

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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Last week, I went on my annual family vacation near Lake Tahoe. Today, I'd like to discuss three occurrences which took place around that vacation: one before, one during, and one after.

The first was an e-mail I received from a reader. A former psychologist, the correspondent wrote in part:

“You may call Jacksonites ‘passionate,’ and I agree that they are, but I think underlying this passion are personality traits/psychological mechanisms/behavioral reinforcers which are very powerful and feed passion.

“One of these is the personality trait that is called ‘narcissistic.’ This is a grandiose sense of and preoccupation with self; a belief that one and one’s world are ‘special’ and ‘unique,’ e.g. Jackson’s geography/vistas/availability of play experiences are really magnificent so, by association, I must be pretty special to live here; a sense of entitlement and belief that others are envious of oneself and exploitation and lack of empathy in interpersonal relationships. I know this sounds pretty bad, but they are at the level of ‘traits,’ not an actual disorder...

“Another is a personality trait called ‘histrionic.’ This is an excessive emotionality; a need to be center of attention; self-dramatization; excessive expression of emotion; provocative behavior and speech that is impressionistic, but lacking in detail. Clearly this dovetails very well with narcissism.

“These definitions are from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. (DSM-IV.)”

The second occurrence was a conversation I had, while on vacation, with a young man in his mid-20s, someone I've known around ten years. His father is a very successful scientist, and as long as I've known him, the son has been struggling to find his own way.

We've gotten into a routine where, each summer, he tells me about his world, and I try to lend a sympathetic ear. This year, he railed against the messed-up world previous generations have left for his. Some of his anger was simply the traditional coming-of-age intolerance each generation has for its predecessors. Some of the specifics, though – multi-trillion dollar deficits, an over-crowded, environmentally-degraded planet; hypocritical politicians with feet (or other organs) of clay; and the erosion of optimism that used to inform Americans' worldview – were pretty hard to explain away.

The third occurrence was an e-mail waiting for me on my return. Sent by someone worried that Jackson Hole may sacrifice its future on the altar of Mammon, it started by saying *“I am fearful that the author’s attitude as expressed in this editorial represents the changing demography of Jackson Hole. The elected officials seem to support this end.”* The bulk of the e-mail was a copy of the editorial in last week's Brand X, in which the author – a reporter in the 25-35 year old demographic – wrote in favor of airport expansion. The gist of the editorial was captured in its final paragraph:

“Expand our economic engine all you want, Jackson Hole Airport Board, so I can make money, have convenient travels around the world, and won't have to spend the night in Salt Lake on a wad of Delta Airlines blankets, wishing I was in my bed – true story.”

It's possible that I'm irony-challenged, and didn't catch the writer's oppose-the-expansion-by-supporting-it satire. If satire was his goal though, he was too subtle for me, so my assumption is that he

supports the Airport Board – and, by extension, other powers that be – doing all they can to stimulate economic growth. If this pro-growth reading is correct, that makes for a pretty nice irony in-and-of-itself – a young writer for the community’s self-styled counter-culture arts paper editorializing for damn-the-torpedoes economic development, forcing geezers to fight the youthful despoilers of the environment.

What I take out of these three occurrences is that the next generation faces an extraordinary challenge: Figuring out how to sustain or improve the world’s quality of life while using far fewer resources, both per capita and overall. To succeed, they will need to develop a new definition of, and approach to, economic health, one far less reliant on our current model of unbridled growth achieved through unthinking exploitation of natural resources. If subsequent generations succeed, they will usher in an era of extraordinary prosperity. If not, there’s a chance that they’ll look back in amazement at the latter 20th and early 21st centuries, wondering what people were thinking during the “Extravagance Age.” Or the “Waste Age.” Or perhaps most accurately, the “Mindless Consumption Age.”

To develop such a new definition is a huge task; to figure out how to successfully implement it will be more challenging still. Yet that’s the hand which has been dealt those in their 30s and younger. I wish it weren’t so; I wish their parents and grandparents could have solved it instead. But that’s not going to happen – the problems are too complicated, and those middle aged and older are fast running out of time to develop answers, much less implement them.

Instead, what I think will happen is that historians will ultimately view those who came of age following World War 2 as the last in a series of generations which considered natural resources as essentially unlimited, and acted accordingly. Those of the next generation – those in their 40s and 50s today – will be seen as a bridge of sorts, the first generation to recognize that resources are limited, but unable to move beyond the “Grow we must; and the way we grow is through resource exploitation” model espoused by their forebears. Figuring out what comes next is the historical challenge facing those born in the mid-1970s and later.

Which is, of course, quite a challenge, a challenge made far more daunting by the fact that the only behavioral model this generation has ever known is one which encourages consumption without sacrifice. America’s current profligacy began under Ronald Reagan, who initiated our national – and ultimately personal – habit of regular and massive deficit spending. Arguably, Reagan’s monster – this uber-entitlement mindset – reached its apotheosis under the second President Bush, whose initial response to the attacks of September 11, 2001 was to urge us to go shopping, and then initiated two wars without asking Americans to make any sacrifice except pay lower taxes. Given such a history of self-indulgence, it’s not surprising that the under-35 generation would see making any sacrifice as being completely unfair.

However, if the essential qualities of places like Jackson Hole are going to be sustained for future generations, sacrifices – fair or not – will be needed. To think otherwise is a faith-based fantasy. There’s simply too much evidence that we cannot continue our current patterns of consumption while simultaneously sustaining massive population increases, the first world’s lifestyle, the second world’s economic growth, and the health of the planet. Something’s got to give, and as the species at the top of the food chain, the major question facing the planet is whether we humans have the ability to act on what we know to be true.

So I understand why my young vacation friend is pissed off at earlier generations. And if I were Brand X’s pro-growth editorialist, I too would be tempted to simply do more of the same – despite sacrifices such as an occasional night on an airport floor, by any historical standard, our current lifestyle is really, really sweet. But as much as it’s arguably unfair, major changes are going to have to happen, happen soon, and happen on the watch of those born during the last 35 years.

Figuring out the next chapter in human economic society is the next great challenge facing our species. If done right, the process can be an exciting and rewarding adventure. But to succeed will also take

a certain level of perspective and maturity, qualities which, in the view of some, Jackson Hole does not hold in abundance. If, ultimately, we cannot muster those qualities, even the most self-absorbed among us will find it ironic, for we have so very much to lose.

Personal note: While I was gone, Willie Neal was killed. He was one of those “under-35s” who got it, with the skills and desire to embrace the challenges facing his generation and world. My deepest condolences to his family.