

The **PROPHECY** of  
**MILLENNIAL**  
**PHILANTHROPY**

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## Introduction

Listen carefully. Can you hear it? Put your palms down on the table. Can you feel the vibration? Look around you in almost any corner of the developed world. Can you see it?

The Millennial Generation is upon us and will soon change everything.

From the perspective of a mid-life Baby Boomer, I have come to the conclusion (acceptance?) that the constant media and social attention heaped on my generation is being replaced by that given the Millennials. The history of their future is fascinating on any level, yet it is enriched when considering their impact on philanthropy.

This essay uses historical analysis and the theory of generational personalities to suggest how Millennials will impact philanthropy in North America (and, potentially, beyond) over the course of the next 30 – 40 years.

My interest in the general topic surfaced in 2004, where I explored Boomer and Gen X personalities in part to predict the coming decline in hospital philanthropy between 2010 and 2030.<sup>1</sup> Left out of that analysis was any treatment of the Millennial Generation (birth years 1982 – 2003).<sup>2</sup> A historian by early academic training and interest, I am drawn to studying the entire arc of a generation as a means of helping to understand the forces of change that may be evident in the near term. I would guess that today there are few, if any, papers or books on the future of Millennial philanthropy in 2035, 2040, or 2045. Yet one's ability to understand the influences and external forces that may shape this generation speeds one's adaptation in working with them now and in the near term.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary J. Hubbell, *Forces of Change: The Coming Challenges of Hospital Philanthropy*. (Falls Church, VA: Association for Healthcare Philanthropy, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> While the literature on generations can be confusing with different names assigned and birth year brackets suggested, I subscribe to language and theory of generations presented by William Strauss and Neil Howe. See *Generations*, *The Fourth Turning*, and *Millennials Rising*.

## History through the Lens of Generations

In 1991, Strauss and Howe hypothesized that all of society can be described as unfolding on a cyclical basis. Specifically, this cycle repeats itself every four generations (80 to 90 years).<sup>3</sup> They further contend that each of the four generations within each cycle has a very distinct personality—which they label idealist, reactive, civic, and adaptive (Generations, 35).

Strauss and Howe define a generation as “a society-wide peer, born over a period roughly the same length as the passage from youth to adulthood (in today’s America, around twenty or twenty-one years), who collectively possess a common persona”<sup>4</sup> Phases of life are defined by the central social roles played during those phases. They describe the four primary phases as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ELDERHOOD</b> (age 66–87)</p> <p><b>Central role: <i>stewardship</i></b> (supervising, mentoring, channeling endowments, passing on values)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>MIDLIFE</b> (age 44–65)</p> <p><b>Central role: <i>leadership</i></b> (parenting, teaching, directing institutions, using values)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>RISING ADULTHOOD</b> (age 22–43)</p> <p><b>Central role: <i>activity</i></b> (working, starting families and livelihoods, serving institutions, testing values)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>YOUTH</b> (age 0–21)</p> <p><b>Central role: <i>dependence</i></b> (growing, learning, accepting protection and nurture, avoiding harm, acquiring values) (Generations, 60–61)</p>
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The authors assert that of the nine generations born over the past two centuries—including the Millennials—none have been longer than 24 years nor shorter than 17 years. What is so fascinating about Strauss and Howe’s theory is that they assert that history does *not* take place in a straight, linear fashion. Neither do generations. They talk about generations fully

<sup>3</sup> William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* (New York: Quill/William Morrow, 1991), chapter 2 (hereafter cited in text as *Generations*).

<sup>4</sup> William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 40 (hereafter cited in text as *Millennials Rising*).

recognizing that no single description applies universally to all its bits and pieces. Rather, they focus on the generation's "social and cultural center of gravity," noting that its direction of change can be more important than its current location. A generation's direction best reveals its collective self-image and sense of destiny (Millennials Rising, 17).

History does *not* take place in a straight, linear fashion. Neither do generations.

Therefore, while any study of the history of philanthropy could demonstrate variations and exceptions, a central pattern emerges, thereby reflecting the shared peer personality of the generation. Why not, then, turn that inquiry to the future to imagine the diagonal trajectory of that generation and its philanthropic social and cultural center of gravity?

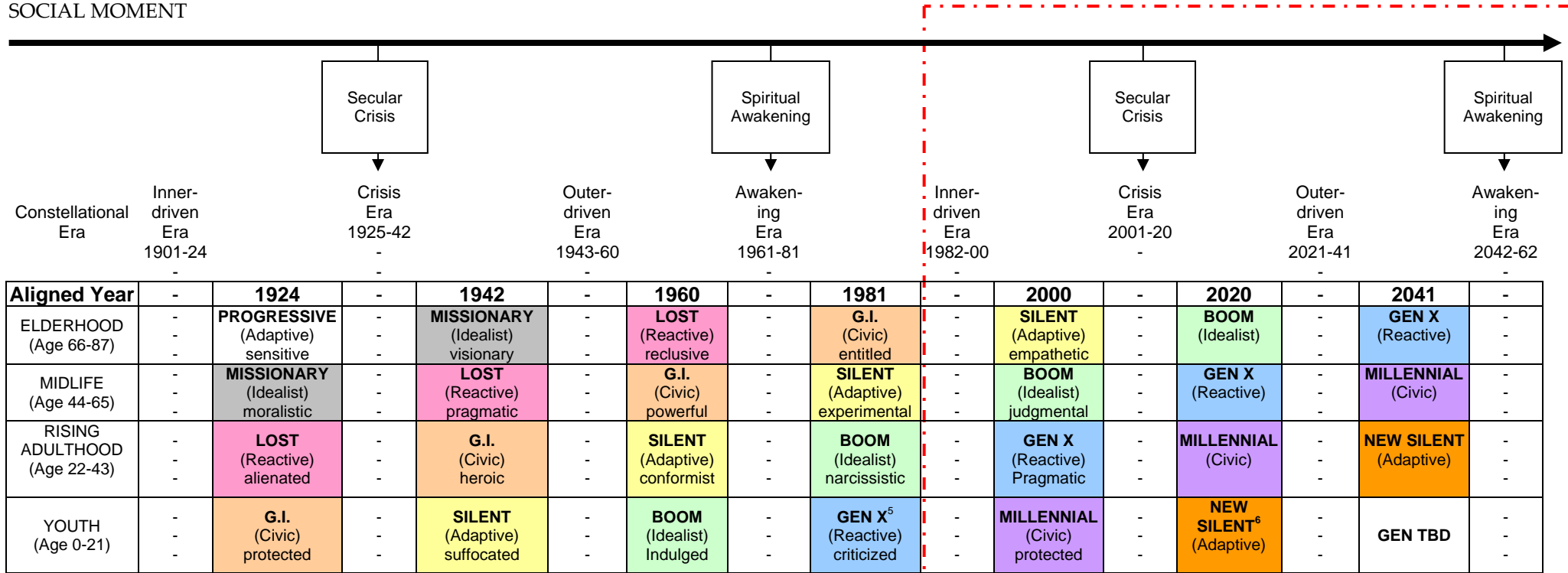
The chart below presents the movement of generational cohort groups through time. I have adapted Strauss and Howe's chart, published in 1991, where they showed each generation's evolution from youth through elderhood against the backdrop of American history. The authors' study shows that the dynamics of this same generational cycle have held true for 18 prior generations in five complete cycles—except one: the Civil War Cycle. I have adapted this chart to continue the pattern beyond 1982, which is shown in the dotted line box.

The key conclusion from this chart is clearer when following the movement of a generation by tracing their *diagonal* path from lower left to upper right (note color coding). In this way, one sees the connections between age location in history, social movements, and generational peer personality. Note the progression of the Millennials.

# The Prophecy of Millennial Philanthropy

## The Generational Diagonal

### SOCIAL MOMENT



Note: This chart combines Strauss and Howe’s portrayal of generational constellations from their 1991 book, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* and their 2000 book, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. The most recent generation, whom Strauss and Howe call the “New Silent,” have birth years of roughly 2003–2025.

*This area represents my adaptation of the original 1991 chart by Strauss and Howe (Generations, 79).*

<sup>5</sup> I’ve used the label “Gen X,” which became more widely adopted than the term “Thirteenth Generation” or “13er,” which Strauss and Howe used.

<sup>6</sup> “New Silent” is the placeholder label Strauss and Howe use for the generation following the Millennials, with birth years of 2004 to roughly 2026.



## The Millennial Revolution: Greatness Again

Born to late-wave Boom and first-wave Gen-X parents, Millennial children have been protected and celebrated like no generation before them.

As is common in each generation, the trendsetters among them are the older cohorts. For the Millennials, that means kids born between 1982 and 1986. As children, they never knew recessions, they saw the Dow Jones go in only an upward direction, people seemed to only get wealthier (except for that nasty, ever-widening gap between rich and poor), America fought only effortless wars, global markets came calling, and the government was largely impotent. To Millennials, only those people getting direct mail from AARP give a hoot about voting, about unions, or about company loyalty. Those interests held (and continue to hold) little sway for Gen Xers in rising adulthood before them. Millennials have grown up with a dizzying number of choices as young consumers, a complete embrace of technology, a shared puzzlement at what they believe is rampant individualism and cult of celebrity, and an uninterrupted flow of happy music and feel-good pals.

Written from their perspective of the year 2000, Strauss and Howe identify seven distinguishing traits of this generation, which many readers will agree have been evident during the present decade of the Oh-Ohs (a.k.a. 2000s). They conclude Millennials are (1) special, (2) sheltered, (3) confident, (4) team-oriented, (5) achieving, (6) pressured, and (7) conventional (*Millennials Rising*, 43–44).

This generation is profiling like the one four generations earlier whose living members are fewer and fewer: the G.I. Generation, or what some have dubbed the Greatest Generation.

The attributes Millennials [have developed]—teamwork, friendship, rationalism—are, instead, the formula one associates with the big deeds that culture doesn't directly *do* but rather inspires beforehand and celebrates afterward. Collectively, Millennials share the kind of background and cultural inclination that is ideal for building spaceships to Mars, less so for

making original movies about why anyone would want to go there. (Millennials Rising, 260)

Each generation is shaped by the generations before it. The pattern suggests three recognizable basic principles of generational evolution in societies like America where kids are given a measure of freedom to express their own inclinations and, thereby, shape society. Those principles are that each generation:

Each generation is shaped by the generations before it.

1. Solves a problem facing the **prior youth generation**, whose style has become dysfunctional in the new era.

- *The Millennials see the Gen Xers' dysfunction in the form of their in-your-face celebrity and free agency, cultural exhaustion, and what Putnam called the "bowling alone" syndrome.<sup>7</sup>*

2. Corrects for the behavioral excess it perceives in the **current midlife generation**.

- *The Millennials will "rebel" by overturning what they perceive to be the Boom Generation's hyper-individualism, impatience, mistrust, and a love of talk (and talk radio!) instead of action.*

3. Fills the social role being vacated by the **departing elder generation**.

- *With the passing of the G.I. Generation, the Millennials see the loss of team players, institution builders, civic achievers, and heroes (Millennials Rising, 62–69).*

Once every 80 to 100 years in American history, one generation emerges in a particular way that profiles as heroic. While heroism can only be judged by history, Strauss and Howe make a compelling argument about the validity of the generational pattern resulting from their study.

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Much has been made of the hero archetype so widely present in the G.I. Generation. Born in 1901 through 1924, this generation—certainly the earliest cohorts—experienced the post-Great War growth and gains of the early twentieth century, flapping their way as teens into the Roaring Twenties. Their greatest test came during rising adulthood, as they (and their parents) clawed their way through the Great Depression to answer the call to duty during World War II. Of course, much has been studied about the celebrated status of these victorious G.I.s, who returned to a waiting and appreciative nation. “Collectively, the G.I.s comprise a ‘Hero’ archetype, the kind of generation that does great deeds, constructs nations and empires, and is afterward honored in memory and storied in myth” (Millennials Rising, 326).

Examining the diagonal trajectory of the generations as they encounter (and help produce) social moments of great significance (whether crises or awakenings), one begins to imagine a pattern for the Millennials not unlike that of their G.I. grandparents and great-grandparents. Through their study of all American generations, Strauss and Howe identified five hero generations, with an eerily familiar pattern of recurrence once every long human lifetime.

Generation	Birth Years
Puritan	1588 – 1617
Cavalier	1618 – 1647
<b>Glorious</b>	<b>1648 – 1673</b>
Enlightenment	1674 – 1700
Awakening	1701 – 1723
Liberty	1724 – 1741
<b>Republican</b>	<b>1742 – 1766</b>
Compromise	1767 – 1791
Transcendental	1792 – 1821
Gilded	1822 – 1842
<b>Progressive</b>	<b>1843 – 1859</b>
Missionary	1860 – 1882
Lost	1883 – 1900
<b>G.I.</b>	<b>1901 – 1924</b>
Silent	1925 – 1942
Boom	1943 – 1960
X	1961 – 1981
<b>Millennial</b>	<b>1982 – 2003</b>
New Silent	2004 – 2026?

With one exception, the hero generation appeared once every four generations. This pattern was interrupted in the American Civil War, as rising adult male ranks (North and South) were decimated by war before fully coming of age and acquiring the midlife mantle of leadership and later-in-life tributes. Strauss and Howe argue the hero pattern in each of the five generations' childhood years is reflected in the Millennial generation's experience. According to the authors, the three key elements of that pattern are as follows:

1. A hero generation arrives just after an era of society wide upheaval in values and culture that many historians call a "spiritual awakening" and passes through childhood during a time of decaying civic habits, ebbing institutional trust, and resurgent individualism.
2. A hero generation directly follows a youth generation widely deemed to be disappointing, reacts against the older "postwar" generation that fomented the spiritual awakening as young adults—and fills a void left by the passing of an elder generation known for civic purpose and teamwork.
3. A hero generation, early in life, becomes the target of passionate adult efforts to encircle and protect the childhood world, to promote child achievement, and to attach a new sense of destiny to youth—to which it responds by meeting and beating adult expectations. (*Millennials Rising*, 326–328)

One would expect the experiences of youth and rising adulthood to have personality-shaping importance.

Is this sufficient evidence to affix the mantle "the next great generation" upon the Millennials? There are certainly powerful and compelling arguments to that end. As the civic-minded G.I. builders pass away, we may be looking at the next wave of greatness in the eyes of today's 22- to 27-year-olds—the trendsetters and first-wave Millennial leaders in the early stages of their rising adulthood era, which occurs from age 22 to 43.

While the study of history produces recognizable repeating generational patterns, each era is shaped by generations—especially in their rising adulthood years. In twentieth-century America, the pattern of philanthropy found that peak giving occurs between a person's late 50s and early 70s.<sup>8</sup> If that is true for the Millennial generation—who may live longer than all previous generations—one would expect the experiences of youth and rising adulthood to have personality-shaping importance.

Therefore, understanding those fundamentally important influences during the first two life stages (youth and rising adulthood) helps us anticipate the midlife generational persona and the potential feeling for philanthropy.

<sup>8</sup>Harry Lynch, "What Your Mother Can Teach You about Online Fundraising," *On Philanthropy*, October 24, 2003, <http://www.onphilanthropy.com/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5942>

The forces of change influencing the Millennial rising adults are unfolding right now. To fully anticipate the frame of reference of likely midlife Millennial philanthropists, we must pause long enough to imagine the depth and scope of the secular crisis facing us all and facing this generation as it enters adulthood.

## Secular Crisis as Catalyst: A Generation's Crucible

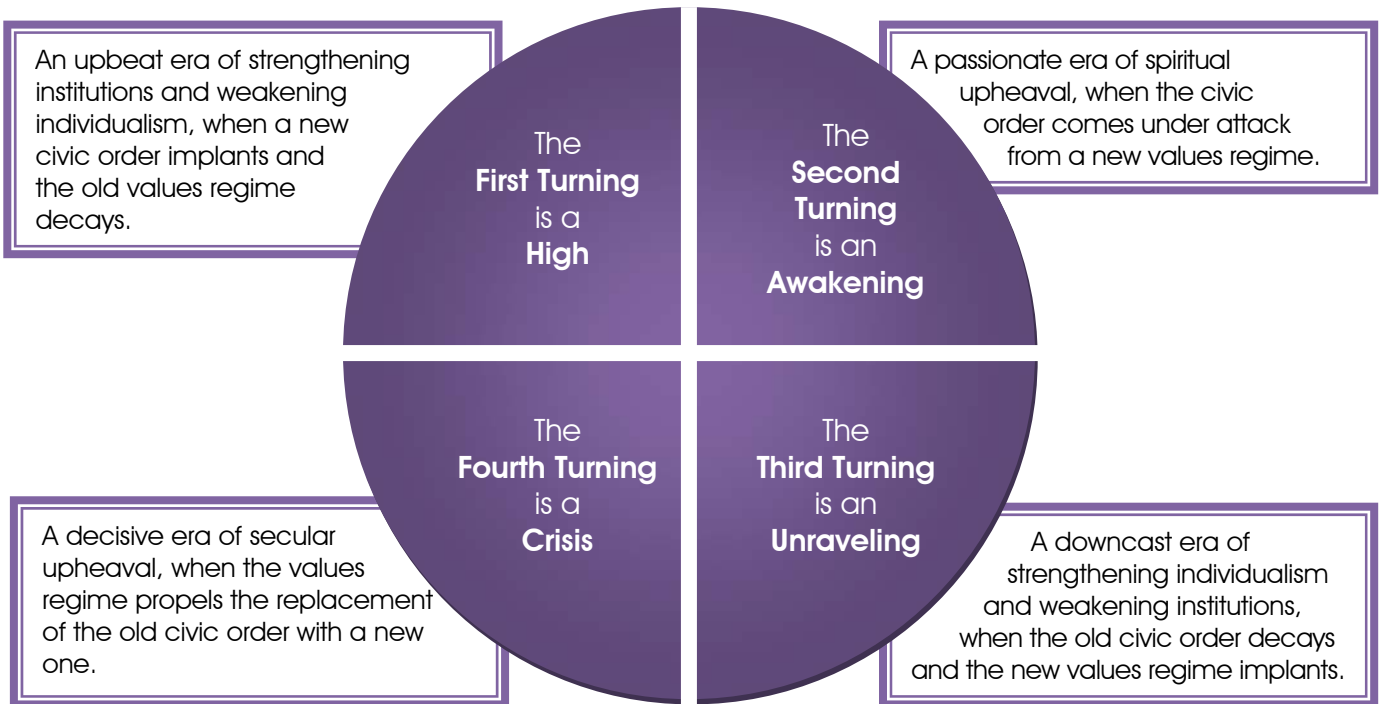
With great caution, I embark on the murky (at best) task of interpreting events of today and recent past within the context of Strauss and Howe's recurring generational personas. None of us can predict the future. Despite that realization, there is much to be gained in tolerating the exercise insofar as it produces present-day dialogue and action. Coupled with the general difficulties is the vulnerability of being labeled a doomsayer—or "the Dr. Kevorkian<sup>9</sup> of hospital philanthropy," as one colleague referred to me after reading the draft of *Forces of Change*—because my affinity for the long view inexorably leads to dealing with dark times. Such is the case at hand.

As noted on the generational diagonal chart earlier, Strauss and Howe see a recurring pattern of secular crisis in American history, which they call a "Fourth Turning." These authors theorize that over the past 500 years, Anglo-American society experiences a *turning*—a new era—approximately every two decades. As each turning begins, people feel different about nearly everything: themselves, the future, the nation, and their culture. Turnings appear in cycles of four, spanning roughly 80 to 100 years. They describe these turnings as "history's seasonal rhythm of growth, maturation, entropy, and destruction."<sup>10</sup> Throughout American history, we've experienced many turnings, producing a discernible pattern as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Jack Kevorkian was imprisoned in 1999 for illegally performing 130 assisted suicides.

<sup>10</sup> William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy; What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America's Next Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 3 (hereafter cited in text as *Fourth Turning*).



The authors posit that the six prior Fourth Turnings in Anglo-American lineage are:

<b>War of the Roses</b> (1459 – 1487)	<b>Armada Crisis</b> (1569 – 1594)	<b>Glorious Revolution</b> (1675 – 1704)	<b>American Revolution</b> (1773 – 1794)	<b>Civil War</b> (1860 – 1865)	<b>Great Depression &amp; World War II</b> (1929 – 1946) (ibid, 259)
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Each Fourth Turning comes with the opportunity of greatness and glory—or apocalypse. Strauss and Howe predicted that America’s next rendezvous with destiny would begin in roughly 2005 and conclude around 2025. They described that we would feel optimism attached to self, but not to family or community; that we would perceive our civic challenge “as some vast, insoluble Rubik’s Cube;” that we will grope for answers, wondering if our intuition has given way to analysis; leaving us feeling “individually focused yet collectively adrift...wonder[ing] if we’re heading toward a waterfall” (ibid, 2).

Their historical pattern recognition indicates that roughly 15 to 25 years elapse between a Fourth Turning’s catalyst and its resolution, with a discernible four-step morphology:

1. A crisis era begins with a **catalyst**—a startling event (or sequence of events) that produces a sudden shift in mood.

- I submit that the American (now global) recession/devaluation of 2008 is that event or a part of that event series. The home mortgage crisis, financial system insolvency, and stock market devaluation are all mounting evidence of sparks of the catalyst. While the crisis era is a period not without hope (from my view, the precedent-setting election of America's first Gen-X and African-American president). However, the authors add: "Each of these sparks is linked to a specific threat about which society had been fully informed but against which it had left itself poorly protected. Afterward, the fact that these sparks were *foreseeable* but poorly *foreseen* gives rise to a new sense of urgency about institutional dysfunction and civic vulnerability. This marks the beginning of the vertiginous spiral of Crisis" (ibid, 256–257).

### Catalyst

Consider the following progression of events from "2009 Outlook for Higher Education: Negative," a presentation by Roger Goodman of Moody's Investor Services to the Council of Independent Colleges, on January 5, 2009:

"So Much Has Happened..."

- July 15, 2007: Bear Stearns hedge funds collapse
- Dec, 2007: Insurer downgrades begin
- Auction Rate securities fail
- Widespread "puts" of insured floaters
- March 17, 2008: Bear Stearns "bought" JP Morgan
- Sept 7, 2008: Federal government takes over Fannie Mae
- Sept 15, 2008: Lehman bankruptcy/ Merrill bought by BofA
- Credit default swap uncertainty rocks markets
- Sept 16, 2008: Reserve Fund "breaks the buck"
- Intense spike in muni short-term rates
- Sept 22, 2008: Goldman & MS convert to commercial bank
- The end of investment banks
- Sept 30, 2008: Commonfund ST Fund closed by Wachovia
- October 3, 2008: \$700 Billion federal rescue plan approved
- Nov 4, 2008: First African-American President elected
- Nov 24, 2008: Citigroup bailout
- Dec 12, 2008: Madoff Indictment"



2. Once catalyzed, a society achieves a *regeneracy*—a new counterentropy that reunifies and reenergizes civic life.

- If we are indeed in the midst of a Fourth Turning, might this suggest that the American \$700 billion stimulus package of 2009 (which mirrors many in other countries) will have some rebalancing effect in the near term (several years)?

3. The regenerated society propels toward a *climax*—a crucial moment that confirms the death of the old order and birth of the new.

- Perhaps this suggests an intersection of events that produces a climax—and a definitive call to duty among rising adults (Millennials) in the mid Oh-Teens.

4. The climax culminates in a *resolution*—a triumphant or tragic conclusion that separates the winners from losers, resolves the big public questions, and establishes the new order (ibid, 256).

It is not my intent to speculate on the countless possible sources of “sparks” that could bring about or exacerbate the current crisis. If one adopts the Strauss and Howe hypothesis about the cyclical nature of American history, then one must consider that the Millennial generation will be shaped by these events. Assuming a victorious resolution (whether to war and/or to some systemic financial meltdown), the Millennials will emerge as a celebrated, inspired, powerful, energized generation, ready to move into midlife leadership and their prime giving years. Strauss and Howe forecast a post-crisis era, including “a redefinition of government’s relationship to the economy and society, a redefinition of man’s relationship to technology, and a redefinition of America’s relationship to the world” (Millennials Rising, 355–356).

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Let us now turn to examine what that context might suggest for the future of American philanthropy.

## Millennial Philanthropy Symbiosis

Perhaps there is a corollary to Strauss and Howe's observation that history shapes generations and is shaped by generations. By extension, one might conclude that philanthropy shapes generations and is shaped by generations. This symbiosis—the interdependence or mutually beneficial relationship between two—becomes a fascinating field of study for future research in our field. If the Millennials' demography and their generational response to political economy, family, school, the pace of life, personal conduct, community, culture, work, commerce, and the world is different than the three (or more) generations before them, then we are likely to see important differences in how they embrace philanthropy too.

We must first stop to remember Strauss and Howe's admonition that neither history nor generational persona formation is a linear occurrence. As generation members age, our phase-of-life behaviors change, as does our interaction and effect on the generations ahead of and behind us. This is important to consider when attempting to forecast adult Millennial philanthropic behavior from the vantage point of early 2009, with only the first third of the generation newly into their rising adulthood (22+) years. From a historical perspective, comparatively more has been written about the Millennials' childhood. Recent literature attempts to make more real-time observations about this generation going to college, to work, and into the military. The study of historical occurrences affords the luxury of context that is sacrificed in making present-day observations, where we can never be quite sure whether we are witnessing an emerging trend or a momentary anomaly.

Recall the earlier discussion that each generation's personality is shaped by the generations which precede it. Therefore, through their childhood years, the Millennials sought to solve the perceived dysfunction of Gen Xers' preference for in-your-face celebrity, free agency, cultural exhaustion, and going it alone. They sought to correct the then midlife Boomers' excesses, hyper-individualism, impatience, mistrust, and love of talk instead of action. Just as motivating is their collective will to become the team players, institution builders, civic achievers, and heroes they saw in their grandparents and great-grandparents

(G.I. Generation). Let us consider how these generational principles may evolve to produce Millennials' response to philanthropy both as "givers" and "getters."

### The Givers

Team-oriented, confident, sheltered, protected Millennial children of North America exude a pronounced sense of confidence tempered by conventional thinking. This generation loves to take action and they prefer to work in teams.

This generation loves to take action and they prefer to work in teams.

Consider Craig Kielburger as a fine example of this empowered generation. In 1994, at age 12, he and his brother Marc founded Free the Children, the world's largest network of children helping children through education. Under Kielburger's leadership, and with the involvement of more than a thousand Youth in Action Groups, Free the Children built more than 500 schools throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America, providing daily education to more than 50,000 children. Through its Adopt a Village development model, it established more than 23,000 alternative income projects to assist women and their families in achieving sustainable incomes.

That same year he cofounded and became director of Me to We, a new kind of social enterprise for people who want to help change the world with their daily choices. Through its media, socially responsible choices and leadership experiences, Me to We supports Free the Children's work with youth creating global change.<sup>11</sup> These actions catapulted Kielburger as an international example of what is best in this new generation and set the stage for many other young social activists taking their formative steps into the world of philanthropy.

Kielburger's story is impressive but not unique. His is a Millennial response to a felt need. His response: take action immediately and locally (which he did in his hometown of Thornhill, Ontario, through bake sales and pop bottle/petition drives), while tapping every available technology-supported social network.

This generational personality, faced with a secular crisis in its rising adulthood years, will bring practical strengths, optimism, and teamwork to the table. This is a generation very intentional about making a difference and

Steeped in solid values, the Millennials will bring the same solution orientation to philanthropy that they have brought (and will continue to bring) to every other aspect of their lives.

<sup>11</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Craig Kielburger," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Craig\\_Kielburger&oldid=285224941](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Craig_Kielburger&oldid=285224941). I had the pleasure of hearing Craig speak at the 2007 AFP Conference in Dallas.

building community. Steeped in solid values, the Millennials will bring the same solution orientation to philanthropy that they have brought (and will continue to bring) to every other aspect of their lives.

Consider the rise in national youth service organizations in the U.S. Consider the frequency with which private colleges organize youth mission trips (e.g., flood victim relief) in growing numbers—despite the fact that this trend evokes far less media coverage than binge-drinking bouts and summer-break escapades on sun-drenched beaches. Strauss and Howe observed in 2000 that “Millennials are primed to give higher priority to the outer world than the inner, to push America toward a blander culture yet also toward a more aggressive and ambitious definition of the nation’s collective action” (Millennials Rising, 261–262). They are what Allison Fine refers to as “Social Citizens, representing a nascent model and era of citizen participation that combines idealism, digital fluency, and immersion in social causes.”<sup>12</sup>

Technology will accelerate and amplify the impact this generation will have on philanthropy. They will increase the reliability of the Internet (and its antecedents) and remove the chaos around divergent technologies, thus creating more useful and integrated tools. Groupware, community networks, cooperative applications, and an untold number of new Web devices will take communication options to unprecedented levels. All of these tools, second nature to these early-adopting Millennials, will be harnessed without fanfare for the pursuit of all facets of life: family, social, economic, political, military, environmental, and, of course, philanthropic.

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Strauss and Howe indicate that the oldest members of the Millennial generation will turn 30 in 2012 and become eligible for the U.S. presidency in 2017. The peak of the Millennial “breakout” will happen early in the decade of the Oh-Teens, evidenced by significant influence on politics and national institutions, with which they will closely identify and bond. Entering the first of two successive family-building decades, the Millennials will prioritize and embrace institutions that strengthen their roles as parents, help them raise their children, and provide for their households. The bottom line will be if it’s family friendly, success and support is more assured; if not, expect a Millennial challenge (Millennials Rising, 316–317).

The Oh-Twenties will find first-wave Millennials turning 40 in 2022. Collective confidence and energy will be high, especially if their generation’s response to the secular crisis appears effective. Interesting—and, perhaps, dismaying to Boomers—their sense of conformism will shape this new era in a way that’s family friendly and intolerant of social

<sup>12</sup> Allison Fine, “Intro: Millennials as Social Citizens” *Social Citizens*, <http://www.socialcitizens.org/paper/millennials-as-social-citizens>.

argument. “Millennials will aggressively apply their stamp to every aspect of American life. In the culture, they will clean up the elder ‘mistakes’ of their youth era, in ways that might today seem authoritarian and intensely anti-individual....In technology, they will launch big projects to improve people’s daily lives” (Millennials Rising, 319).

These forecasts lead one to conclude that philanthropy will be embraced by Millennials during the next two decades, even before they have evolved into what is typically known as prime giving years. Philanthropy will become another tool for accomplishing their social agenda. Their desire to make the world a better place—while cleaning up the messes and excesses and reversing the dysfunctions of the two preceding generations—will drive adoption of philanthropy. Grassroots philanthropy will become the norm, fueled by a healthy dose of activism and ubiquitous technology-assisted communication.

The Boomer- and Gen X-inspired trend toward venture philanthropy, philanthrocapitalism, and the like may become less compelling for Millennials. While this “business” approach to philanthropy may continue to be attractive to newly practical-minded Gen Xers entering midlife, for Millennials, those methods may seem to be more about the donor than the recipient and, therefore, replaced by giving that seems more values-laden and that allows for a stronger sense of personal connection to the recipient.

Millennial philanthropy will increasingly be color blind as racial and ethnic diversity was the norm during their generation’s childhood years. The divisions that plagued earlier generations will prove less distracting and less relevant for Millennials. Their philanthropic behavior will be similarly color blind for donors and recipients alike. Assuming successful navigation through the crisis—which, from the vantage point of early 2009, seems like a huge leap of faith—Strauss and Howe predict the emergence of a new American middle class. If this development occurs, it will add further momentum to the growth of philanthropy at grassroots levels, especially (or perhaps largely) if the philanthropic focus is family- and community-focused.

Today, one observes an increasing trend toward global philanthropy, where gifts are both sought and applied across many borders. While the Millennial persona infers this trend will only accelerate, it remains unclear how the response to the current (and continuing) crisis will affect that tendency. One can imagine that the herculean efforts required to resolve the secular crisis may pull the collective attention of newly victorious Millennials to a huge domestic agenda of institution building (or rebuilding). If so, this would likely be expressed in the form of a continuing appreciation for and interest in the global community, yet accepting the perceived need to prioritize improvements closer to home. It will be interesting to watch in years to come whether each country’s greatest philanthropists turn their attention inward to domestic issues. If that is the case, one worries about the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people. Clearly that is a topic for additional research and forecasting that goes well beyond the scope of this essay.

## The Getters

Of course, Millennials have already entered and will continue to enter the ranks of the fundraising profession and nonprofit leadership. In time, they will become the dominant workforce, designing philanthropic solutions and opportunities to attract charitable support. Therefore, it is important for us to explore how they think and work (coupled with how they decide to give) and how that may change the way fundraising evolves as a practice. It forces us to wonder about the extent to which institutional fundraising (e.g., colleges, medical centers, federated social service organizations) will need to change to both serve and attract Millennials. Finally, we must consider what choices they might make as volunteers and which fundraising practices and tools are likely to look very different from those in vogue today.

Millennials in the fundraising workplace are now and will remain different from their predecessors. Scott Degraffenreid, a social network architect and principal with N2Millennials (meaning “Into” Millennials), states, “One thing you can count on with Millennials...they change at the pace of technology.”<sup>13</sup> According to Degraffenreid, functional MRIs have revealed physical changes in the way Millennials’ brains work, which, he claims, is the result of having grown up with personal computers, cable, music videos, video games, and search engines as daily interfaces.

Much has been made in the press and employment literature about the number of job changes the Millennials will experience. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that current college learners will have 10–14 jobs before the age of 38. The Millennials’ ability (or penchant) for fast-paced change is, perhaps, a purely adaptive characteristic, given that the amount of technical information is doubling *every two years* and that the top ten in-demand jobs for 2010 didn’t even exist in 2004. No wonder, Degraffenreid notes, they’ve “been dubbed ‘Crash Test Geniuses<sup>®</sup>’ because they aren’t afraid to ‘reboot’ and learn faster from failure than anything else. This means that they feel no guilt about walking off the job if it doesn’t seem to be working” (N2Millennials).

The personality traits of this generation make them strong candidates for service with nonprofit organizations. In *Social Citizens*, Allison Fine notes that many Millennials have strong personal values, necessitating for them that their jobs and careers reflect those personal values. Many will look beyond the paycheck for meaningful, make-a-difference kind of work, which includes nonprofits, NGOs, and charitable organizations.

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<sup>13</sup> Scott Degraffenreid, “What Do You Need To Know About Millennials?” N2Millennials, <http://www.n2millennials.com/> (hereafter cited in text as *N2Millennials*).



Fine’s research led her to conclude that “Millennials are set apart from other generations by their cause lifestyle—a youth that is infused with giving and volunteering, eventually complemented by careers dedicated to causes.”<sup>14</sup>

Degraffenreid believes Millennials are hard-wired to take on market shifts, innovative problem solving, and product creation without the fear of failure that paralyzes previous generations. This kind of fast thinking and bias for action will influence how these generation members perform in the fundraising shops of the future. Fine notes that in their professional lives, Millennials are wary of institutions, even when they run them. They crave genuine relations, and can instinctively sense when they aren’t there. Fine raises the question of how this persona will influence current and future institutions. While not exclusive or exhaustive, American philanthropy has largely been institution-based or institution-benefiting. Today, churches, colleges and universities, hospitals and medical centers, arts and culture, and major human service organizations have been the dominant players in the world of philanthropy.

Enter the Millennials, who, Fine tells us, value peer relationships over institutional loyalty. “This has profound implications for...organizations accustomed to support from their donors over long periods of time. Young people are unlikely to be lifelong donors to their local United Way or Sierra Club. They will engage enthusiastically in specific campaigns about which they feel passionate, but their institutional support is likely to vanish once that campaign ends” (ibid).

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Neither Allison Fine nor I question the continuing role and importance of institutions in the decades to come. Clearly, they have critical mass, offer expertise, focus efforts, provide institutional memory for communities, and lead issues. Yet, if they look as they do today, Millennials will disengage. Further, they (Millennials) will be unlikely to stay on fundraising staffs with quiet, unchallenging acceptance. While possessing strong values and an action orientation, this is the point-and-click generation with little patience for the ponderous pace of bureaucracy—a revulsion felt by both Millennial donors and Millennial development staff. They will test institutional assumptions about why philanthropy is needed, rather than simply acquiescing to administrative requests for “the next campaign” and “more millions.” Fine observes, “Millennials can be instrumental in questioning and assessing when and why institutions are needed to address causes, and when a protest campaign or a blog will do. The larger issue of how institutions will be structured and organized in the Connected Age is an

<sup>14</sup> Allison Fine, “Can Institutions Survive? Should They Survive?” *Social Citizens*, <http://www.socialcitizens.org/paper/key-questions-for-social-citizens/can-institutions-survive-should-they-survive> (hereafter cited in text as *Social Citizens*).

ongoing process” (ibid). I believe that the same questioning and assessment of fundraising processes will occur.

Some might say this profile makes the Millennial a high-maintenance worker, requiring significantly more attention and direction, only to have them bolt for a different job at a moment’s notice. While that interpretation may fit some, chief development officers hiring Millennials should consider that a different set of characteristics requires an altered approach to teaching, managing, and mentoring. First, the Millennials’ inner desire to make a difference is a highly conducive framework for learning the mission of the nonprofit they select and the development profession in general. Second, they are learning machines. If Fine’s and Strauss and Howe’s profiles of their learning styles are accurate, this is a generation that learns from immersion and in cohort groups. Said another way: heap on the teaching, training, and real-life experience. Give them the opportunity to weigh in and offer feedback and alternative approaches. Third, they are highly relational and possess strong values, which makes them ideal for the work of fundraising.

Finally, listen intently to them. They are far less likely to take their own organization’s press releases at face value. If they can’t make the case for support from a position of truth and credibility, they won’t. They’ll either walk away, or they’ll demand it be stripped down and rebuilt. That clarity and assertiveness may frighten some Boomer development leaders who learned their development craft in an apprenticeship model. By comparison to those leaders, these Millennials may seem impatient and uncommitted. Don’t be deluded. These Millennials will “talk truth to power.” The successful nonprofit leaders will be those who listen and adapt. Doing so will signal to Millennials their value and impact, thereby redoubling their commitment and intention to stay, yielding what Degraffenreid calls “tenure equity.”

Millennials may seem impatient and uncommitted. Don’t be deluded. These Millennials will “talk truth to power.”

The tools and processes that shape fundraising practices of the future are in some cases already in play, and in others, pure speculation. If one subscribes to the belief that history shapes and is shaped by generations, and if philanthropy shapes and is shaped by generations, then fundraising practices shape and are shaped by generations. Every generation of fundraising professionals struggle to unlearn the techniques that worked with earlier generations but they now find don’t work nearly as well with the current rising adult generation. That’s why studying the generational diagonal chart presented earlier is as important to determining fundraising communication strategy and organizational structure as anything else to consider in imagining the future of philanthropy.

Following are just a few examples of some anticipated changes:



Today's Fundraising Practices/Techniques	Millennial Generation-Friendly Alternatives
Direct mail	Mobile electronic communications
Printed case books/statements	Video links on Web sites, including requests for constituent uploads of personal experiences (videos, photos, etc.) with relevant issues
Campaign feasibility studies to determine fundraising goals	Online surveys, coupled with peer networking to assess interest, strategy, and capabilities
Ego-centric giving appeals and recognition	Recognition for being part of a concerned group who made a real difference (the power of "we over me")
"Wine and dine" cultivation of major donors	Guided opportunities for committed prospects to "get their hands dirty" and to personally experience issues in their social context
Institutionally controlled flow of information	Pervasive transparency, yielding institutional participation in real-time discussions of information with constituents
Periodic reports of collective accomplishment	Ongoing, personalized, real-time tracking of impact available virtually and remotely to donors anywhere, anytime
Foundation and governing board membership	Strong willingness to get involved, but in formats that bring fast-paced opportunities to "immerse, converse, and disperse" (Social Citizens)

## When and With What Impact on Me?

While the for-profit and nonprofit business worlds are accustomed to thinking in time frames as short as quarters, annual results, and three-year plans, historians are more comfortable with a longer view. Historians will think in terms of decades, eras, generations, and centuries. Development professionals can afford neither perspective in isolation. We must consider both short- and long-term variables. When attempting to understand the impact of Millennial philanthropy, it behooves one to keep in mind some key dates:

Mid 20-Ohs	Secular crisis onset
2005	Gen-X eldest turned 40, entered mid-life phase
2010	Boomer eldest turn 65, enter elderhood phase
2012	Millennial eldest turn 30
2016	Gen-X eldest turn 55, assumed peak years of giving begin
2026	Crisis resolution
2026	Millennial eldest enter midlife phase
2026	New Silent eldest enter rising adulthood
2030	Gen-X eldest turn 65, enter elderhood phase
2037	Millennial eldest turn 55, assumed peak years of giving begin
2047	Millennial eldest turn 65, enters elderhood phase
2047	New Silent eldest turn 44, enters midlife phase

The last three years have seen a plethora of blogs, editorials, articles, and a few books written to interpret the weak economy and the implications for fundraising. Most offerings that I've seen effectively address the issue from these perspectives: giving in comparison to

previous U.S. recessions and the Great Depression, giving in relation to the performance of the stock market, or giving in relation to social psychology. Each of these lenses provides valuable insight and context to understand what we might anticipate in the years to come.

Equally important to those other views is to anticipate the implications for the future of philanthropy as shaped by generational persona. Following is my forecast about the coming decades, as influenced by my study of the generations.

**Context:**

The Fourth Turning continues to unfold. While not all bad news or doom-and-gloom, the tone of this period is downright serious. Having lost an average 18 percent of net worth in 2008,<sup>15</sup> Americans worry more about income and assets, thereby dampening philanthropy. Stock market investors who followed the long sage advice of “buy and hold” will find that it may take three decades, assuming continuing the past 10-year annualized rates of return of 2.88 percent, to recover the losses from the bear market of early 2009.<sup>16</sup>

The fiscal crisis mounts and becomes global, displaying mind-numbing complexity and vulnerable interdependencies of nations, institutions, and peoples. Debt increases, civic decay, and community/global disorder are on the rise. Panic is never far from the surface. Few people alive during this period will have had any lived experience similar to these current events.

**Boomer Response:**

Boomers economic downward spiral in the Fourth Turning. “This generation will get a comeuppance for a lifelong habit of preaching virtues its members have not themselves displayed—of talking more than doing.... Sooner or later, the truth will dawn on old Boomers that the money simply won’t be there to support their accustomed consumption habits in old age. Neither they nor their nation will have saved enough” (Fourth Turning, 283).

This situation poses a dilemma for Boomers who have long sought to change the world, but now must face the reality that it will not be their resources that get it done. Their impact as donors diminishes (far sooner than has been the case for previous generations), but their spirited (and spiritual) advocacy and philosophizing continues to add value.

**Gen-Xer Response:**

The reactive persona of this generation will lead them to simply hunker down and take care of themselves as best they can (which they’ve been doing since childhood). Financial worries skyrocket during this entry into midlife. Thomas Murphy claims that the primary financial decision-making criterion for determining a donor’s capacity to engage in philanthropic activities is neither wealth nor income; rather it is the expected present and future relationship between income and expense.<sup>17</sup>

This being the case, Gen Xers, who have never really been joiners or natural collaborators, will remain largely disconnected and only a modest force for philanthropy.

**Millennial Response:**

Grassroots efforts, fueled by widely shared generational optimism, must come to terms with the crisis. Pulling on a can-do spirit and marshalling deep inventiveness and community spirit, Millennials respond, helping to blunt the worst effects of the crisis and embracing philanthropy as a tool for change and improvement. While their gift resources are still small, they are disproportionately oriented to giving. Their role in boards, councils, and associations begins to increase significantly.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Hagenbaugh, “Net Worth Sinks 17.9%, Uneasy Consumers Likely to Spend Less,” *USA Today*, March 13, 2009. This article indicates that the speed and depth of the decline in net worth in the fourth quarter of 2008 was the biggest decline since quarterly records began in 1951, according to the Fed.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Shell, “Stock Recovery Will Be a Long Haul,” *USA Today*, March 9, 2009. This article points out that using the March 6, 2009, S&P 500 close of 683, time periods were determined for how long it would take to recover the money lost in the bear stock market. At 25 percent annualized rates of return, it would take until June 2012; at 20 percent, until April 2013; at 15 percent, until September 2014; at 10 percent, until June 2017; at 5 percent, until September 2025; and at 2.88 percent—the annualized yield over the past 10 years—until November 2037.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas B. Murphy, “Financial and Psychological Determinants of Donors’ Capacity to Give,” *New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising* 29 (Fall 2000): 34, <http://www.bc.edu/research/swri/meta-elements/pdf/Murphy.pdf>.

**Context:**

“All of America’s lesser problems will combine into one giant problem. The very survival of society will feel at stake, as leaders lead and people follow” (Fourth Turning, 277). “Emerging in this Crisis climax will be a great entropy reversal, that miracle of human history in which *trust* is reborn” (ibid, 278).

In the last half of this period, charitable giving emerges from its doldrums and begins to rise.

**Boomer Response:**

These Zen-like philosophers will take a more serene position in their later years. Having survived the crisis and having (for the most part) exhausted or lost much of their reserves, the Boomers are content to reflect for society. They add meaning through their lifetime pursuit of consciousness-raising. In this role, they are advocates for where philanthropy can do its most good, yet their own resources are in limited supply.

**Gen-Xer Response:**

This generation lives its own version of *True Grit*. Strauss and Howe predict that this generation will, at this time, be financially worse off than their Boomer parents. As the crisis era deepens before its resolution, Gen Xers “will feel little stake in the old order, little sense that their names and signatures are on the social contract. They will have reached full adult maturity without ever having believed in either the American Dream or American exceptionalism” (ibid, 289–290).

Yet, this generation will persevere. They will plod on and play their own leadership role. Philanthropy will not be a priority for this generation—especially during crisis years. Holding weakness and compassion in contempt (at its most extreme expression), Gen Xers will look at philanthropy as a bit of a luxury better left to others.

**Millennial Response:**

The full weight of tax burdens, deferred debts, and economic upheaval of the past decade and a half has left this generation winded, but resolved. They know a better time is coming and they are leading the way to finally putting the crisis and its residual impact behind them. They are poised to regain their generational birthright as nation and community builders, bold goal realizers, and heroes. Philanthropy—long understood and personally embraced by Millennials—will be sought after as a vehicle through which they can make things happen. For them, this period is an exodus from the dark. They feel they are on the cusp of something exciting.

**New Silent Response:**

Like their forefathers and generational namesakes of roughly 80 years earlier, the New Silent childhood is one marked by crises, economic weakness, and—possibly—war. They will be continually reminded by their Gen-X and Millennial parents that daunting sacrifices are being made...for them (Generations, 286). They’ll largely keep quiet and watch what unfolds throughout their childhood.

**Context:**

With the crisis resolved, society begins to open to a new era of progress and optimism. A pent-up agenda of breakthroughs is now unleashed, sparking unprecedented social and commercial undertakings. This is the period Havens and Schervish dubbed “the golden age of philanthropy” because of the anticipated intergenerational wealth transfer of roughly \$41 trillion between 1998 and 2052.<sup>18</sup>

**Boomer Response:**

With the oldest Boomers turning 90, their impact on philanthropy will be limited, except for the important role Havens and Schervish predict in their transfer of wealth, which will likely pass to the Millennial Generation.

**Gen-Xer Response:**

Entering elderhood, Gen Xers will occupy little dominance in public life, having been forced to relinquish those leadership roles to midlife Millennials. Reflecting upon a lifetime of pragmatism and largely having to do without, Gen-X philanthropy will be unspectacular, often directed at their generational peers, and performed in a way that draws little need for deep involvement or attention.

**Millennial Response:**

As far as philanthropy is concerned, this era is like the Millennials’ coming-out party. With many recent societal challenges now in check, with midlife earnings high, and with business, political, and social leadership positions all but locked up, the Millennials will catapult philanthropy to new heights. Echoing a civic forefather’s bold admonition, “If you can dream it, you can achieve it,” Millennials will take nonprofit organizations to new levels of relevance and accomplishment, they will invent and evolve more effective methods of solicitation, and they will set unprecedented goals for giving.

**New Silent Response:**

In their rising adulthood years, the New Silent are attentive students of the Millennials’ impressive accomplishments. They learn well what works and what does not. They are smart, trainable, and productive, making this generation a real asset as they enter the world of work. Millennials will gladly put them to work in the many new jobs and organizations they’ve created to fuel their big dreams. The New Silent will, in this period, develop a healthy respect and appreciation for philanthropy.

<sup>18</sup> John J. Havens and Paul G. Schervish, *Millionaires and the Millennium: New Estimates of the Forthcoming Wealth Transfer and the Prospects for a Golden Age of Philanthropy*. (Boston: Boston College Social Welfare Research Institute, October 19, 1999), <http://www.bc.edu/research/swri/meta-elements/pdf/m%26m.pdf>. One must question the extent to which their forecasting model is impacted by the wealth-dissolving thrust of the current devaluation/recession. Will the intergenerational wealth transfer *really* bring about the golden age of philanthropy?

## Close

Of course, the act of forecasting events or movements in the future—and generational responses to those events—is fraught with peril and the likelihood of error. It is my hope that a discussion of these observations does not become too easily distracted by surface level “will it or won’t it” debates. Rather, I’m hopeful that these observations will spark discussion and study about how neither philanthropy nor each generation’s relationship to it progresses in a straight line.

## About the Author



Gary J. Hubbell is founder and president of Gary Hubbell Consulting. He has thirty years experience in philanthropy, strategy, planning, and coaching. He is passionate about partnering with leaders to transform organizations – applying his research and experience to help define and achieve goals.

A voracious reader and student of history, he is constantly looking to understand the driving forces that shape choices and produce change. He seeks to know why people behave the way they do so that passion and energy can be channeled toward social sector organizational growth and greater impact. Gary holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Michigan (1978) and a Master of Science degree in Organization and Management from Capella University (2004). He is an active author and speaker.

Gary Hubbell Consulting works with organizations on the cusp of doing great things – articulating innovative philanthropy models, engaging board members and stakeholders in unprecedented ways, sparking transformational change within organizations and communities. We listen to clients with an ear for key issues and an eye on the horizon. No issue or opportunity appears in isolation. Our deep knowledge and innate ability helps organizations see through an ever more chaotic marketplace with clarity and agility. We bring research and resources to help you view opportunities and challenges in new ways.

Other titles by Gary J. Hubbell, available at [www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com](http://www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com)

- Forces of Change: The Coming Challenges in Hospital Philanthropy (2005).
- Lessons from Benchmarking: Fast-Forwarding the Maturity of the Fundraising Operation, co-authored with Mary Reinders, (2007)
- Staff-Led Feasibility: How to Design and Conduct Your Own Fundraising Feasibility Study (2009)
- When the Party's Over: Why, How, and When to Conduct a Post-Campaign Assessment (2009)



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Especially during challenging economic times, asking the right questions and accurately assessing environmental factors can mean the difference between success and failure. Sometimes transformational change for your organization may be necessary. Other times, adjusting your perspective and language can mean the difference. One thing doesn't change – your organization's need to live out your mission and achieve your vision.



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