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Title

Together For Tomorrow: Building Community Through Intergenerational Dialogue and Action

Abstract

Over the last seventeen years, I have created and developed a civic engagement process that brings together all living generations in community, organizational, religious and corporate settings. These intentional, intergenerational gatherings and dialogue/conversations are organized to help break down generational isolation and separation, solve problems, or capitalize on opportunities across 5 generations.

The Intergenerational Dialogue and Action Model™ has been the research subject of a successful Ph.D. dissertation, a Doctor of Divinity, and an MA comprehensive paper. Each of these independent examinations has shown the Intergenerational Dialogue & Action process to be an effective best practice.

In addition, over 3,000 people across the United States of America have been trained to organize and implement this process. The range of issues for which the Dialogue has already been used includes: healing from natural disasters, homeland security, rural economic development, prevention of domestic and child abuse, school shootings, an ageing society, entitlements, generational knowledge transfer, mentoring, bridging racial and cultural divides, and immigration to name just a few dialogue topics. There are very few issues that are not enriched by a robust intergenerational conversation. (Training is available through the website below.)

This paper provides a clear understanding of the unique gifts and assets each of our living generations brings to any issue or opportunity. The reader will also learn compelling reasons for bringing all generations together to problem solve and build assets in a healthier and more equitable aging society. And finally, this paper will demonstrate the interdisciplinary foundations of the process, (from the perspective of sociology, history, education, community organizing, psychology and anthropology) describe how the process works, and provide practical examples of real Dialogue outcomes.

(My two books *Together for Tomorrow: Building Community Through Intergenerational Dialogue* and *All Are Welcome: A Primer on Intentional Intergenerational Ministry* and the booklets *Generations* and *Generations in the Workplace* are available at: www.pointsofviewinc.com)

Together For Tomorrow: Building Community Through Intergenerational Dialogue and Action

James V. Gambone, Ph.D.

“Let’s intergenerate - not age segregate”

– **Maggie Kuhn, Founder of the Grey Panther Party**

Introduction

Eighteen years ago, I embarked upon an interesting and life-changing journey. On the recommendation of a friend and fellow historian, (my BA and MA are both in history) I read a book called *Generations; The history of America’s future from 1584 to 2069*. (Strauss and Howe, 1991). As a student of history and historiography, I was impressed by the perspective they offered on U.S. history. They argued that four generational cohorts repeated themselves throughout U.S. history from 1584 to the present. If you wanted to find a cohort very much like your own, you could simply take the year of your birth and go back in history 100 years or so, and you would find a generation that had similar values and attitudes to your own generation. (A generation in their model covers approximately a 25-year time period.) They also argued you could predict the future by taking existing younger, generational cohorts (their core values, attitudes and leadership potential) and project the actions of these cohorts into the future. It was a more provocative and different look at U.S. history than I had ever seen.

At the same time I was reading this book, I was trying to make sense out of a diverse, “multi-portfolio” professional career. I was trained as a community organizer for the Peace Corps, had a doctorate degree in Sociology and Education, loved teaching, was known as an award-winning film and television writer, producer and director, established as an independent investigative reporter, operating as a successful entrepreneur, and a sought-after public speaker. My struggle involved searching for unifying themes that might help me better understand my diverse professional work history.

I’ll never forget the lunch I had with my friend Shirley in 1991, who was organizing a large violence prevention effort in St. Paul, Minnesota. When I told Shirley how excited I was after reading Strauss and Howe, she asked me a very poignant question, “Jim, how will this new generational understanding help reduce violence in Ramsey County?” It was this direct question, and the resulting 18 years of trying to answer it, that brings me to this conference today.

What is a generational perspective?

Morris Massey was a successful corporate consultant in the U.S. in the 1970’s and 1980’s. He said, “You are now what you were then, when you were ten.” If someone wanted to understand the current behaviors and attitudes of a 20-, 40-, or 80-year-old, Massey would say, go back and look at the political, social, economic and cultural influences that challenged them at a formative age. Like many developmental psychologists, Massey was saying that core values, developed when a person “comes of age,” often remain powerful influencers throughout that person’s entire life span.

For my parents, two significant events in their impressionable value-forming years—the Great Depression and World War II—fundamentally shaped their orientation toward the world, and contributed to my own early value formation.

Strauss and Howe say, “A generation is shaped by its age-determined participation in epochal events that occur during its childhood and, especially during the coming-of-age experiences separating youth from adulthood. This age location produces a set of collective behavioral traits and attitudes that later express itself through a generation’s life cycle trajectory.” (Strauss and Howe, 1991)

If Strauss and Howe are correct, and I generally believe they are, it means that each generational cohort brings unique assets, talents, and weaknesses to daily real life situations and cumulatively to the major historical challenges each generation faces in their lifetime. We know, from research and experience: how children are raised often affects how they parent; how we are taught affects how we teach; and the “how and when we come of age” can shape our later exercise of leadership. Yael Danielli provides more than ample evidence to support the fact that there are documented worldwide case studies of multigenerational transmissions and legacies of trauma, abuse, caring, compassion, and respect. (Danielli, 1998)

I have identified six generational cohorts in the United States based on Intergenerational Dialogues that I have personally organized and conducted over the last 18 years. These cohorts are:

Civic or GI Generation (born 1931 or before)

This generation came out of an agricultural economy and accepted many American myths. They lived as young adults through the Depression. They were heroes in their hour of crisis, World War Two. After the war they worked to gain economic rights and they were very impressed with the technology they developed. Their lives coincide with an “American Century” of general economic growth, technological progress beyond anyone’s expectations and military dominance. The American broadcaster and author, Tom Brokaw, calls them the “Greatest Generation”—a generation that brought optimism, teamwork, a black and white sense of right and wrong, and civic pride to every problem they encountered.

Adaptive or Mediating Generation (1932-1944)

The majority of men and women of this generation came of age too late for World War II. A very small number served in Korea, but most were born too early to feel the pressures and burdens of the Vietnam War. Strauss and Howe say these were the “unobtrusive children of depression and war, the conformist ‘Lonely Crowd,’ Grace Kelly and Elvis, Peace Corps volunteers, civil rights activists, divorced parents of multi-child households, sexual revolutionaries like Hugh Hefner and Gloria Steinem, the U.S. Public Broadcasting commentators MacNeil and Lehrer, and the less than colorful cabinet officers of the Bush Administration.” This generation created the corporate human resources system, expanded American myths, made dress and appearance an important

value, changed work from the personal to the organizational, and developed the concept of career and loyalty to your employer. Unlike their Civic counterparts, they view issues as much more complex. They dominate the helping professions and civil rights organizations. They are also some of America's finest arbitrators, mediators, and public interest lawyers.

Baby Boom Generation - America's largest generational cohort (1945-1963)

Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) of all generations, the Boomers came to college in record numbers between the Kennedy and Reagan administrations. This was the first generation in American history raised in a culture of abundance and influenced by a plethora of media dominated by television. These were the babies of optimism and hubris. This generation sees weaknesses in American myths. They firmly believe in values and for the most part seem intensely self-immersed. Work is an important measure of who you are as a person. Their question of "Does my work have meaning?" is a very different question when compared with the Civics or Adaptives, who saw their jobs and personal life as separate. Idealistic Boomers believe that process and participation can solve any problem and that service to social justice is a real measurement of citizenship. The sheer size (84 million) and economic power of this generation, will ensure their historical center stage position for the next twenty years.

Diversity or GenX Generation (1964-1981)

These were the first babies that came of age in a society with rapidly increasing divorce rates, experimental education practices, "latchkey" programs, an AIDS dating scene, birth control, kids with weapons, increasing numbers of young people committing suicide, more proficiency with technology than any other generation, and the most experience living in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society. They get along very well with the Civic generation but horribly with their Mediating and Boomer parents (who also happen to be their bosses in the workplace.) The most significant message this generation heard when it was coming of age was that they might become the first generation in American history to not do as well as their parents.

Millennial Generation (1982-2002)

This is the generation that is coming of age in a world of test tube babies, cloning, economic boom and speculative times, large scale political scandals, the most sophisticated media ever created, Internet connections with young people all over the world talking about how to protect the environment, fight child labor, and plant flowers and trees in blighted urban neighborhoods. Polls suggest this generation is not particularly interested in political parties but very interested in working together with other generations on local issues. Many have labeled this generation as smarter, better behaved, and more civic-spirited than any of the living generations. They are the achievement generation! The Millennials are also the children of 9-11 and intensified worldwide terrorism. They are the generation that might provide the most significant leaders over the next twenty years.

Digital Generation (2003-present) It is too early to tell what this generation might bring to the conversation.

While sociologists and historians might argue about the specific birth years for a particular generational cohort, I have chosen my birth years based on extensive field experience. I have also found the birth years used for organizing Intergenerational Dialogues to show the greatest similarities within a particular cohort and the greatest differences with other generations.

What is an intergenerational perspective and why is it important?

The simplest definition of the word intergenerational is what happens when two or more generations collaborate to nurture and support one another. The first place we learn how to collaborate and support one another is within the traditional nuclear and extended family.

Unfortunately, many dramatic changes have made the traditional family structure incapable of providing the robust model and learning grounds for experiencing the kind of generational connectedness it once offered. Post-industrial society now includes routine corporate employment mobility; divorce; college and post-secondary educational opportunities located often many miles from home; successful niche marketing to generational cohorts making them care only about themselves and their own perceived needs (Smith & Clurman, 1997); a denial of our own aging; and a growing market of age-segregated retirement communities—both in the U.S. and throughout the world. All of these factors, and others, have unconsciously conspired to create actual geographic, as well as social and emotional chasms between all the generations.

Those of us paying attention have also noticed that, along with these generational “gaps,” there is an increase in loneliness and depression among many older adults. According to the American Psychological Association in 2009, 20% of adults over age 65 experience symptoms of depression that cause them distress and make it hard for them to function. (They currently represent about 11% of the U.S. population.) This is in spite of the fact that the oldest two generations in the U.S. and elsewhere, have seen overall improvements in their economic status and geographic mobility. On the topic of generational isolation, I would recommend a very powerful book, *Heat Wave* by Eric Klinenberg. He painfully describes generational disconnectedness through a social autopsy of the 1995 Chicago heat wave. That July, 425 elders (mostly minority) were afraid to come out of their apartments to ask for help, and died painful deaths in the sweltering heat. Klinenberg also introduces us to very large rooms in city and county government buildings that serve as a depository for the possessions of thousands of older adults who die alone every day. No one ever claims their belongings. I wonder how many of you have such a room in your cities?

Intentional intergenerational theorists and practitioners understand the power of this perspective to deal with fear and isolation in any generation. We often pull our supportive research and base intergenerational programs on prominent and accepted life-span human growth and development theories. However, there is not a unified and accepted theory for why we need to continually advocate for a wide range of intergenerational initiatives. I will boldly suggest a common unifying and foundational starting point: It is my firm

belief that the human species, as well as all other species, rely, for their very survival, on successful intergenerational transfers of knowledge, values, skills, traditions, etc. These connections and interchanges between human generations are one of our **principal species survival lynchpins**. And when these transfers are seriously interrupted or threatened, our species is put “at risk.”

Shouldn't we be alarmed when the highest suicide rates in the U.S. occur in the age groups 14-19, and those 65 and older? And isn't it interesting that the one common denominator among all of the children involved in recent deadly school shootings is that none of these children had one caring and loving adult in their lives with whom they could have shared the terrible pain they were experiencing before they committed these horrific acts. Generational isolation and separation should be seen like a canary having breathing problems in the mine. Perhaps some of you could share data from your own countries on generational isolation and separation.

One of my intergenerational mentors, Maggie Kuhn, summarizes the challenges facing the generations in this clip from her last video interview with me at her home in Philadelphia in 1992. (show Maggie Kuhn video/DVD clip)

Inspired by Maggie, and some of my other personal mentors and influencers – including Myles Horton of Highlander, Paulo Friere, Carol Tice, Margaret Meade, Erik Erickson, Karl Mannheim, and others – I set about to create a model/tool that would help bring generations together through an intentionally intergenerational process.

What is the Intergenerational Dialogue & Action Model?

An Intergenerational Dialogue & Action model brings together between 50 and 75 or more individuals for five and a half hours. The group represents five of the six generational cohorts listed above, and reflects as much diversity as is contained in the community, church, synagogue, mosque, or company where the Dialogue is taking place. The Dialogue begins with a Circle of Generations to symbolize the unity of all the people present. The circle enables them to personally witness the incredible diversity in the group. (The largest age range in a Dialogue I have conducted was a nine-year-old and a 96-year-old.)

My formal process starts with a facilitator retelling a real life story or scenario based on an important issue to the people who have been invited to attend the Dialogue. It values each generation's perspectives on the issue by respectfully listening to representatives from all five generations answer open-ended questions from the facilitator about the real life scenario. Finally, all the generations are challenged to join in small groups to make intergenerational Recommendations and Action Plans for future action.

(Show a short DVD clips from selected dialogues to illustrate the Circle of Generations, the generational panels and the small intergenerational groups that are developing the Action Plans for follow-up.)

The Intergenerational Dialogue needs to be about something important to people otherwise people wouldn't attend. By definition, it needs to include all ages and generations. It should feel fair, honor differences and not be partisan to anyone. It aims to establish broad bases for agreement. It should enliven and give hope. It should recognize politics but not be politicized. It can build consensus, recognize diversity, and encourage constructive change. People should leave the Dialogue with a clear understanding that it is both their right and responsibility to take the intergenerational recommendations formed at the end of the Dialogue session and make them a reality in their community.

Outcomes, outcomes, and more outcomes....

The following information and examples should help to further explain the power and potential of the Intergenerational Dialogue & Action process.

In all Intergenerational Dialogues, young people:

- Increase their understanding of the aging process.
- Gain a better understanding of adults of all ages.
- Open themselves to a lifetime of skills and experiences.
- Have the opportunity to develop meaningful new relationships.
- Dispel myths about race, culture, disability, and other stereotypes.

Adults of all ages:

- Learn about and gain a better understanding of young people.
- Share their life skills and experiences with young people.
- Open themselves to learning the latest technological skills from young people.
- Have the opportunity to develop meaningful new relationships.
- Dispel myths about race, culture, disability, and other stereotypes.

Just the act of bringing together 50 to 75 very diverse people from five generations is a significant community organizing achievement. The Dialogue Event itself begins to break down isolation and separation between generations. And it is even more exciting when some of the people attending the Dialogue decide to do something concrete with the Dialogue recommendations.

The following summaries of 3 selected Intergenerational Dialogues includes information about why the particular Dialogue was organized, the overall theme of the Dialogue, the sponsoring groups or organizations, the number of people who attended, the age range of participants, and any follow-up activities. I could personally tell hundreds of other stories just like the ones you are about to read.

After Columbine . . . Bridging the Gap: A Dialogue on Respect and Building a Healthy Community for All Generations.

Teens from the Youth Leadership Council of the Community Coalition of Horry County (Myrtle Beach, South Carolina) organized an Intergenerational Dialogue for 68 people (ages 10 to 85). The group consisted of about 50 percent African-American, reflecting the make-up of the youth planning group. The young people used an innovative organizing

strategy by forming their own five-generation small groups during the planning process. Each of the young people found four other people from the older four generations to become part of their personal Dialogue planning process and then recruit them for the Dialogue event. These small intergenerational groups provided input on every aspect of Dialogue planning. This small group strategy also brought in 65 people for the Dialogue event. When the adults were asked why they came to the Dialogue, many replied to the effect: "I came because I was in Latitia's or Calvin's small group, and it was important that I attend."

The Dialogue Scenario story also came from the young people. It focused on the diversity found in their middle and high school campuses. It was a very realistic story told from a male and female point-of-view. It talked about how kids are just trying to figure out who they are; the pressures young people face in school; the contradictions they see between what they are told and what they see adults practice in the "real world"; and the racial separation young people experience in the Myrtle Beach school system.

The Dialogue was very successful. One of the teens commented, "I realize now that the other generations have been through similar things to what we're going through." One of the adults said, "An answer to the serious problems that schools and kids are having, is to network the generations and have them all work together and support each other." The intergenerational small groups made over 40 recommendations around topics such as: discipline in the schools; needing more outlets for youth to be heard by all the generations; and how to make their communities more intergenerationally active. Each person at the Dialogue made a personal commitment to do something positive with a member of another generation within the ten days following the Dialogue.

Members of the Youth Leadership Council were funded by the State of South Carolina to bring recommendations from the Myrtle Beach Dialogue to communities throughout the state through a series of public presentations during 1999-2000.

An Urban Story – The Wilder Dialogue.

Overall Theme: Elder Fear in Urban Neighborhoods

Seniors from a high-rise apartment complex and young people were in conflict over many issues in a diverse, moderate- to low-income St. Paul, Minnesota urban neighborhood. The Dialogue Planning Committee wanted to cover issues like elder fear, disrespect, safety, generational isolation, and racism. Sixty-eight people came together (ages 8 to 89) for five hours of frank and honest discussion, and developed recommendations for improving life in the neighborhood. The Wilder High Rise staff was committed to long-term follow-up.

Following the Dialogue, an ad hoc Intergenerational Task Force (made up of 8 to 12 people) was formed. Their primary goal was to implement the intergenerational recommendations from the Dialogue. The Task Force decided their primary emphasis would be creating social situations where elders and other members of the community, particularly young people, could interact in respectful and caring ways.

This Task Force evolved into a grassroots organization called Generations Together. The organization received over \$50,000 in funding from foundations and individual contributions over a ten-year period. They worked on breaking down social isolation and separation through a variety of programs – including intergenerational movie nights, pot luck picnics, bike rodeos, community field trips, and an intergenerational version of the Welcome Wagon concept.

The Nebraska Rural Community Economic Development Story

Eight years ago Dr. Leverne Barrett, an international expert on leadership development and Director of The Leadership Institute at the University of Nebraska, asked me to do a statewide training via Internet2 video for Extension Agents across the State. Over 50 agents in 5 separate sites participated in a day-long training event. The stated outcomes for the training were to: employ the Dialogue & Action model in rural Nebraska communities in order to develop leadership across the generations; help Nebraskans cope with the aging of rural communities; break down barriers between generations; and see if the model could help spur-on community economic development. Since the training, over 25 Dialogues have been successfully conducted in Nebraska rural communities. Terry Waugh, who worked on some of the Dialogues, finished a Doctoral Dissertation based on his facilitation of Dialogues and his follow-up research documenting the Dialogue as a transformation change process. (Waugh, 2006)

Implications of the intentional intergenerational approach for ageing/longevity society. It will be very dangerous to march into our future in isolated and separated generational groups. Most industrial democracies are aging societies and have major intergenerational social and political compacts like health care, Social Security, and long-term care, that will need substantial revisions simply based on demographics. The question is: will we redo these compacts on the basis of who has the most political power, or through a process involving all the generations affected? And perhaps even more important: who will represent the most vulnerable of all generations—those yet unborn—in these deliberations?

You may have heard the saying, “If you don’t think age discrimination affects you, just wait awhile.” What a gift it would be if a large intergenerational coalition, led by aging boomers, decided the most important legacy we could leave for future generations would be to end age discrimination in our own lifetimes. This is possible, but only if all generations are able to value the wisdom of age and experience, think more creatively about retirement and employment, make mutual sacrifices, and see real worth and value in one another. Only a truly intergenerational effort will make age discrimination disappear.

One of the less discussed reasons that we don’t deal with really tough aging issues is that we are in a major state of denial about our own aging. One of the fastest growth areas in the surgical field is cosmetic plastic surgery. In 2000, over a half-million people in the U.S. had surgeries simply to make themselves look younger. That number is increasing. Add liposuctions, pharmaceutical and cosmetic creams, lotions and tonics, and you have a multi-billion-dollar industry dedicated to helping us deny our own aging. According to

Betty Friedan in her book, *The Fountain of Age*, if older adults did nothing more than maturely accept their own aging as something positive and worthwhile, we could spawn dramatic changes across our entire society. Think about it. How can we expect younger generations, who naturally look to older people for their wisdom and experience, learn anything positive about aging when they see us artificially trying to mask our own age and look and act like them?

Denial, isolation, and separation = generational conflict. The “politically correct” position is that generational isolation and separation is largely a myth. Public policy “wonks” tell us that 85 percent of all care given to older people comes from family members. These same analysts suggest that broad political and economic interests are often shared across generations. I certainly will not argue that generations are waging all-out war with each other—yet. But anyone who argues that cross-generational bonds are not currently being placed at great risk is simply not honestly confronting the social and economic reality faced by millions of people. Consider these examples:

- Historically, women have provided the care given to aging family members. As more women choose or are forced to enter the work force because of the economy, less care will be available from these traditional family sources.
- In many rural areas in the U.S., 60 to 70 percent of the citizens do not have children or grandchildren living in their communities. Talk to rural leaders and ask them about generational conflicts and school bond referenda, long-term care funding, property tax reform, and dividing scarce resources among the young and old. You will probably hear that they are afraid of our aging society, and most see aging only as a current and future economic and social burden.

There is one tremendous advantage attached to living and practicing intergenerational respect caring and cooperation in post-industrial democracies. We will find our ability to communicate and work with diverse populations much easier. I have conducted my Dialogues with every community of color in the U.S. In these Dialogues, I have been the only white person present both during the organizing stage and the Dialogue itself. Minority groups within a country where another race or culture is dominant, often have survived very unpleasant histories through their intergenerational connections and support systems.

The U.S. civil rights activist, Rosa Parks, was the guest speaker at an Intergenerational Dialogue on the history of civil rights in the U.S. that I organized in Virginia in the late 1990s. She privately told me about being mugged by a 17-year-old Black man in Detroit. She kept saying, “I’m Rosa Parks!” And he replied, “I don’t care.” Rosa said this was a wake up call for her on the need for the Black community to heighten its awareness of the need for better intergenerational transfers. People of color are worried about what is happening with their younger generations. They are falling prey to the same forces that I have mentioned which isolate and separate generations. An invitation to participate in an intergenerational event means asking people of color to bring their racial or cultural strengths and assets forward with pride and deal with an issue that is very important to them.

We are indeed paying a tremendous social, political, and economic cost for generational isolation, alienation, and separation. The price will get much heavier in the next twenty years unless we initiate widespread intergenerational interventions. In a diverse society, age can provide an exciting and motivating common ground. We all belong to a generation. This fact gives us a common starting point. We can ask ourselves what we share in common based on our generation's historical, cultural, social, and economic experiences. And then, based on the principles of intergenerational respect, caring, and cooperation, we can begin to build a brighter future for all generations – together for tomorrow.

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