

IT'S OUR TURN: What We Owe to Future Generations ¹

Barney J. Brawer

I wrote this essay in **1990** to try to understand and articulate my generation's experiences and responsibilities as we headed toward the start of the 21st century. Its original subtitle was "A Pass / Fail Test for the Baby Boomers in the Last Decade of the 20th Century." Now we are well into the 21st century, and I still believe just about every word of the essay. I have discovered that it also seems to have relevance for some folks much younger than I am. I include it here as my personal Mission Statement.

B. Brawer, The National Classroom, Inc.

***To some generations, much is given.
Of others, much is expected.
This generation has a rendezvous with destiny.***

Franklin D. Roosevelt
June 27, 1936

1. Generational Ascension to Leadership

At key points in history, generational groups declare their readiness to take up the tasks of leadership, to address long-neglected problems, to chart new directions.

Franklin Roosevelt, accepting the nomination for reelection as U.S. President on a hot summer day in Philadelphia, announced the challenge facing his generation: those who were already adults in the years of the Great Depression, those who would lead the nation through the Second World War.

24 years later, John F. Kennedy announced a new ascension to leadership:

***Let the word go forth from this time and place,
to friend and foe alike,
that the torch has been passed to a new generation ...***

John F. Kennedy
Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower had been the nation's leaders during World War II; John Kennedy was the first president from the generation who served as soldiers in that war.

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Kennedy's campaign announced a "New Frontier" and his inaugural speech lauded

***... a new generation of Americans – born in this century,
tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace,
proud of our ancient heritage.***

"The world is different now," he explained. "We must begin anew."

***I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with
any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith,
the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country
and all who serve it – and the glow from that fire can truly light
the world.***

It is easy now for Americans to feel cynical or wistful about the Kennedy years – but the energy, the optimism, the grandeur of Kennedy's vision was powerful and direct.

***And so, my fellow Americans:
Ask not what your country can do for you –
ask what you can do for your country.***

***My fellow citizens of the world:
Ask not what America will do for you,
but what together we can do for the freedom of man.***

***Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world,
ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice
which we ask of you.***

***With a good conscience our only sure reward,
with history the final judge of our deeds,
let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help,
but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.***

The consciousness of any generation is formed by their childhood environment and the key public events of young adulthood – events so large as to intrude upon private realities. Critical experiences, reinforced over time, define each group's perception of the world and their place in it.

John Kennedy faced a test as a young Navy officer in the boat called PT-109; fighting a brutal war against an evil enemy was the commitment young men of his era were called to make. Two decades later, "strength" and "sacrifice" are words he uses easily. His inaugural address embraces the judgment of history as he proclaims his generation's eagerness "to lead the land we love."

We know, as he did not, how this chapter will end, and it will end badly. World War II was the

crucible in which Kennedy's vision of the world was forged. The assassination of John Kennedy and the assassinations which followed, the Vietnam War, the collapse of the Great Society, the violence unleashed at home and abroad became the defining events for another generation, those whose adulthood began after John Kennedy became president.

2. The Baby Boom

The Baby Boom, demographers tell us, began in 1946 and ended in 1963. It began with those born at the end of World War II and ended with those born at the end of the Kennedy presidency.

I was born in 1948 and turned 40 a year and a half ago.² Men and women my age began our awareness of public events with the Kennedy administration: the Peace Corps, the Cuban missile crisis, "Ich bin ein Berliner." And, wherever we were, each of us can remember the day John Kennedy was shot. I was a junior in high school.

Those who are five years younger than I am began their awareness of public events not with Kennedy's administration, but with his assassination. If you are now in your thirties,² that "first" assassination is likely to have been the first public event that intruded upon your world of private awareness. It was followed by a series of assassinations which removed the key American leadership of the post-Eisenhower generation.

Were they alive today, John Kennedy would be 72 years old.² Malcolm X and Bobby Kennedy would be 64; Martin Luther King, 61. We would be watching them on MacNeil Lehrer or the Sunday new shows as the senior statesmen of their generation: advising, debating, commenting. John Kennedy would analyze the beginning and the end of the Berlin Wall. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King would debate the significance of Jesse Jackson's 1988 Presidential campaign; they might discuss with Bobby Kennedy a new biography of the FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

But we grew up without them. We grew up having learned what we came to believe was the truth about leadership: If you present yourself as a leader – or put much faith in leaders – most likely it will end badly. Either your hopes will be dashed, as they were for those who chose Lyndon Johnson as the "Peace Candidate" against Barry Goldwater in 1964, as they were for others who learned of the secret underside of John Kennedy's administration and can no longer see that era as we once did. Either your hopes will be dashed, we came to believe – or, if you really start doing something of significance, most likely you'll be shot.

In much of our current popular fiction, from the era of the movie Easy Rider to the era of Do The Right Thing, if the story ends in violence – that is "realism." If the story ends happily – on a topic larger than Boy Meets Girl or the championship game of a sports story – that is an ending we deride as "saccharine," "unrealistic."

² Please remember: This essay was written in 1990, 24 years ago.

3. The Problems We Face

As we entered the last decade of the Twentieth Century, our nation and our world faced serious problems:

AIDS / health care / medical costs and quality

Drugs and drug-related violence

The escalation of reported neglect, abuse, and even murder of children by their parents

Violent crime spreading through all sectors of our society

The environment:

Will we be able to drink our water, swim in our lakes, eat our fish, breathe our air?

Nuclear and chemical weapons:

Their potential for world-wide destruction, their possible spread to new international players

The enduring racial divisions within our society

The growing gap between rich and poor, in America and worldwide

The disappearance of routine safety and civility in many of our communities.

You and I might disagree on the particular items to be included on this list or the definition of each problem, but each of us could generate our own catalog of crises. Cumulatively, the reality is daunting: the challenges we face are formidable.

4. My Parents' Generation

My parents' generation, in their youth, faced two monstrous threats: the Depression and Adolf Hitler. They grew up in an era defined by worldwide economic collapse and came to adulthood as Hitler's and Hirohito's armies gobbled up countries across Europe and Asia. They rose to meet the challenge: reluctantly, hesitantly, no doubt ambivalently. But they met the challenges they faced. Gentle non-fighting men in my family left their jobs or closed the doors of their shops to join the Army. My mother, my aunt, and the men whom the Army wouldn't take drove ambulances. That was not how they had dreamed of spending their first years as young adults, but they had to do it – and they did it.

They succeeded in overcoming the twin crises facing their generation. Whatever their fears, whatever alternatives they might have wished for – finally, they made the commitment and they succeeded. Building on a crippled economic structure, saving and using every scrap of material, mobilizing the full range of our human resources, they fought a vicious war. They had no understanding in advance that, by fighting the Second World War, they would also build the economic engine which would power 20 years of postwar prosperity.

They did not know that the war effort would succeed. France fell. Britain was under nightly assault by air. Hitler's scientists worked feverishly to build the atomic bomb. Today we look for solutions to our problems and ask the question, "But how do we know it will work?" They didn't know it would work. They only knew, finally, that there was a painful job which they could no longer avoid.

My parents' generation met the challenges they faced: we must remember and acknowledge their accomplishments. As a Jew and as an American, I and my family might well not have survived their failure.

5. The Last Decade of the 20th Century

As we began the last decade of the twentieth century, we Baby Boomers were of the age when generations announce their eagerness, in Kennedy's phrase, "to lead the land we love." Until then, the state of our society and our nation **was not our fault**. We were too young: even in wars and political upheaval, 22 year olds rarely make policy. But the era of our dispensation from responsibility is coming to an end. What happens next will happen **on our watch**.

During the next decades, as we move *en masse* into our most productive and powerful adult years, we face critical challenges – challenges which will determine the nature of the world we hand over to our children.

My daughter is 8 years old.³ When I am in my fifties, she will have grown to young adulthood and we will have completed the last decade of the 20th century. In that period of time, ***the problems we face will have become horribly, immeasurably worse – or – we will have begun the process of repair and restoration.***

I grew up, as many of us did, in a society where the idea of homeless people living on the streets described a distant reality. That was a vision of Calcutta, of lands far from the cities and towns we knew. As children, we learned in school about such places, and we could not understand how "regular" people could live ordinary lives amid such a reality. How, we wondered, could they simply conduct their daily "normal" lives in the presence of such extreme misery? Now, as homeless people live on the streets of every city in America, we understand how the unthinkable can become the commonplace.

We have the opportunity to pass on to our children the chance to be the first generation in human history to live on a planet where the air is not quite breathable, the water not quite drinkable, the ozone layer not quite intact, with random violence, pervasive poverty and wealth simultaneously setting new records, and the temperature rising beyond levels we've every known. If that is the world we hand over to our children, we will be ashamed – and rightly so. We will have failed them. We will have failed ourselves. We will have failed.

³ in 1990

There is no reason we should believe that our children will be less critical of us than we were of our parents. They will ask some new equivalent of “What did you do in the war, Daddy?” If we have failed to tackle the problems we face, we will be ashamed before our own children.

Many of us can imagine that possibility – although we try not to think about it. Among the most caring, the most concerned members of my generation, when you begin to recite the list above, the list of the problems we face – from AIDS to the Greenhouse Effect, from nuclear weapons to urban violence, there is a common response: **Almost** everyone **almost** believes it's **almost** hopeless.

Ask your friends. Give them the list, or one of your own making. The sense of hopelessness comes so near to the surface that such conversations are best banned from lighthearted social events.

The consciousness of the problems we face – connected with our sense of the futility of leadership – has led us, even the most caring of us, to avoid facing the larger picture. We are like Lot's wife who, fleeing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, was warned not to look: It is too horrible. You'll be turned into a pillar of salt.

So we retreat to smaller spheres where we can feel in control. We build our families, our careers. We engage in the small projects of change, but, from fear, we resist the question: How can our small projects become a larger response? How can we build solutions which are as big as the problems?

Or we look, we feel the pain, and we indulge in our despair. Intermittently, prodded by some news event, we slip into that conversation which confirms our sense of the futility of it all. Not knowing how to heal the wound, we pick at the scab.

Some believe “It'll take a real crisis ... “ – as if what we have now is not crisis enough. Last year, there were 136 homicides in Kansas City, almost 2,000 in New York City. The air is polluted in the Grand Canyon and in Kennebunkport, Maine. The contaminated well, the coed murdered in the parking lot, the urban child killed by stray bullets, the air quality alert: daily staples of the evening news. The idea that we can escape, that there is a place where “it won't happen to us” is collapsing. Routinely, we ask: Is it safe to walk this city street or this country road at night? Can we swim in the ocean today? Do you let your children go outside to play – without an adult to watch them every moment? (It is not skinned knees that we are worried about.) The unthinkable becomes the commonplace.

There is among us an idea that “it will have to get (even) worse before ‘people’ are mobilized to ‘do something.’ “ Are we talking about people like ourselves? People unlike us? The degraded masses who differ from us, the enlightened few?

Our response is a formula for waiting, for expecting some unnamable thing in the external environment to drive us all to the kind of action we know we already should be taking. “It will have to get a lot worse before people do anything.” Which people? Who?

6. My 40th Birthday and “Ecological Kristallnacht”

In the summer of 1988, we were in Maine to celebrate my 40th birthday. We were together, friends and family, on the coast near Rockland – and it was very hot. Old timers at the local hardware store said it had never been that hot, there, as long as they could remember. We had fun with a big birthday celebration, but that summer – for a while – we were scared. We talked more about the heat than about our larger fears, but we were scared. Then the summer of 1989 was cool here in New England, followed by a nice cold winter. Perhaps we forgot how the heat scared us just a year and a half earlier. **This** year, we hoped, we could avoid thinking about **that** crisis.

Early in 1989, Senator Albert Gore, Jr. of Tennessee, one of the first members of our generation aspiring to be President of the United States, wrote of an “Ecological Kristallnacht.” He offered a summary of the now-familiar statistics about population growth, destruction of the earth’s forests, the hole in the ozone layer, the seepage of chemical waste down into the groundwater and up into the atmosphere, starvation due to preventable crop failures, the Greenhouse Effect heating the planet. The usual list. He compared it all to Kristallnacht – November 9, 1938 – when the Nazis in Germany unleashed their open attack upon Jews. The night is named for the sound of breaking glass as Nazi thugs smashed shop windows in Jewish neighborhoods and began their murderous assault upon the Jews themselves. Many, in all nations, chose to turn away, to avoid facing the implications of a process that had already begun. For those who had the courage to look and to see – the pattern was clear of what was to come.

Baby Boomers: as we came of age, as we began the last decade of the twentieth century, as political change transforms the face of Europe and the Middle East and economic change sweeps through Asia, we face a new set of challenges, different in nature but as dangerous as the challenges of 1939. What is required of us, now, is what the psychologist Seymour Sarason calls **“taking the obvious seriously.”**

7. The Nature of the Solutions

Many of our problems are new. Before the twentieth century, we never had AIDS before. We never have tried to put this many people – or this many cars – on the planet before. We never generated this much trash before. Old solutions prove inadequate to the present realities; new solutions are called for. Each of the new solutions must be built of three essential elements:

- Public education
- Expert innovation
- Citizen action.

We must recommit ourselves to educating our whole population, for two reasons:

1. We need to develop, from among our young people, the highly-educated individuals who will create **new levels of expert knowledge**. Our need for expert knowledge has never been greater; we can assemble that expertise only by casting our net widely to

find and recruit those among the young who will become our technical innovators in needed fields of endeavor.

2. We must **educate all of our citizens** so they can understand the problems we face and can participate, as citizens and private individuals, in the decision-making which is now unavoidable.

Solutions will come from the combined actions of experts and citizens. We must build an educational system capable of generating expertise at the highest levels and educating the citizenry on the broadest basis.

An effective response to the AIDS crisis: Immunologists and epidemiologists must understand how the disease works and how it can be fought. Then they must explain it to the rest of us. Only the experts can understand the details of how the disease functions. But we, as private individuals, must understand the changes we must make in our sexual behavior. And, as citizens, we must participate in difficult policy decisions: Do we distribute clean needles to addicts? How do we balance the need for epidemiological information with the right to the privacy of one's medical records? Do we punish HIV-positive prostitutes and their clients? How do we care for the child who was born HIV-positive and protect the child who wasn't?

In a democracy, these are decisions which are appropriately made based upon a free exchange of ideas among an educated citizenry. We need experts capable of extending our knowledge and we need citizens capable of understanding and responding to complex information. A quality system of public education is essential for generating both.

Take any of our problems: Consider the automobile. As an individual, I might change my driving habits, but that would not put a dent in the problem of air pollution. We know that we must do something about our reliance on the individually-driven, gasoline-powered, internal combustion engine. Ordinary citizens cannot easily start that process. Experts will have to invent the solution, build it, distribute the fuel which powers it. Ordinary citizens will have to buy it and drive it – and ride mass transit a lot more frequently. It is the combination of experts and citizens who can make the changes significant enough to matter.

To clean up Boston Harbor, the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority – following court orders – had to assemble the expertise to rebuild a sewer system created hundreds of years ago for a tiny population. We, as citizens, may have to change the way we fertilize our lawns and wash our cars, what toilets we install, how quickly we fix the faucet that leaks. Some of us will have to live near new treatment plants. All of us, through the bills we pay for the water we use, will commit serious financial resources to the harbor cleanup. It will take the combined activism of experts and citizens to do the job.

As Baby Boomers, we grew accustomed to hearing ourselves described as the best educated generation in history, and we assumed that the upward spiral would continue. We have now come to realize that, not only are we better educated than those who had come before us, we are also better educated than the younger Americans who followed us. Appalling gaps in the knowledge base of American citizens are frequently reported in the academic and popular press. The children of our nation, with boring consistency, again and

again score far below those of other nations – in our understanding of science, of math, of geography, in our ability to speak a language other than our native tongue.

Less widely known is the fact that, at the highest levels of our educational system, in mathematical, technical, and scientific endeavors, we can no longer fill America's universities with Americans. ***Less than half the doctorates granted by universities in the United States in mathematics, physics, chemistry, electrical engineering – the technical fields – are granted to citizens of the United States.*** If we had to fill the graduate level technical programs in our own universities with young people we had educated in our own schools, we would have to close half or more of the spaces at Harvard, MIT, Stanford, the University of Michigan, and every competitive university in the land. This is not a warning about infiltration by foreign students; it is an indication of the extent of our failure to “grow our own.”

Horace Mann, writing in 1840, explained the original purpose for which we established our system of universal free public education. If we can forgive his old-fashioned use of “men” for all of humanity (he was a pioneer of the equal education of women), we can appreciate his vision of the critical role of education in a democratic society.

Our advanced state of civilization has evolved many questions respecting social duties. We want a generation of men capable of taking up these complex questions, and of turning all sides of them toward the sun, and of examining them by the white light of reason. ...

We want no more of those patriots who exhaust their patriotism in lauding the past; but we want patriots who will do for the future what the past has done for us. We want men capable of deciding not merely what is right in principle – that is often the smallest part of the case; but we want men capable of deciding what is right in means, to accomplish what is right in principle. ...

What resources are there, in the whole domain of Nature, at all comparable to that vast influx of power which comes into the world with every incoming generation? ... Each one of these millions, with a fitting education, is capable of adding something to the sum of human happiness and of subtracting something from the sum of human misery; and many great souls amongst them there are, who may become instruments for turning the course of nations, as the rivers of water are turned. ...

Education must be universal. ... The theory of our government is – not that all men, however unfit, shall be voters – but that every man, by the power of reason and the sense of duty, shall become fit to be a voter. Education must bring the practice as nearly as possible to the theory.

Dramatic innovation is called for. Problems on an unprecedented scale call for unprecedented solutions. We must invent new tools as big as the problems. As Ralph Nader recently pointed out: When was the last time we actually solved any national problem?

8. Learned Helplessness

Why do we seem to have such difficulty addressing ourselves to these tasks? What will it take to mobilize the energies and skills of a generation whose hopes and dreams were shattered years ago?

In the late 1960's, the psychologist Martin Seligman and his colleagues began a series of experiments with laboratory animals which illuminated a phenomenon they called "learned helplessness." Their experiments began with dogs in a research laboratory setting. The dog was placed in a cage with two chambers. On one side of the cage, an electrical grid was built into the floor, a grid capable of giving the dog a painful shock. The other chamber had a safe, plain floor. A barrier, at the height of the dog's shoulder, separated the two compartments. It had long been established in experimental psychology the dogs can be trained to escape, with increasing efficiency, an electrical shock in one chamber by leaping the barrier into the other side of the cage.

Under normal circumstances, when the shock begins, the dog will jump and bark actively until, seemingly by accident, it discovers that the barrier can be jumped and the shock escaped. Discovery of this escape route leads to quicker and quicker responses in subsequent trials. Moreover, when a signal such as changed lighting routinely precedes the electrical shock, the dog can learn the significance of the signal and escape before receiving any shock at all.

To these standard experiments, Seligman and his colleagues added a new wrinkle: The dog first experienced, in a harness apparatus, inescapable shock. The lights would dim, the shock would come on, and nothing the dog could do would terminate the shock. After a short time, the shock would end automatically.

It was discovered that the experience of inescapable shock created an "interference effect" which prevented the dogs from later learning how to escape. In subsequent trials, when the escape route was available – even when the barrier was removed and the animal dragged to the safe chamber, to demonstrate the path to safety – the dogs who had experienced the inescapable shock demonstrated their unchangeable belief in the futility of any action. Loud barking would not occur; the dog would cease moving in an agitated manner. The dog would lie down on the electric grid, whimpering, and would passively accept the severe, pulsating shock.

Seligman and his colleagues defined learned helplessness as a psychological state in which the subject – on the basis of real experiences – concludes that action is hopeless, that there is no predictable connection between response and outcome, **and is therefore unable to learn adaptive responses to later situations in which effective action *is* possible.**

Learned helplessness is a real phenomenon in humans. We see it in behaviors from the extremes of clinical depression to negotiations over who will change the car's flat tire on a cold, rainy night – or who will change the baby's soiled diaper. We can sense its power as we try to teach mathematics to an individual who has previously experienced that subject matter as a series of painful, inescapable shocks.

But we are different from dogs in cages. We have cognition and the capacity for commitment. We can understand our situation, and we can address the future. We can examine our own psychology and confront within ourselves the temptation toward feeling helpless. We can choose and we can act.

We Baby Boomers, at a critical point in our growing up, watched the removal by assassination of important leaders wrestling with important problems within our nation. Assassination after assassination, crisis after crisis occurred before our eyes: in Seligman's terms, inescapable shocks. We could protest; we could demonstrate. But as the late 60's turned into the 1970's, protest gave way to rage for some, and passivity for others. We learned then that there was nothing we could do to escape the shocks. An ideology of the 1980's allowed some of us to decide either "it's not my problem" or that somehow the automatic functioning of free markets and private incentives would generate solutions. For many of us, the daily confrontations with the headlines of today's newspapers evoke a lying down and whimpering, a terrible sense of helplessness, a feeling that "no one is providing leadership," perhaps a vague hope that "something will have to happen" because, after all, "What can we do?"

9. A Pass / Fail Test

Decades have passed. We are now of the age of the leaders we lost, or older than they lived to be. Like the dogs in Seligman's experiments, we can accept the additional shocks to come, convinced from our own real experience that there is no escaping this cage. We can await the arrival of some leader who will, somehow, wake us from our resignation, while believing as well that such leadership is unlikely at best, futile at worst.

Or we can take charge of our situation, of our future, and of the legacy we will leave to future generations. It is – like it or not – a Pass / Fail test for us. We will, indeed, be tested as the 20th century ends and the 21st unfolds.

We Baby Boomers are both a privileged and an injured generation. We grew up in a time of unprecedented national affluence and relative international peace. We were raised in an era of consumer comfort and we benefitted from an extraordinary expansion of our nation's investment in education. In the brand-new elementary schools many of us attended in growing suburban towns, with "National Defense Education Act" scholarships which enabled our generation to attend college and graduate school without burdensome debt, we grew to adulthood in a nation which prided itself on its belief in expanding educational opportunity and our generation's demonstration of the value of expanded educational attainment.

But we are also an injured generation. At a critical time in our transition to adulthood, we watched as the American leadership of the generation ahead of us was removed by assassination. For any who doubt the significance of those losses, imagine how the struggle against Hitler and the Depression might have fared had our parents' generation lost to assassins' bullets Roosevelt, Churchill, Eisenhower, and DeGaulle. We became adults as the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon demonstrated to us the failure of our leaders to address the problems we faced at home and abroad.

We Baby Boomers are now ⁴ in our 40's or late 30's. For those of us who became parents

⁴ in 1990

early, our children are in college. For those who became parents late, our children are in diapers. In coming decades we can – if we choose – observe and analyze and bemoan the deterioration of our environment, our safety, and our sense of possibility. Or we can understand the grave risks of wallowing in “learned helplessness”; we can rouse ourselves and use all that we know; we can take charge of the future because, as it was said of an earlier generation, so it is true of us now that:

***To some generations, much is given.
Of others, much is expected.
This generation has a rendezvous with destiny.***

As children of the late 1950's and early 60's, we transformed family life and the educational system by our numbers and our significance. As college students, we educated ourselves to levels unmatched before or since. As protestors and resisters, we expanded civil rights and ended a horrible war. When our generation entered the housing market, the demand created by our numbers pushed the cost of housing sky-high – often beyond our reach. As we became parents, we generated new markets for every consumer product used by our children – from children's books to gym classes for toddlers to video games. And as we retire, our numbers will again make us significant by placing unprecedented demands on our nation's financial resources.

As adults, we now have acquired a powerful set of personal skills and organizational tools. We learned early of the contradictions and complexities of our society. In our most powerful and productive adult years, will it be ***only in that role*** that we pass by the opportunity to have an unprecedented impact on our nation and the world? ***Will we simply default on the human debt of leadership, vision, and accomplishment that we owe to our children, their children, and the future generations of this planet?***

For the reality of new generations moving to assume leadership, to address and solve critical problems, is not – after all – different from the terms in which John Kennedy framed it for us many decades ago:

***With a good conscience our only sure reward,
with history the final judge of our deeds,
let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help,
but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.***