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Editor's Notebook: Bridging the Generation Gap - Again

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Bridging The Generation Gap - Again

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A
fter twenty-one years spent in the midwest, I came of age in Massachusetts during those
dark but exhilarating days of Vietnam, Watergate and domestic unrest. Al-
though I was a graduate of that now famous high school class of 1965, I
never really thought of myself back then as being part of America’s revolu-
tionary generation. But after one year in graduate school I found myself carry-
ing a sign which read “Free Huey Newton” and going to protest rallies to
end the war. Mind you, I was no flaming radical or card carrying mem-
er of the peace movement, but the times and the public environment
changed me, as it did many others who lived through that era.

Looking back now to a time over twenty years ago when words like
“relevance,” “commitment,” and “involvement” were heard on college
 Campuses with great frequency and forcefulness, I am drawn to a compari-
sion with the young men and women who sit in class before me and listen to
my lectures on politics. How does this generation of college students match
up to my generation? Have the same values and concerns that prompted my
generation to get involved been passed down? Was the generation of the 60’s
unique in the way it responded to crisis in this country or do those of us who
are now in our 40’s make too much of our social activism and political
heroics?

Despite the seemingly endless array of problems and controversies that
arose in that period, the 60’s were also
a time of endless opportunities — oppor-
tunities for young people to chal-
genle lethargy, the generation of the 80’s has
demonstrations against the Vietnam
war were supported not only because
of moral outrage, but for more selfish
reasons such as the prospect of being
shot. Yes, idealism, conscience and a
concern for others existed in 60’s stu-
dents, but along with these virtues my
generation also revealed a nasty sense of
intolerance, a failure to understand

the personal ramifications of public
actions, a blind acceptance of protest
leaders and a sad unwillingness to see
the good that this country has to offer.
Along with its high ideals and morals,
my generation also acquired healthy
doses of cynicism, permissiveness and
an eventual overarching concern for
self.

The 80’s generation is criticized as
more interested in personal and career
growth than those of us who still
identify with the Tet offensive, the
March on Washington and the protest
songs of Joan Baez. To a member of the
60’s generation the twenty year olds of
today seem ignorant of recent history,
hopelessly immersed in popular cul-
ture and too busy making money to
turn their attention to the problems of
their community, their country and
their world. And yet I think that those
of us who came out of the 60’s should
not be too harsh on the current student
population. Their materialistic savvy
gives them a much better understand-
ing of how to survive in this
difficult world; they are harder
workers (although unfortunately
much of their energy is directed toward
non-academic pursuits); and they
know how to enjoy life and are willing
to laugh at themselves. Perhaps most
importantly, though, they are surpris-
ingly confident about the future of mankind and the planet. Compared to
the “gloom and doomers” of the 60’s,
the generation of the 80’s glows with
renewed confidence.

If the social commitment and politi-
cal awareness that were the hallmarks of the 60’s seem to be absent today, the
cause may be that fewer challenging
opportunities exist. This generation
has not had the chance to realize that
what happens outside of their world
does affect them and that they have an
obligation to try and do something
about it. Yet it is critically important
that they, like their 60’s predecessors,
become aware of the evils of un-
checked power, the necessity of in-
suring that democracy remains a sys-
tem of popular rule and the respon-
sibility of good citizens to see to it that
the American dream becomes a reality
for everyone.

In many respects today’s college stu-
dents face a similar lack of oppor-
tunities to reach out of themselves.
Granted that world hunger, apartheid,
and the war in Central America have
stimulated Live-Aid, calls for divest-
ment of stock portfolios by colleges
and an occasional demonstration
against the contras, but by and large
the problems of the 80’s are far from home
and have little direct bearing on the
daily lives and futures of America’s
youth. With no serious national threat
or crisis to force them out of their
lethargy, the generation of the 80’s has
appeared to concentrate its energies on
sex, money, sports, and MTV.

Although the students of the 60’s
will be remembered for their activism
and social conscience, it is important to
recall that many of them paid little
attention to political wrongdoing or
economic injustice. Campus strikes
were often used as an excuse to cut
classes and avoid term papers, and
demonstrations against the Vietnam
war were supported not only because
of moral outrage, but for more selfish
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