

AgingToday

the bimonthly newspaper of the American Society on Aging

ISSN: 1067-8379
www.asaging.org

Page 1

MARCH-APRIL 2020
volume xli number 2

Baby boomers need to step up—and step back

By **Kate Hoepke**

By now, most have heard about the OK Boomer story (tinyurl.com/y6zxh8em), which appeared in *The New York Times* this past Fall. Members of Generation Z are angry and frustrated with the perilous state of the world they will inherit from baby boomers. The planet could become uninhabitable in their lifetimes, economic inequality threatens their ability to succeed and U.S. democracy is under siege. These young people are upset and scared, and why wouldn't they be? I am, too.

As a woman in my mid-60s, the OK Boomer meme alerted me to feelings I had long been avoiding: despair about the corruption of our democratic ideals; outrage with our collective denial of the climate crisis; and shame that mass shootings are commonplace, that children live in cages at our southern border and that my Oakland neighbors live in tent cities under the freeway.

Real Change Requires Humility—and New Choices

I'm now facing the painful reality that this is the world my unborn grandchildren will inherit if nothing is done to change course. I fear that we're too late to reverse the effects of climate change, too politically complacent to fight for our democracy and too numbed by media to know what the truth is anymore.

But fear will not seed change at this scale. Change will emerge out of hope and a just vision for the future, guided by younger generations. They have more at stake. And real change will require humility from those of us who have achieved a certain measure of power and position, and our willingness to leverage that power to advance an agenda equal to the threats we all face. Baby boomers need to step up and step back at the same time.

This can be challenging. A 20th-century view of retirement suggests that by a certain age we deserve leisure. We've worked hard, raised families, paid taxes and now we can relax and make pleasure a priority. My dad played golf and pursued leisure activities for 30 years after retiring.

But the world we're now living in no longer affords us that option. We must wake up to the future and the support role that older adults must play. We need to make new choices.

Erik Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development (tinyurl.com/y8u84rx2) provide a framework for understanding what drives generational choices. Each stage is characterized by a crisis of two conflicting forces (e.g., from trust versus mistrust at birth up to 18 months; to ego integrity versus despair for ages 65 and older); successful resolution of these results in the acquisition of basic virtues.

For baby boomers, the tension is between generativity and stagnation, which leads to the virtue of caring. In other words, what are we contributing to the greater good that will endure after we're gone?

Of Power, Purpose and Leverage

This question of baby boomers' contributions to the greater good came into sharp relief recently while I attended a program at my Oakland church. The program included students from the Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center (*mlkfreedomcenter.org*), which brings together individuals and organizations of diverse ages, races and socioeconomic backgrounds, to work side-by-side for a healthy democracy. Its director, Dr. Roy Wilson, reframed Erikson's theories, urging us elders in the audience to ask ourselves: What am I doing to prepare the next generation versus how am I pleasing myself?

The discussion that followed moved me into a new state of awareness, especially as I heard from 17-year-olds who are committing themselves to the responsibilities of leadership development. They spoke, with a wisdom that belied their age, about love, non-violence and power, which one young woman defined as "achieving a purpose." It's that simple, she said.

Seeing power this way makes it lot more difficult to disclaim.

So, I'm asking myself new questions about the choices that will guide me in the coming decades: What is my purpose in light of our new social reality? What do I have to offer this new generation of leaders? How can I leverage my experience, networks and resources to advance their agenda?

I am a middle-class white woman, a baby boomer privileged to have come of age in an era defined by choice—choices that previous generations couldn't fathom: whether or not to go to war, or to have a baby, or to stay married or to love a same-sex partner. Making choices is part of my generation's ethos and for me, another definition of personal power. What will I do with that power? What will you do with yours?

A Decision Made and Challenges to Face

As a community-builder and leader in the Village Movement, I am choosing to speak out and use my powers of persuasion to mobilize intergenerational action to address the perils knocking at the door. I'm coordinating face-to-face dialogues among diverse groups of younger and older adults to learn about our different worldviews, to discover common priorities and to co-create an action agenda.

Earlier this year, a group of LGBTQ Millennials met with older Village members to discuss the spectrum of gender identities that has come to light in the last decade. Members also heard from representatives of Vote16 (*vote16usa.org*), a national campaign to extend voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds at the local level. Moving forward, we'll be seeking new partners to help us discover an expanded sense of interconnection. I invite you to do the same in your community.

As we baby boomers approach the final decades of our lives, Erikson tells us that our developmental task will be to navigate the tension between integrity and despair. We'll be challenged to weave together the threads of our lives—the choices we've made, the love we've created, the limitations we've overcome—into a narrative that makes us feel whole and proud of what we're leaving to succeeding generations. The alternative is to experience the burdens of regret and unfulfilled purpose, and a longing to know our place in the larger human story. ■

Kate Hoepke is executive director of San Francisco Village, chair of Village Movement California and an Encore Public Voices fellow with the Op-Ed Project. She can be contacted at kate@sfvillage.org.