



RE:GENERATIONS

A PRIMER FOR

ALL AGES

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LYNDSAY POAPS & KEVIN MILLSIP

Why We're Doing This

In the last few years we've seen a lot of attention being paid to the idea of generational tensions. As the economic crisis continues we hear more and more that seniors should be afraid of younger people and younger people should be pissed off at older people. Common refrains are about how young people don't want to pay for seniors' medical costs or pensions; that young people should be pissed off at older people for screwing up the environment, or the economy, or both; that older people don't want to support the education costs of younger people; that younger people are too entitled and have unrealistic expectations; the litany of negative typecasts is endless.

In the last 18 months alone there has been an explosion of articles and media discussing intergenerational conflicts and the troubles faced within each generation. Most of these articles follow a simple formula with the focus on how members of one generation aren't doing well, are concerned about their futures, are blissfully unaware of their impact on each other, and resolves with the conclusion that the other generations are to blame.

There's bound to be some truth in some of the above but it seems to us that focusing on the things that separate us, or cause us to fear, mistrust or care less about one another, especially generationally, may not serve either our common or our individual interests.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES: RE:GENERATIONS

Of course there are tensions between generations: there are tensions building because we have four generations in the workforce. There are tensions building because the great recession has made almost everyone vulnerable. There are tensions building because the challenges we all face are getting larger and the stakes on issues like climate change and poverty keep rising. There are tensions because the expectations each generation has had about security and wealth has been radically redefined. There are tensions building because people are working longer for less if they are working at all, and the list goes on.

These tensions can also be felt in the organizations and groups that are striving for environmental and social justice. There is work to be done to build trust and understand the different styles and approaches to organizing as well as the desires and needs of different generations. Often the communities in which we work don't expend the energy on capacity building or take the time to look at the internal challenges of working together because of the feeling that we are under the gun on a host of pressing social issues. In the absence of making space for this kind of conversation we sometimes adopt mainstream framing and internalize stereotypes and misrepresentations of each other.

For example, if young people do indeed feel angry at older people for any number of reasons, where does that take us in terms of action? Especially if the real challenges we face — climate change, inequality, the 99% vs. the 1% — are less generational than they are class or interest based? How would it help us or build stronger communities if younger people were to come together as a cohort and say 'We're not paying for seniors pensions!' That seems to be what some in the media and the political realm want to have happen, but why? Perhaps it's in the interest of some to have us fighting amongst ourselves and not focusing on the bigger picture.

It isn't our intention to ignore the very real issues of intergenerational inequity being experienced. The legacy of spending and policy building of the 1960's and 70's has not materialized for generations growing up in the 1990's and 2000's; however, we think the current practice of focusing on one generation's blame or responsibility for these problems ignores the real power players and the deeper issues at hand. Intergenerational inequity exists in both directions — many seniors don't have adequate pensions to live on and have legitimate fears about the state of seniors care in our country, while many

younger people are consumed by student debt, are un- or under-employed and priced out of the housing market and crunched by the lack of services for young families.

We think that there is a better and more productive way to have the conversation rather than pitching age fights and overhyping differences. We reject the lazy journalist approach of dropping controversial word bombs and then letting people duke it out in the comments section where at best people just trade venomous barbs. Some people are more invested in the antagonism; we're more interested in the possibility. With the challenges that we face, we can use as many hands on deck as can be mustered.

People born at different periods of time are going to approach situations in different ways and work differently. We are shaped by the period that we grow up in and the seminal events that take primary focus during that period.

Our premise is that we are stronger together, not ignoring difficult conversations that may be grounded in generational approaches or expectations, but that there is benefit for us working together for a common good. For example, it would be unexpected for young people to be seen fighting for, not against, seniors for better seniors care and stronger public pensions. It would certainly surprise some to see older people working with younger people for greater access to education funding, or universal childcare.

To this end, this edition of *Our Schools/Our Selves* continues a journey we began about three years ago with a series of workshops and dialogues called Re:generation. The dialogues have evolved from more open-format discussions about what different generations bring to social change work, to more focused workshops where we bring together people from different ages to look at specific issues facing our community. We then look at how we come to the present situation by learning about social change efforts in that area from the past, looking at what present goals are in that area and discussing together how we can work together across generations to achieve the new goals that we have together.

It's been a true learning experience for all involved and this anthology is another way to continue this exploration. We wanted to hear from people across the country about what has been rewarding and challenging about working with people from other generations.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES: RE:GENERATIONS

What are people learning and can we begin to pull out some common points or themes that may help more of us in the important work that people are doing across the country?

Rather than focusing on the divisions, the differences and the disconnections we see the power, the potential and the potency of working across generations. Ageless activism. We put together this collection of stories because we want to highlight the efforts and successes that people have made towards bringing together generations for social change. Some of the stories in the anthology also get into the challenges of intergenerational work and the steps people took to overcome and learn from them.

This collection of stories is a beginning in a different way — there are 11 stories here and there is no way we can capture all the richness from across this country in this format, so in conjunction with this issue we're launching a website called 'Re:generations'. This is a place where we will keep this conversation going by adding new stories and providing tools to help people craft their own oral histories and load them on to the site. "We have organized the stories by cohort with our final story as a letter to the future generations who will take up this work.

If you know of a great cross-generational story or see a voice that isn't represented in this issue, you have a chance to help capture that voice and that experience and get it on to the website to be shared with more people.

Thanks for the work that you do and for taking the time to read this issue. We look forward to hearing from you.

KEVIN MILLSIP builds capacity for progressive social change. He is the Director of Next Up and the Sustainability Coordinator for the Vancouver School Board. He co-founded Check Your Head and Get Your Vote On.

LYNDSAY POAPS is an expert in local government and the opportunities to create meaningful citizen participation. She co-founded Check Your Head and now leads Futureproof consulting. Lyndsay lives in Vancouver.