way of predicting how we are going to feel and what is going to happen to us. Comfort also creates complacency. Complacency stops the growth process. It prevents us from asking questions that are critical to growth and improvement.

When people stop taking risks, they stagnate. Joy is no longer there, and they don't see the happy side of life. They are only bitter and cynical. Why? Because the only perspective they have is of the ferment that is occurring around them. Who creates that ferment? They

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do. But who are they going to blame? Everybody else, or they blame circumstances.

When you are willing to act differently and take some risks, before long you will begin to feel comfortable doing something else differently. Soon you will start looking forward to experiencing life and not being afraid. Suddenly, your tiny view of life expands and your life is all the richer for it.

The happy person is balanced. And balanced people appreciate what they have. This is one of the most important things I have learned about life, and why I insist: Stop always thinking that there's someone or something missing from your life and that you won't be happy until you find it. And if you think that someone out there has the answer—the Dalai Lama, Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra, or Gary Null—you're wrong. We don't have the answers for you. The best we can do is offer some questions and guidance.

Once you know what you don't want in life, you have to determine what you do want—not in terms of possessions, but in terms of meaning. You must create your meaning. Start to picture who you want to be and how you want to live. If you don't do that, it will never happen. There is a marvelous saying, "The pull of the future is greater than the push of the past." When we focus on the past, paying too much attention to our old self and the traumas and upsets that condition our thinking, and permit that to be the shaper and guider of our lives, we are pushed along to and fro. Consequently, we lose all sense of control over where we are going. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to be in the moment, surrendering our past in order to be open to the future, then we are pulled effortlessly toward the opportunities that will improve and transform us. It is this second way that enables us to cast off the dross from our being to reveal our new self.

Finally, make the commitment to be unpredictable. When you

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do that you will begin to unfurl the person you truly are. Doing so provides us with an exhilarating sense of freedom, as if the chains holding us to past conditions were sliding away from our limbs. You must have the confidence to re-create experiences of pleasure or peace of mind every day. Remember that the authentic self finds happiness and a sense of peace in life, and that you're entitled to them.

*Neglecting the Power of Silence*

I remember an occasion when a communication satellite malfunctioned, knocking out service to many of the nation's paging devices for a couple of days. This technological breakdown was serious enough that it made front-page news. But the really interesting thing was that many pager owners weren't all that upset. In fact, they were quite relieved. With their beepers temporarily silenced, there was one less bit of noise infiltrating their lives and demanding a prompt response. For a short while, their world became a little quieter, a little calmer.

This led me to imagine a scenario: What if all our nonessential communications could go on the fritz for awhile? Emergency services would still be in place, but otherwise there would be no telephones, faxes, TV, radio, or e-mail. The effect would be like that of the satellite breakdown ten times over: People's lives would be much quieter, and the subtle sounds of nature would come to the fore. People would be able to think more clearly. They'd have more time to examine the meaning of their lives, instead of just scrambling to keep up with the trappings. In short, they would discover the power of silence.

This kind of selective power outage probably won't happen. But on an individual level we can make it happen to some extent, simply by turning off the appropriate switches when we can. There's another

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simple step we can take—we can stop talking so much. Then we can sit back, or go for a walk in the open air, and revel in the quiet.

Members of the baby boom generation are sorely in need of silence, because many have been silence-deprived all their lives. This is the first television generation. In addition to television, this generation was the first to grow up with telephones as a birthright, not as an option. The number of automobiles in the United States boomed along with the number of babies in the 1950s and 1960s, bringing increased traffic, noise, and destruction of natural environments. There is even “light noise”—unless you live in a rural area—which prevents people from ever being able to see the full beauty of the starry sky. Excessive noise, light interference, and the increase of electromagnetic waves from computers, cell phones, and household appliances all have a profound physiological effect on a person’s quality of sleep.

Professor Rubin Naiman, a sleep researcher at the University of Arizona’s Program in Integrative Medicine has studied “night blindness,” which is the effect on a person’s health and psychology of being deprived of darkness and bombarded by emissions from electronic devices and excessive light stimulation. According to Naiman, sleep disorders are epidemic today and affect all generations alike.

During the past year, *Science News Daily*—a leading reporting service for the most recent scientific research literature—has been noting a large increase in studies that show poor and deficient sleep in all age groups as contributing to disorders such as impaired mental function, obesity, diabetes, childhood learning difficulties, and more. Yet this is simply a continuum and increase of the beginnings of a noise culture inherited by the boomers. Add up all these factors and you can see why silence is something that many of today’s adults did not grow up with but so desperately need.

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A woman came down to my holistic retreat to attend a series of workshops, but she and a small group of people talked nonstop. There was no introspection. I kept telling them that their best time would be spent in silence, doing nothing except being with nature. No one listened. The woman wasn't going to stay a second week until I sat her down and told her that she had not learned anything because the most important message is always the silent one. I asked her to spend a second week there in silence, and she did.

During the second week, I asked every guest to eat in silence. I provided candlelight and flower arrangements. There was no conversation. For the first time, people knew what it was to eat in an environment conducive to inner tranquility. Now they were aware of what they were eating. They lost weight. They felt energized. Later when I took them out to sit quietly and listen to the wind, they suddenly could hear a symphony in the wind. They could allow every distracting thought to leave their minds.

People would tell me, marveling, that they could hear a thousand different sounds in the wind. "I heard the top of the palm trees moving. And I heard the grass moving. I heard the animals in the background, and the birds." All the sounds had been there before, but everyone had tuned them out because they were focused on their own chatter.

When we can finally break through to place our energy in the moment of silence, we are able to transcend the normal boundaries of visual perception, smell, and taste. We become integrated. Like a bird, which never contemplates its death while flying, we don't experience fear of falling from the sky. But most of us fly with fear.

It's interesting how an experience can change so completely when it is encountered with integrated thoughts. I could have you sit down for an hour to meditate, and you might wonder about whether your children are all right and where your husband is. If your mind is

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somewhere else, you are not integrated. On the other hand, you could be there in the moment. That's where healing occurs.

Only by being alone can you experience a silent mind that allows you to think about who you are, not who you've been told you are, or who you should be. Then no relationship will ever take precedence over your self. We have the mistaken notion in our society that the high point of our adult life is a relationship. I find that for most people that's very unhealthy. It's normal and human to relate to people and to share with them, but you should never be your relationship. Because what happens is that you cannot differentiate your self from the relationship. You never have a sense of being a complete and whole person. You're always attached at the psyche to someone else. And then you get caught up in power struggles. When you tie yourself up in knots trying to find your self-worth in another person there can never be any authentic interior space that's truly your own.

When we learn to be present with ourselves in silence and begin to learn the lessons of silence, we begin to observe how our mind and feelings function. You might ask yourself, what comes first, the thought or the emotion? The thought always arrives first. A thought is a word or a sentence or an entire idea that you've created. Consider how many times you've thought about something that you didn't do and should have done, or that you did and wished you hadn't. How many opportunities have you had and lost, and then relived a thousand times in your mind? Every time you relive a moment, you relive it by creating thoughts.

The thought, then, is not the reality. But how many times have you made thoughts real? For instance, we're in a small Southern town. There's an all-white audience. Suddenly, a black person comes in and sits down. How many people are going to think a negative, fearful, racist thought and make it seem as if it's real?

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Thoughts are not real. They're merely constructs. No one can have only positive thoughts. Even if you meditate, not all of the thoughts that arise from the surface of the mind will be positive. And the negative thoughts are often followed by an emotion of fear, anxiety, insecurity, resentment, or anger. You might decide that meditation, or yoga, or correct breathing isn't the only antidote to make you relieve your stress, so you look to health food, vitamins, or juices to improve the quality of your health. But these aren't going to change your life in any essential way; rather, it's your attitude that is going to change your life. Your life's only going to change after you learn to curb your criticism toward yourself and others.

There is nothing more damaging than an overly critical mind. If you need to do everything right you may experience some failure along the way. Then you're going to beat up on yourself. So we need to be comfortable in silence and use that silence to focus only on actualizing what is constructive. Think in terms of watching your thoughts parade in front of you and saying, *No . . . not that one . . . yes, that one I like. That one supports my intentions. That's healthy. I'll take it in.* Just let go of everything else because it's not constructive. This is an excellent way to get out of our destructive patterns and to find solutions to our problems.

*Universal Outrage*

Not long ago I produced a documentary about cancer and the vested corporate and medical interests involved with this disease. During the program, I provided a forum for many viewers to speak. Many patients felt various kinds of anger and outrage. When we use terms like anger, rage, and outrage, we need to be careful about what each refers to. Anger can sometimes be a positive emotion in that it is an expression of energy. But realize that there is a difference between anger and rage. Rage can hurt; anger can create change. In fact, I

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can't understand people who never feel angry. It seems to me that if you don't get angry at things, you have no passion for life. Anger most often has a very personalized quality. For example, if someone betrays me in some way, I might feel anger toward that person. Rage is when my anger takes complete possession of me whereby I lose reason and seek retaliation.

Then there is what I consider to be a higher form of anger, which we can call outrage. Outrage is not personal. I believe it is an inherent attribute of life that is expressed when something of great injustice is done that betrays the spirit of human reason and universal laws. For example, if I am watching the news and witness footage of a genocide in Africa or a story about a corporation knowingly destroying the environment and people's lives, I feel outrage. My own person is not being targeted by the genocide or the corporation, nevertheless I experience these actions as a violation of universal decency and the dignity of human life. Most of my documentaries are the products of an outrage I have felt toward how the medical establishment and other vested corporate and government interests have abused their power and resources, injuring and even destroying the lives of innocent citizens. There is a segment in my film *Gulf War Syndrome: Killing Our Own* in which I show pictures of Iraqi children who died as a result of the first bombing, suffering from poisoning by the bombs' depleted uranium and from the subsequent sanctions that prohibited Iraq from receiving medicine and equipment to assure functioning water facilities and civil infrastructures. The photos show innocent children inflicted with a wide range of birth deformities, previously unobserved cancers, and rare diseases due to toxic chemical exposure. Many people who have seen the film told me they cried while viewing this segment and felt an overwhelming sense of outrage toward our government's decision to attack Iraq. That is what outrage does. It opens our heart toward

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another person who has been violated indiscriminately and against all reason, and instills in us a desire to act to correct the wrong.

Most people get so comfortable and secure in their predictable lives that there is no anger and outrage left to project as a positive emotion. Remember the outrage of some of the baby boom generation as they protested the Vietnam War? Where has that motivation to actualize feelings of outrage gone? When outrage is actualized positively, it can be a powerful, constructive force for correcting the wrongs in the world. It was this kind of outrage that motivated Ralph Nader to go to Washington to protect American citizens from a wide range of abuses and that attracted young idealists and well-educated lawyers and activists from New England to create Nader's Raiders. It is a shame that boomers have forgotten how to feel outrage and instead have resigned themselves to the apathy of living self-centered lives. Today we are in urgent need of more outrage from aging boomers in order to jump-start new constructive and enlightened activism to improve our society.

*Children of the Boomers*

Occasionally on my radio broadcasts I have guests from the younger generation—the children of boomers—who have published important books or who have taken on the mantle of being spokespersons for their generation. I also have opportunities to speak with the young people who work in our offices and I ask them for their opinions about their parents and the boomer generation. Although most of them admire and have been influenced by much of what boomers produced during the 1960s and 1970s, my impression is that the overall sentiment toward their parents' generation is one of disgust. Kids whose parents continue to hold the higher ideals representing the best of the boomers' past, who walk their talk, show a greater appreciation for their parents than those whose parents have lost

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themselves in the superficiality of American mass media and the endless pursuit of possessions, money, and quick-fix schemes to try to feel more secure about themselves. One of the more common criticisms I hear when I ask young adults about what they dislike most in their parents' generation is their obsession with consumerism, their careers, and superficial interests.

For example, not long ago I read an e-mail from a well-educated young man in his early thirties who grew up in a family that was very influential and popular in pioneering the burst of exploration into Eastern mysticism during the 1960s. He summarized very succinctly how many of the boomers' children look upon their parents' generation today:

Some of us have a deep respect for the baby boomer generation and the earlier culture it produced. In particular we are impressed with their music, their progressive politics—especially the civil rights movement—their proud, unapologetic identification with spirituality and a certain frank, unembarrassed emotional expression. In some cases we see their early example as something we would like to replicate in our own generation. However, there is a feeling that the baby boomers, after innovating many projects and advancements, have lost their edge. They have become more passive and less discriminating. For example, the generation who challenged the assumptions of conventional religion now seems to passively accept the assumptions and dogmas of New Age and fundamentalist religions. There is an embarrassing indiscriminateness in that generation's hopping on the bandwagon of New Age crazes in health and spirituality, which seem to me to be shallow and uninteresting commodifications of the impulse to explore, which earlier defined this group's visionary

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and expansive spiritual evolution. Their current lack of discrimination and acceptance of mass media versions of music, entertainment, politics, social values, and spirituality unfortunately makes me doubt they are a group worth much consideration anymore.

I believe that underlying this young man's sentiments is a larger perception that the boomers are alienated from themselves, their children, parents, communities, and just about everything else that is vital and imaginative for experiencing life's fullness. In many cases, young people feel a resentment toward the boomer generation for producing a society filled with strip malls and an insane ethic that everything should be exploited for personal short-term gain. Or else young adults are too numb to notice or feel there is anything authentic and real around them. This has been the primary conditioning they received from their boomer families, education, and environment, and so in some ways it is all they really know.

While preparing for the publication of this book, I had a conversation with Pir Zia Inayat-Khan, one of the few authentic spiritual teachers to have arisen from the present younger generation. When asked about his perceptions concerning his generation's lack of spiritual ideals and their complacency toward civic activism, he agreed that this was largely the case for the vast majority of young adults today. They entertain a wild menagerie of eclectic ideas lacking any focused direction and are adrift in a sea of information, consumerism, and competition, which seems to follow the mantra that "life is uncertain so reap and enjoy all you can." Speaking about his own education while growing up outside San Francisco, Pir Zia said he was utterly bored and found no inspiration in what and how he was being taught. In fact, he fell into serious doubt that he would ever make anything of himself in life. This is not an uncommon experience among

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young adults regarding their education during their growing years. The further degradation of American education to a level of banal mediocrity is another contribution boomers can be thanked for.

Partially to blame is their boomer parents' information-based culture, which has overwhelmed young adults' minds with nonessential data that offers little for living a happy and rewarding life. Any boomer who experimented with hallucinogenic drugs during the adventuresome 1960s and 1970s will remember the overload of thoughts and images pummeling their minds. This is an accurate analogy for what our obsession with information has done to the minds of young adults. Boomers have built for themselves a vast hallucination. The problem with a hallucination is that you experience it alone. There is no one sharing the images and thoughts crowding in upon you. Likewise, we are so busy in our hallucination of consumerism and career-oriented success in order to fill the void left by insecurities and fears that we are unaware of how isolated we have become. There is less of a vital lifeline connecting us with our elders, our children, our friends, and communities.

The boomers' experiment with building a social hallucination populated with mental and physical stimuli blasting across everyone's senses is part of this generation's legacy to its children. Little wonder that boomers might see their children as if walking through a dream, indulging themselves in the immediate, short-term pleasures society offers them. What else is a hallucination except a play of the mind?

Another fundamental difficulty young adults face is detaching themselves from the culture of entitlement they were raised in. In the meritocracy of the Greatest Generation, discipline, focus, study, and mastery would result in the gradual achievement of rewards for a person's efforts. Learning mastery is a gradual process. Accomplishing small feats generates confidence and a sense of satisfaction

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to undertake greater deeds. For better or worse, it was the boomers' conditioning in mastery through accomplishment that expanded Wall Street and built huge megacomplexes such as Silicon Valley. Boomers also launched great advancements in science and technology at a rate unprecedented in human history.

When boomers replaced merit with entitlement, they were essentially saying to their children, "You don't have to prove anything to us because you are already deserving of being rewarded simply because you are here." Over the years of running an office with anywhere between thirty and one hundred people at a given time, I have had ample opportunities to closely observe the work ethic of young adults. I frequently witness the detrimental effects of entitlement on these young adult minds in their attitude and relationship to work. Often they demand to work on their own terms. Their loyalty to what they accomplish only lasts until something paying a higher salary comes along.

At the same, I also observe great potential for young adults on the horizon. They have keen, visionary qualities awaiting to be actualized. Although some boomers who are the dynamic leaders in America are unlikely to step down after reaching retirement age, young people today are starting to realize they can exert positive change on a grassroots civic level thanks to their natural affinity for the Internet and other high-tech communication. If they can discover themselves as more deeply connected with others at a spiritual level, latent ideals will come to the fore, and they can constructively use their unique technical and problem-solving skills to initiate positive change.

*The Boomers' Legacy*

Everyone is ultimately disposable. That's the way life on this planet works. People don't like the idea of being impermanent, but no matter how important they are, every person and every thing in life

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is transitory. Everyone who ever lived was disposable. As important as Buddha or Christ were, they were impermanent too. They helped humankind, they gave people new insights, but ultimately they came and went. It's what they left afterwards that people remember and treasure.

We remember those who live honestly and who earnestly seek to create beauty. We love the honesty of expression in music, literature, poetry, and art. We also cherish people's contributions made on a more personal level to improve the lives of their families and friends and to enrich their communities.

The sad fact of the matter is that the baby boomer generation has left a legacy for future generations that is fundamentally unsustainable and impermanent. When boomers were handed the baton from the Greatest Generation to further shape the country, they ended up placing their trust in the very things that brought unhappiness and disease. All those things and values they thought would bring them happiness, such as the perfect spouse, the perfect job, and piles of possessions, led in so many cases to disheartenment. When boomers reached their ascendancy during the late 1980s and onwards, they dismantled many of the institutions and infrastructures that were the gifts of the Greatest Generation's legacy: Family and community cohesion and togetherness eroded and were replaced by the highest divorce rates and single-parent families in American history; the tradition of feeling assured that there was a job for you disappeared when downsizing and corporate mergers based on the whims of those who stood to gain the most wealth became the norm; those boomers who came into corporations and institutions as trust babies, never having needed to prove they were worthy of their inheritance through hard work and effort, virtually destroyed what was handed to them; and the appreciation of spending within one's means was replaced by a culture of debt and speculation that now contributes to America's

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uncertain economic future and its standing in the community of nations. Perhaps worse, the boomer values of consumption and exploitation—corporate and individual—coupled with its addiction to wastefulness continue to deplete the nation’s environmental resources at an unprecedented rate.

The parents of boomers appreciated and honored the inevitability of approaching death. For this reason, leaving a legacy to their children was an important statement affirming their lives’ worth and purpose. Many others performed good deeds in their communities and died with the comfort of knowing that they would be remembered for their kindness. Innovators who built businesses and companies saw them as a permanent legacy that they envisioned would continue to thrive for generations to come. Of course, communications professor Leonard Steinhorn at American University does note that polls taken in the mid-1990s reveal that most Greatest Generation senior citizens still oppose interracial marriage, divorce, the rise of working mothers, and gay rights, in addition to insisting that young people should follow the dictates of their elders. But while many of their beliefs, allegiances, and convictions may seem out of touch today, the Greatest Generation’s intentions were genuine.

The United Nations’ official definition of sustainability can be paraphrased as: to develop and use natural resources in a responsible and ethical manner that does not deprive future generations from providing for their own needs while relying upon those same resources. As I mentioned above, the boomer legacy includes indiscriminate abuse of the environment. For example, today’s monopolistic agro-industry, which has ruined the legacy of the family farm, is completely unsustainable for long-term food production. As geomorphologist Professor David Montgomery at the University of Washington told

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me, the earth's topsoil is more fragile than the top layer of the human skin. All of the world's agricultural production is based on the couple feet of topsoil beneath our feet. When that is depleted, the land turns barren. This is only one example of megacorporations' misuse of natural resources. The same is true for water, the quality of plant foods due to genetic engineering, forests, and more. Former World Bank vice president Ismail Serageldin predicted that the wars of this century will increase and will focus primarily over water access and rights. Today more than five million people, mostly children, die annually from impure drinking water. Americans across all generations seem to maintain the insulated belief that such problems will never happen here.

Every boomer should ask him- or herself, *Will the legacy of my generation assure the well-being and healthy lives of our children?* My own answer is a definitive *no*. This is what I call the "boomer dilemma." How then do boomers restore their legacy, which is now nothing more than a broken-down palace?

To the United Nations' definition of sustainability above, I would also add human sustainability and spiritual sustainability. Human sustainability refers to restoring universal values to our lifestyles, our institutions, our communities, and families. Making this happen requires a dramatic shift from the current perception of boomers as a "Me" generation to becoming an "Us" generation that respects our society's diversity and pluralism, whether it be race, gender, religious orientation, political allegiance, or social status. In order to make a society's health sustainable, citizens must shift their perspective away from themselves and toward the well-being of others. Spiritual sustainability refers to developing our inner life and mindfulness. Our attention toward improving our personal lives, learning to become mindful of the consequences of our choices, and discovering

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happiness and peace within ourselves are prior conditions for any viable and sustainable act we might initiate to improve society's human sustainability.

Pioneering a new path, or restoring a path forgotten and ignored, is not easy. But we can still live vibrant lives and accomplish great deeds, large or small. We can take on new, more awakened roles in our families, our communities, and local organizations. But we have to make concerted choices about caring for our inner life if these things are going to happen.

We can begin this process by first focusing our attention upon universal values—beauty, kindness, compassion, joy, and excitement, and on the inherent energy within ourselves to accomplish noble deeds. During our spare moments, rather than giving heed to things that are impermanent, we can instead focus on a universal value within ourselves. Whenever you find the urge to buy more things or to replace something that is still perfectly functional with a new and improved model, stop to investigate your motivations. There is no need to continue our neurotic obsession with searching outside ourselves for answers. The more we seek for external solutions, the greater the personal angst we experience. Years ago when I was travelling by bus from West Virginia to New York, I remember it being hot and stuffy. They didn't have air conditioning on the buses, and it was a seventeen-hour ride. I remember a woman sitting so peacefully and calmly throughout it all that outside of Pittsburgh I asked her, "Aren't you uncomfortable?" She said, "No, I'm just thinking nice thoughts."

I thought, *I'm thinking about how uncomfortable I am. And this guy is smoking a smelly little cigar behind me.* And here was this woman. She taught me something important in the midst of an unpleasant experience. Her spirit touched me and strengthened me.

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We should also frequently reflect on the impermanence of our lives. As Buddhists often like to say, the only thing we must do in life is die. From the moment of birth, all of life is simply a walkway leading to death. One of the problems with the paradigm of permanence is that you know in your heart it's not true. But you've already given your loyalty to that belief, hence you are living a conflicted existence, which creates a sense of emptiness. On the other hand, when you live in the moment and accept the moment as being impermanent, you don't feel betrayed and dying is no longer threatening.

Having seen what has happened to senior citizens of their parents' generation, boomers are kicking and screaming over the prospects of aging. Like everything else they struggle to possess and accumulate in their nests, clinging onto youthfulness is just another thing to possess. Retirement is an idea that not all boomers are happy with because it means they will be ushered into the world of their aging parents whom they have ignored or neglected. Therefore, boomers are fearful of handing over the baton to the younger generation.

I can't emphasize enough to boomers that so many young people in their twenties and thirties are disgusted with the legacy their parents are bequeathing them. They think, *Step aside and go to pasture. You had your chance. It is our turn to take over.* Yet for many aging boomers, especially those who have dynamic personalities and who have taken on leadership roles in the reshaping of the American landscape, this is like a call from the grim reaper. The boomers' response is, *Hold on. It is not our time to fade away into a misty fog of insignificance.*

At the same time, boomers are the first generation to believe they can actually defy aging. Because they are accustomed to success, boomers expect success in defeating the coming of old age. It is true that believing that it is necessary to age "on schedule" is perhaps one

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of the worst mistakes a person can make. Due to past conditioning, many boomers have a set of expectations about how people are supposed to look and behave during each decade of life. Today our knowledge about aging has expanded tremendously. Those who follow the older model they internalized years ago, say in the 1950s and 1960s, are going to shortchange themselves throughout life, and may actually be lessening the years and quality of their lives.

The average life expectancy in America has increased almost a decade during the past half-century (from sixty-eight in 1950 to seventy-eight in the twenty-first century). Boomers realize that they don't have to act or look old at any particular time. So today, we have senior citizens working past the traditional retirement age, some runners in their eighties completing marathons, and authors in their nineties writing books.

All the knowledge and information in the world is not going to be of any benefit if a person's attitude about life is negative. Boomers have exerted too much effort achieving and consuming at the expense of experiencing the wonders of the world around them. They have placed their enjoyment on hold in order to chase after some magical moment in the future when they will feel completely secure. Now they are starting to regret not having taken more time to nurture themselves and to develop meaningful relationships with others. People obsess about what they might have been and what they could have done. We need to surrender our delusions and regrets and live solely with what we are willing to be.

For both women and men of the baby boom generation the bottom line is this: If you're going to avoid the aging-on-schedule trap, first and foremost you're going to have to want to. You're going to have to feel good enough about yourself and your life to want to get out there and shine, for years to come. You're going to have to

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want to try new things and take on new tasks, develop new habits, and possibly make big changes.

If boomers are to consciously address the dilemma of their legacy, they need to create authentic meaning in their lives so that they are not forgotten after they leave. Then their lives will not really be disposable. The memory of what they have left will be honored. In that way they will live forever.

*Who Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?*

Not too long ago a middle-aged woman came to my Florida ranch to work on our production projects. She had a pedigree background: a privileged family, a Vassar education, and a very lucrative career at a major Wall Street firm. I asked her why she gave up a prestigious career to come to a ranch and work a low-profile job. Her response defines the current state of American society and the polarization between the generations of boomer parents and their children.

It was because everywhere I looked I saw hyper-stimulated and aggressive alpha males and females competing to get ahead—and for no ethical purpose other than the personal gratification of showing off who they are and what they own. Eventually I felt spiritually violated and I came to the realization that to save my soul I couldn't work in such an environment anymore.

Later she described the financial environment that now governs our economy. Financial institutions today are comprised of two groups: the baby boomers who created the dominant empires of unsustainable investment and the young turks—the “Wolves on Wall Street” as a recent book title calls them—who have no ethical and moral backbone to inspire them to act conscientiously. The entire

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system has bought the politicians and legislators in order to avoid any sensible regulation that would prevent them from capitalizing on the destructive effects of their speculative schemes. The rules of the game are simple: everyone and everything can be exploited for personal gain and social climbing. Or, as this woman described it to me, we now have “an orgy of excess.” For example, none of our policy makers and leaders, who are steeped in strategic ties with lobbyists’ vested interests, are realistically addressing the underlying causes for the subprime mortgage mess and the vast personal debts Americans face today.

People are succumbing to the slogans and promises of politicians, analysts, and the media as a rationale for speculating indiscriminately on their assets to get the larger home, the bigger car, the next vacation. For the boomers and young adults who have already achieved success, it is not a matter of raising themselves out of poverty, but instead of raising their contorted self-image to celebrity status.

There was a time in the 1960s and early 1970s when boomers offered the nation a new paradigm that was based upon more enlightened civic virtues. Even if a boomer was not a member of an activist organization, he or she more than likely respected those who voiced the ideals for societal renewal. This is why we still remember the names of Rachel Carson, Cesar Chavez, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Eldridge Cleaver, and Ralph Nader. What differentiates the boomer generation of yesterday from the boomers of today is that in the past there was a collective consciousness held together by shared noble ideals and virtues to address the wrongs of society that were based on the fears and vulnerabilities of the Greatest Generation’s concern for stability and holding on to what had been gained. Today, that collective consciousness has dissipated. Boomers make fewer socially responsible choices in their lives and in their outside associations. The younger generation makes even less.

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Yes, there are those individuals—most of whom are boomers—with the courage and outrage to unveil the hoaxes behind the slogans of politicians, financiers, corporate executives, and the media. But let us not forget, the perpetual creators of these hoaxes are boomers, although this awareness has yet to seep into the collective consciousness of the general population. The courageous activist voices of change today, among boomers and young adults alike, remain relatively small. But they represent the next movement, which may take five to ten years to reach a new collective consciousness that will inspire decisive activism. In the meantime, it may very well take a major crisis affecting the majority of the nation's population before anyone will listen.

What I find most sad is that today's young adults, with few exceptions, appear almost oblivious that anything spiritually urgent is happening around them. During my conversation with one of today's more brilliant social historians and critics of contemporary culture, Morris Berman told me that at the time of the Iraq war, approximately 18 percent of young adults could not find Iraq on the map. In his important work, *The Twilight of American Culture*, Morris discusses a little-known study revealing that a notable number of young adults were unable to even locate the United States on a map. Ask most members of the younger generation what the First Amendment and habeas corpus mean or about the effects of the Patriot Act and you will receive a blank stare. And who can be blamed for their ignorance about the world and the purpose of life except the boomers and the society they have built?

I would like readers of this book, whether a boomer, a senior citizen, or a young adult who is just entering society as a productive citizen, to consider one of two fundamental choices that will shape and guide your life.



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The first choice is to remain unwilling to change and stay as we are, as servants to the existing social paradigm and the powers that control it. If our attitude is to get through life now and not feel any connection with or responsibility toward the society around us, then we will continue to be myopic and whine and complain about the injustices we witness. We are only able to be beneficial and constructive members of our society, as well as of the global community, if we take ownership of our role and responsibility in preserving the best they have to offer. Therefore it is incumbent upon us to understand how every choice we make affects someone, somewhere, and every day.

If I decide to watch an inane reality program, I am participating in the station's ratings and contributing to the program's ratings and survival. If I acquiesce to a child's desires to have a hamburger or french fries in a McDonald's, then my money is like casting a personal vote saying I favor and support junk food. If I work for a corporation whose consumer products I know are detrimental to the well-being and health of another person, then I am directly responsible for inflicting disease upon them. Therefore, we need to take an eagle's eye view of our entire lives and decide for ourselves whether we are healing our world or making it more ill. If our decision is to do nothing, then we will continue to run the rat race and fall victim to others who do not care for our best spiritual interests and personal growth.

The alternative choice is to commit ourselves to awakening and learning to become aware of our exchange of energies with ourselves and each other. If we become accountable for our thoughts, our words, and our deeds, and then realize the positive or negative effects these have upon our authentic self, we can begin to live virtuous lives. Physical reality—our society, nation, and the planet—is determined by how we act, for better or worse. If want to improve our

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society, we must become honest with ourselves and then challenge the status quo.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, young boomers tried to walk their talk. They were unafraid of taking the risk of standing out by standing up. They were committed to their ideals and to their vision of a better and more free society. So I believe it is time for boomers to become “hippies” again. I do not mean to don tie-dyed clothes and deny themselves the wonderful inventions modern society has created to bring comfort into our lives. Instead, I mean boomers should reclaim the vitality that has been lost over the past three decades. In this way, boomers can create new communities and visions during their remaining years and share that vitality with their children’s generation, which is hungering for something more meaningful than the ceaseless pursuit of possessions, a better paycheck, and pleasures that disappear immediately after they are experienced.

The choice is ours to make. And our choices will determine the legacy we leave for our children. Will it be a legacy that lives and breathes new meaning into society or will it be a legacy best left in the grave?

